



Seeking help from the low status group: Effects of status stability, type of help and social categorization[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Helping behavior is used strategically to achieve dominance over low status groups.
- Groups show less willingness to seek assistance in unstable social hierarchy.
- Inducing common identity promotes intergroup harmony and willingness to seek help.

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ABSTRACT

This research extended previous work on the relationship between intergroup status and helping exchanges by investigating the conditions that moderate the willingness of members of a high status group (psychology students) to seek help from a low status group (social work students). In Study 1, when participants believed that there was a threat to the stability of status relations, participants from the high status group were more willing to seek autonomy-oriented assistance, which is empowering, than dependency-oriented help, which could undermine their group's advantaged status. Study 2 considered how reframing the nature of intergroup relations by emphasizing common superordinate group membership can influence help-seeking among members of high status groups. When separate group identities were emphasized, the results replicated. However, as predicted, when common identity as mental health professional was made salient, psychology students were as willing to seek autonomy- and dependency-oriented help across both the unstable- and stable-relations conditions. Theoretical and applied implications are discussed.

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Introduction

Offering and seeking help, which commonly reflect mutual caring and support, can also communicate, maintain, or establish power disparities. According to the Intergroup Helping Relations as Status Relations Model (IHRS; Nadler, 2002, 2010, *in press*), which integrates findings and concepts from social identity research (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and helping relations (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006; Nadler & Fisher, 1986), intergroup helping can be a strategic way to assert status differences and manipulate the power dynamics between high status and low status groups. For example, Nadler, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, and Ben David (2009) found that when intergroup relations were less secure, members of high status groups were more likely

to offer assistance to members of low status groups in ways that promoted their dependency (dependency-oriented help) but not in ways that directly empowered the other group (autonomy-oriented help). The present research extends previous research on intergroup helping and status relations by investigating the conditions that moderate the willingness of members of a high status group to seek help from a low status group.

As suggested by research on Social Identity Theory (SIT; Scheepers, Spears, Doosje, & Manstead, 2006; Spears, Greenwood, de Lemus, & Sweetman, 2010) and work on help-giving (Nadler et al., 2009), when status relations are perceived as more insecure, members of high status groups, who are motivated to defend their group's advantaged status, may particularly avoid seeking help from a low status group, because it can further compromise the group's status. However, there are circumstances, such as when status relations are secure, in which members of a high status group actively avoid drawing attention to dominance relations between the groups to avoid unnecessarily arousing resistance (Scheepers et al., 2006) and to maintain harmony and social stability (Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008). Under these conditions,

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members of high status groups may be particularly willing to seek help from members of a low status group. Soliciting assistance from the low status group represents a way of preserving the group's dominance and social privilege by making the low status group feel valued and respected, which can elicit positive responses from the low status group (Shnabel, Nadler, Canetti-Nisim, & Ullrich, 2008) and can preemptively ward off future discontent with the status difference.

The present research consisted of two studies investigating how the stability of intergroup status relations and the kind of help available (Study 1) and framing the relations between groups (Study 2) influence the extent to which members of a high status group seek help from members of a low status group.

Study 1

Based on work on helping and status relations (Nadler, 2002), we assumed that high-status group members would be less likely to seek dependency-oriented than autonomy-oriented help from the low-status group members when status relations were presented as unstable. Dependency-oriented assistance threatens the advantaged status of the group. By contrast, autonomy-oriented help reinforces the competence and capability of the group and is thus experienced as empowering rather than threatening (Nadler & Halabi, 2006).

However, when status relations are stable, groups high in status are often reluctant to display signs of their dominance and instead promote harmony (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2007, 2009) because explicit assertion of power might unnecessarily elicit resistance and negative reactions from low status groups (Scheepers et al., 2006). Members of high status groups can afford to appear magnanimous toward disadvantaged outgroups under these conditions, but in ways that do not ultimately challenge the security of their advantaged position (Spears et al., 2010). Thus, when status relations are stable, members of high status groups may not distinguish between autonomy- and dependency-oriented assistance in the same way as when status relations are unstable or, more generally, when members of low status groups seek help from high status groups (Nadler & Halabi, 2006).

