

Underestimating One's Influence in Help-Seeking

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Imagine for a moment the anxiety experienced by a prospective groom in the moments leading up to his proposal. Think of the butterflies felt by a Girl Scout knocking on her neighbor's door for a potential cookie sale. Consider the student's apprehension in asking his esteemed professor for a letter of recommendation. The chance that any of these appeals will be accepted is very high. So, what do these individuals have to fear?

Robert Cialdini's book, *Influence* (Cialdini, 1984), has counseled countless readers on the art and science of persuasion. Some have read the book looking for tips on how to become more persuasive, while others have flipped the pages searching for clues on how to protect themselves from persuasive attempts. Whatever they are hoping to find, readers come away with a similar emotional response. Almost without exception, their common reaction is a feeling of surprise. Scan the reviews of *Influence* available online and you will be told in clear detail about a strong sense of shock, awe, and amazement, all centered around how gullible people seem, how transparent effective persuasion tools are, and how willing we all may be to say "yes" to a clever phrasing of a direct request.

The effects described in *Influence* are indeed surprising, but, at the same time, they are also empowering to the casual reader. They verify that tools of persuasion are not possessed exclusively by individuals with unique skills and rare talents; instead, they are simple and subtle approaches to presenting a decision so that others will feel compelled to comply. These tools can be understood, customized, and implemented by anyone—not just used car dealers, door-to-door salesmen, and brand advertisers. In short, what is particularly surprising about Cialdini's book is not his compelling description of how people can be easily influenced, but how easy it may be for each of us to become influential ourselves. If we appreciate the pressure that others face

when deciding whether to agree with our requests for help, we may be in a much better position to get help.

This insight has inspired our own research on the topic of help-seeking and compliance. Specifically, we have examined the extent to which people are aware of the most basic weapon of influence—making a direct request for help. Given that we regularly ask people for help or are subject to help requests ourselves, we should be fairly accurate in estimating the likelihood that others will say "yes" to a direct request. However, our research tells a different story—one that suggests people are woefully inaccurate when it comes to predicting others' helpfulness. Rather than give people the benefit of the doubt, most of us wrongly assume that others will say "no" in response to our requests (e.g., to buy a box of cookies or to write a letter of recommendation). In the sections that follow, we describe this systematic bias, highlight its potential utility, and address some of its adverse consequences.

ASK AND YE SHALL RECEIVE

Imagine you are standing in the middle of Columbia University's campus in New York City. You have been searching for a nearby building, but cannot find its precise location. You stop someone walking by and ask that person to provide you with some directions. He or she points you toward the general vicinity of your destination, but you mention that you have been over there before and had no luck. You ask this stranger to escort you over to the exact address, which appears to be about three city blocks (and 5-10 minutes) away. What do you think the stranger will say? More specifically, how many people do you think you will have to approach before you get just one individual to agree to this request?

This scenario is not fictitious. Rather, it describes an exercise we conducted in late 2005 (Flynn & Lake [Bohns], 2008, Study 2). Participants in the study were positioned in the middle of campus and instructed to approach random strangers for an escort to the university gym, which is located at the edge of campus (the Columbia University gym is subterranean and therefore difficult to find). Before completing the task, participants were asked to estimate how many people they would have to approach in order to get one to say "yes" On average, people estimated they would have to ask 7.2 people to get just one to agree. In fact, they needed to approach just 2.3 strangers, on average. While people presumed that about 6 out of 7 of the individuals they approached would refuse to assist them, the reality was that approximately every other person was willing to agree to their request.

This underestimation effect has been replicated in several domains: soliciting charitable donations, asking people for the use of their cell phones, and recruiting people to fill out questionnaires, to name a few. In each case, those seeking help overestimated by as much as 200% the number of people they'd have to ask to get someone to agree with their help request. As it turned out, people were far more likely to say "yes" than participants expected. The participants could get assistance fairly easily, even from strangers, but this potential power—the power of the "ask"—was lost on them.

