



Exploring profiles of academic help seeking: A mixture modeling approach

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ABSTRACT

Two studies were conducted to empirically explore the most common profiles of academic help seeking in college student populations. Specifically, mixture modeling was used to identify and evaluate naturally occurring combinations, or patterns, of help seeking attitudes and behaviors. Mixture modeling supported three quantitatively ordered classes/profiles of “adaptive” help seekers for first-year students. Relationships between class membership and external variables (e.g., self-efficacy, performance) also suggested classes were not qualitatively distinct. Results from upperclass students were similar to those from first-year students with the exception of a fourth class with a somewhat qualitatively distinct profile. Implications are discussed, with a focus on the utility of person-centered techniques to identify typical profiles of complex processes, such as help seeking.

1. Introduction

Imagine two students, Beth and Jill, both completing a class project. While completing the project, Beth was unsure about some concepts and needed clarification to master the material. After reviewing her textbook, Beth approached her instructor for further explanation of some concepts. Jill also experienced difficulty while completing her project. She knew she needed help but did not want to expend much energy. Additionally, she was worried about being perceived as incompetent by her instructor and, in turn, avoided seeking help from him. Rather, Jill sought out a friend who had completed the course and asked the friend to provide her with the answers.

Beth and Jill had different reasons for seeking help and engaged in different help-seeking behaviors. Given the different profiles of help-seeking attitudes and behaviors displayed by Beth and Jill, educators and researchers might be inclined to label Beth and Jill as different “types” of help seekers to more efficiently communicate their help seeking processes.

The current set of studies explores the common profiles of help-seeking attitudes and behaviors for college students. More specifically, we were interested in the existence of qualitatively distinct help-seeking “types.” That is, we examined if there were sub-groups of students who had qualitatively different patterns of help-seeking attitudes and behaviors. As we are not the first to empirically explore help-seeking profiles/types, we compared the profiles/types we uncovered to previously empirically extracted help-seeking profiles/types. We also

gathered validity evidence for the profiles/types by assessing if they could be distinguished by external variables (e.g., motivation, performance) in addition to examining if they generalized across first-year and upper-class students. An additional goal was to showcase this person-centered approach of uncovering common profiles as an option for modeling the complex, multivariate data associated with the process of help seeking. Before describing our findings, we summarize the process of help seeking and note its importance, and discuss the utility of identifying the typical profiles of help seeking for college students.

1.1. The process of help seeking

Help seeking is a complex process used by self-regulated learners (Karabenick, 2006, 2011; Karabenick & Berger, 2013; Newman, 2006; Ryan & Shin, 2011). It combines cognitive and social competencies, differentiating it from other strategies that are primarily cognitive in nature (e.g., rehearsal; Karabenick & Berger, 2013; Nelson-Le Gall, 1985; Newman, 2006). To seek help, a student must be cognitively aware of a need for help (i.e., “forethought”; Karabenick & Berger, 2013, p. 240) and then must ask for help (i.e., “perform” the seeking of help; Karabenick & Berger, 2013, p. 240) from a source. As such, the process of help seeking consists of a series of decisions (Karabenick, 2011; Karabenick & Berger, 2013). These decisions include, but are not limited to, deciding to seek help, deciding from whom to seek help, and deciding what form of help to seek.

Thus, one conceptualization of the help-seeking process represents

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these important decisions via five dimensions: 1) attitudes toward help seeking (i.e., threat), 2) avoidance of help seeking, 3) sources of help, 4) instrumental form of help seeking, and 5) executive form of help seeking (Karabenick, 2003). More specifically, attitudes about help seeking, such as help-seeking threat, represent affective/emotional components that may emerge during the “forethought” stage of self-regulation. Some students feel needing help suggests a lack of competence (i.e., represents a personal *threat* to self-esteem), therefore decreasing their tendency to seek help (Butler, 1998; Newman, 1998). Not seeking help when needed is referred to as *help-seeking avoidance*. Distressingly, students who have the greatest need for help are likely to avoid seeking it (e.g., Karabenick & Berger, 2013; Karabenick & Knapp, 1988).

Sources of help and forms of help seeking (i.e., instrumental help seeking, executive help seeking) are behaviors occurring during the “performance” stage of self-regulation. *Sources* from which help is sought is represented by a continuous dimension ranging from informal (peers) to formal (instructors). *Instrumental help seeking* refers to help sought to aid in understanding. It involves seeking help to master concepts (e.g., Karabenick, 2003; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). In the above example, Beth would score high on the dimension of instrumental help seeking. *Executive help seeking* refers to help sought to acquire answers to aid in task completion. Students seeking executive help may become impatient with explanations because they are seeking help to avoid completing work themselves (Karabenick, 2004; Newman, 1998). In the example, Jill would score high on the executive help seeking dimension.

We adopted this five-dimension conceptualization of help seeking for the current study given it was used in previous empirical study of help-seeking profiles/types. Different conceptualizations involving additional or different aspects of the help-seeking process may result in uncovering different profiles/types.