In Study 1, we manipulated threat to the stability of the relative status of the groups, investigated the willingness of psychology students to seek help from social work students, who have lower academic status in Israel (see Dafni & Nadler, 2002), and the kinds of assistance sought. Psychology students received information emphasizing either the stability or instability of the status advantage of psychologists over social workers in the future. Then participants were given two scenarios, which were adapted from previous research (Halabi, Dovidio, & Nadler, 2008, 2012), and asked how they would respond to each. Response options, based on previous research on this topic (Halabi et al., 2008), included examples of seeking dependency-oriented help (e.g., obtain a direct answer from a social work student about a field study problem) or autonomy-oriented help used in previous research (e.g., discuss with a social work student alternative solutions to a field study problem).

Method

Participants

Seventy female undergraduate psychology students ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.5$ years) from a university participant pool (81% women) in Israel received course credit for their participation.

Procedure

Participants, who were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (Threat to the Stability of Status Relations) \times 2 (Kind of Help: Dependency or Autonomy-Oriented) between-subjects design, were informed that the study was designed to evaluate the Psychology and Social Work

professional training programs. In Israel, psychologists have higher income than social workers (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013), and psychology is perceived as a discipline higher in academic status than social work (Dafni & Nadler, 2002). Pilot work, in which 25 psychology students were asked to rate 15 professions (from 15, most prestigious to 1 the less prestigious), including social work and psychology, further supported this status difference. Psychology students rated psychology as more prestigious than social work, $M_s = 12.36$ ($SD = 2.43$) and 6.80 ($SD = 2.67$), $t(24) = 10.50$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 4.28$.

Relating to the Threat to the Stability of Status Relations manipulation, participants first read general information about the psychology and social work training programs and then were presented with cases and questions that relate to several aspects of their professional training program. On the basis of past research (Boen & Vanbeselaere, 2000; Turner & Brown, 1978), the threat to stability of status was operationalized in terms of information about the gap between psychologists and social workers. In the *Stable* condition (low threat, $n = 38$), participants were informed that the gap between clinical psychologists and social workers has not changed. In particular, compared to psychology, social work as a profession is still considered less prestigious, that social workers earn less money than psychologists, and that they lack important professional training (e.g., in psychotherapy) compared to clinical psychologists. In the *Unstable* condition (high threat, $n = 32$), participants were informed that the gap between psychologists and social workers is narrowing in that they both basically have the same professional training and have similar responsibilities, and that social workers are earning more prestige and better compensation, like psychologists, for their work.

After reading this information, among several filler questions about general attitudes, the effectiveness of the stability manipulation was assessed with the item, "Do you believe the chances of a psychologist and a social worker to get a good job are getting more and more similar?" Possible responses ranged from 1 = *totally disagree* to 7 = *totally agree*; higher scores reflected greater perceived instability.

Next, participants were presented with two scenarios. The first one, about developing a website, was irrelevant and included to obscure the true purpose of the research. The second scenario was designed to measure willingness to seek dependency-oriented or autonomy-oriented help from social work students (i.e., the low status outgroup).

The scenario was a short case study involving a professional training dilemma. Participants were asked to consider field-training situation in which students had to administer a clinical face-to-face or a group interview to a potential patient. They were not given any information about the client's specific psychological problem, and were instructed that, in the absence of that information, they had to think about whether to recommend a clinical face-to-face or a group interview. Students were told that both procedures are important and usually used to acquire different information about the interviewee, but require different interview skills. Students were also informed that both procedures are complicated and if not accurately done, one can make improper judgments in the process of building a comprehensive profile of the interviewee. Students were asked to choose the most suitable method in order to build a more detailed and accurate picture of the interviewee. Furthermore, students were told that social worker students, unlike psychology students, take a few courses on clinical face-to-face and group interviews in their training.

Following this scenario, participants were asked to rate (1 = *not likely at all* to 4 = *very likely*) their interest in two possible exchanges with social work students. To limit participants' awareness of our interest in differences in seeking dependency- versus autonomy-oriented helping (full solution versus hint to solve the problem, based on Nadler & Halabi, 2006; see also Halabi & Nadler, 2010), Kind of Help was manipulated between-groups. Participants in the *Dependency-Oriented Help* condition were asked to rate two items, $r(37) = .691$, $p < .001$, indicating whether they were willing (a) to seek close guidance from a social work student offering direct solutions for the case

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