Why does this happen? We propose that people underestimate givers' willingness to comply in responding to requests for help because they fail to account for the social pressures that accompany help requests. No one wants to reject others, particularly not face-to-face. We all can recognize this fact. Nevertheless, when we consider whether someone will agree to provide help, we pay less attention to the social cost of saying "no" (i.e., the potential embarrassment one

might feel for rejecting a request) than potential helpers do. What do we focus on instead? When predicting others' willingness to comply with a request for help, we attend to the costs of saying "yes" (i.e., how much time, effort, and resources are required to comply with the request) rather than the costs of saying "no."

To test this idea, we asked participants in another study (Flynn & Lake [Bohns], 2008, Study 6) to estimate how many people they would need to approach on campus to get one person to fill out a questionnaire. The directness and the magnitude of the request varied across conditions. In one condition, participants were instructed to simply hand passersby a flyer with the request (low social costs of rejection), and in another condition participants asked them directly (high social costs of rejection). The length of the questionnaire also varied, so that half of the participants distributed one-page questionnaires, and the other half distributed 10-page questionnaires. One might expect that people would be far less likely to fill out a lengthy questionnaire than a short one. As it turns out, the passersby were much more susceptible to the directness of the request than its magnitude (they were far more likely to say "yes" in response to a direct request than a flyer, but did not distinguish between a "big" and a "small" request). Participants, however, assumed the opposite was true—their estimates of how many people they would need to ask did not adjust for the manner of the request, just its size.

When we are the ones who need help, we are simply not attuned to the motivation others have to help us. The upshot of this failure in perspective taking is straightforward: People may not take advantage of others' willingness to say "yes" because they erroneously assume that their requests for assistance will be rejected. Just think of the opportunities lost. Clients are not called, donors are left unsolicited, and first dates are never propositioned because we simply have a hard

time understanding our targets. We cannot appreciate how difficult it is for other people to say "no," even though we have been in that uncomfortable position many times ourselves. As a result, we fail to benefit from cooperation to the fullest extent possible.

WHAT IF PEOPLE WERE MORE WILLING TO ASK?

When we assign Cialdini's text in class, we draw skepticism from some students who express concern that we are "feeding the sharks". That is, they worry that the only individuals who will make use of effective persuasion tactics are those who wish to satisfy their own Machiavellian interests.

In reality, such tactics can be used to accomplish noble deeds as well as evil ones. Thus, the misgivings that people have about who *can* benefit from understanding the principles of influence seem misplaced, perhaps mainly because the terms "influence" and "persuasion" can conjure up images of politicians and snake oil peddlers more readily than images of humanitarians and civil rights leaders.

When pushed further, students often reveal a deeper concern that the use of influence tactics will make them appear Machiavellian, even when they are not. This concern is not trivial, given that personal reputation matters in forming, developing, and maintaining social relationships, especially when a personal reputation is negative. Thus, many individuals may balk at the prospect of becoming more persuasive because they worry that using tools of persuasion will elicit enmity from others. Indeed, we often receive the same comment about the underestimation effect—"If people feel more emboldened to ask, won't they just irritate others more with their frequent requests?" Our answer to this question is "no," and we base it on three

streams of research that, taken together, suggest people are more likely to walk away with a positive impression of help-seekers than one might assume.

Harshness Bias

Research by Savitsky, Epley, and Gilovich (2001) suggests that people overestimate how harshly others will judge them. In a series of studies involving social judgment, people anticipated being viewed more negatively for an awkward gaffe, a performance failure, or a personal shortcoming than they actually were. The authors explain this effect by proposing that people tend to be inordinately focused on their own embarrassing circumstances and therefore unable to consider the situational factors that might affect an observer's impressions (e.g., he or she is distracted, overwhelmed by other cues, or attending to a larger set of potential targets). As a result, the anxiety that people experience in violating social norms and anticipating rebuke may be exaggerated.