1.2. The importance of help seeking: achievement-related correlates

When examining these five aspects of the help-seeking process (instrumental, executive, threat, avoidance, and sources) individually, they relate in differential and theoretically expected ways to important achievement-related variables including academic performance, anxiety, achievement goal orientation, and self-efficacy. *Academic performance* of K-12 and college students has been positively related to instrumental help seeking and sources of help (Karabenick, 2003; Kitsantas & Chow, 2007; Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997) and negatively related to executive help seeking, help-seeking threat, and avoidance of help seeking (Karabenick, 2003; Ryan et al., 1997). *Anxiety* often accompanies performance situations and has been found to negatively impact academic performance (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008; Zeidner & Matthews, 2005). As one would expect, course-related anxiety was positively related to executive help, help-seeking threat, and avoidance for college students (Karabenick, 2003). No relationship was found between anxiety and instrumental help or sources of help.

In addition to performance and affect, motivation is also critical to success in academic contexts. *Achievement goal orientation*, a prominent motivation construct, represents “the purposes or reasons for students engaging in achievement behaviors” (Schunk et al., 2008, p. 184). Research has supported four goal orientations: mastery approach, mastery avoidance, performance approach, and performance avoidance (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001). The four achievement goals have correlated differentially with the five help-seeking dimensions. Mastery-approach goal orientation, for which students are concerned with developing competence in reference to an absolute/intrapersonal standard, has been positively related to instrumental help seeking (Karabenick, 2011; Newman, 1990; Roussel, Elliot, & Feltman, 2011; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001) and preferences for formal sources of help, and has been negatively related or not related to perceived threat, help-seeking avoidance, and executive help seeking (Karabenick, 2003, 2004; Newman, 1990; Ryan et al., 2001). Mastery-avoidance goal orientation, for which students are concerned with avoiding misunderstanding in reference to an absolute/intrapersonal

standard of competence, has been positively related to executive help seeking, threat, and avoidance of help, and has been unrelated to sources of help or instrumental help (Karabenick, 2003). Performance-approach goal orientation, for which students are concerned with demonstrating competence relative to others (e.g., outperforming others), has been positively related to help-seeking threat, avoidance, executive help, and formal sources of help, and unrelated to instrumental help (Karabenick, 2003; Roussel et al., 2011). Performance-avoidance orientation, for which students are concerned with not demonstrating incompetence relative to others (e.g., not being the worst), followed a similar pattern to performance-approach goals: positively related to threat, avoidance, and executive help, and not related to instrumental or sources of help (Karabenick, 2003, 2004).

Self-efficacy, another motivation construct linked to success in performance situations, also relates in important ways to help seeking. *Academic self-efficacy* is defined as “students’ judgments of their capabilities” in academic environments (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998, p. 528). Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to take on tasks that develop skills and to persevere in the face of challenge, whereas students with low self-efficacy are more likely to disengage in tasks that would aid in learning (Schunk et al., 2008). Academic self-efficacy among college students has been positively related to instrumental help (Karabenick, 2003; White & Bembenuddy, 2013) and sources of help (Karabenick, 2003; Kitsantas & Chow, 2007), unrelated to executive help and help-seeking avoidance (Karabenick, 2003), and either unrelated or negatively related to threat (Karabenick, 2003; Kitsantas & Chow, 2007).

1.3. Using a person-centered approach to study help seeking

As exemplified in the review of the correlates of help seeking, most research on help seeking has employed variable-centered approaches (e.g., correlations, regression, factor analysis) to understand relationships among the five help-seeking dimensions or relationships between help seeking and academic-related variables. Unlike variable-centered (VC) techniques, which focus on relationships among the *variables* themselves (e.g., threat is positively correlated with avoidance), person-centered (PC) techniques, such as mixture modeling, focus on the common profiles of scores, or the subpopulations of *people* identified by similar patterns of values on a set of variables. By focusing on the profile or pattern of scores across variables, a person is characterized in a holistic sense (Magnusson, 1998). This switch in focus implies “an emphasis on *types* rather than *dimensions*...”, and a corresponding view of the person as a system of interacting components” when using a PC approach (Robins, John, & Caspi, 1998, p. 135). Ultimately, the aim when employing a PC technique is to plot the profiles/types and to understand what external variables explain the distinctiveness of these profiles/types (Nagin, 2005). Examining correlations between help-seeking dimensions and/or between help seeking and other variables does not provide information regarding the combination of help-seeking dimensions within the person, even though it is tempting to discuss VC results in this manner.

1.3.1. Advantages of a PC approach

PC techniques, such as mixture modeling, would prove useful when studying help seeking because researchers and practitioners have characterized students as types of help seekers, reflecting a belief that a particular configuration/profile of the help-seeking dimensions exist within a person (labels for profiles include but are not limited to “strategic,” “maladaptive,” “autonomous,” “dependent,” “appropriate”). That is, in addition to the common practice of examining the separate dimensions of the help-seeking process, some researchers also communicate the multivariate nature of help seeking via a small number of profiles (e.g., Butler, 2006; Karabenick, 2003, 2011; Newman, 1998; Ryan, Patrick, & Shim, 2005). Applying a PC approach, such as mixture modeling, allows us to uncover the most typical profiles of the five help-seeking dimensions in our samples. For example, is it

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