A similar dynamic may apply to the case of help-seeking. Requesting help can be an awkward experience. Even a request that seems relatively minor, in objective terms, can make the help-seeker feel self-conscious, embarrassed, and guilty, in part because he or she is imposing on the potential helper by asking "for something outside of the addressee's daily routine" (Goldschmidt, 1998, p. 131). One might expect the potential helper to react with displays of annoyance and frustration, but this is rarely the case. People are expected to respond graciously to help requests, even if they do represent a minor imposition (Goffman, 1955; Grice, 1975). Although help-seekers may expect harsh judgment, more often than not they will be pleasantly surprised by others' willingness to satisfy their request.

In our research, we have found that the anxiety help-seekers experience over how their request will come across is surprising to potential helpers who do not know what all the fuss is about (Bohns & Flynn, 2010). In one study, we asked two samples of potential helpers (teaching assistants and peer advisors) to estimate the number of students who would seek their help during a single semester. The peer advisors overestimated by over 60%, and the teaching assistants by 20%, the number of students who would ask them for help. This prediction error emerged even though the peer advisors had been students themselves the prior year, and the majority of teaching assistants had worked as teaching assistants before (often for the same class). Nevertheless, their past experience as help-seekers offered no clues in predicting others' future help-seeking behavior.

Bad Trumps Good

Although help requests tend to be satisfied more often than people expect (Flynn & Lake [Bohns], 2008), there remain times when requests for help are not satisfied, either because the potential helper was unwilling or unable to provide assistance. These episodes are likely to loom large in our minds. In fact, when asked to recall a recent time when they were refused assistance, people are able to recall it more quickly and with greater clarity than a recent time when they were granted assistance. This tendency is reminiscent of work showing that the costs associated with negative outcomes may be weighed more heavily in our minds than the gains associated with positive outcomes (see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). As time passes, more extensive cognitive processing can even enhance the

memory of negative information relative to positive information, which further biases overall impressions (Taylor, 1991).

Negative events tend to be more salient, play a more significant role in forming impressions, and have a larger impact on individual behavior (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004; Peeters & Czapinski, 1990; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Given this bias toward negative experiences, people might be prone to misjudge the rate at which they have been rejected in the past when attempting to seek help. Because negative outcomes are more salient, episodes of noncompliance may be overrepresented in a help-seeker's mind (relative to episodes of compliance), leading help-seekers to believe that the odds of getting a "yes" in response to an appeal for help is worse than is actually the case. Such a bias may discourage people from asking for help, when in fact their fear of rejection is inflated.

Motivated Reasoning

Ben Franklin once wrote, "He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another than he whom you yourself have obliged" (Lemay, 1987). The meaning of Franklin's message is that when we perform a favor for another person, we tend to like that person more as a result. The effect is highly counterintuitive, but also highly robust. For example, in a classic experiment by Jecker and Landy (1969), students were asked to participate in a contest in which they had the opportunity to win some cash. In one condition, the researcher asked the contest winner to return the prize money because he had been using personal funds and was now running short. In another condition, this request was posed by an administrative assistant from the psychology department (who claimed that the department was running short on funds). And, of

course, there was a third (control) condition in which no request was posed. As it turns out, participants reported liking the experimenter most following the treatment in the first condition—when he asked them to return the money. How can this be? According to the researchers, people are motivated to justify their actions; in this case, the participants convinced themselves that they performed a favor for the experimenter *because they liked him*.

Indeed, help-seeking can be an effective means of reducing interpersonal conflict, although we suspect that it depends on the type of conflict involved. If the help-seeker was thought to be condescending in the past, asking for assistance may enable that individual to come across as less self-aggrandizing. In a series of studies, Hogan and Flynn (2010) found that people reacted more positively when they were asked for help, rather than being offered help, following a conflict based on perceived condescension. To be clear, this finding is not intuitive. In a separate study, when asked to estimate how effective offering and asking for help would be in resolving a condescension-based conflict, participants expected that offering help would be significantly more effective. So, once again, people may fail to appreciate the potential value of asking for help.

HELP-SEEKING AS A FORM OF INFLUENCE

Research shows many benefits of help-seeking. Not only does asking for help make it likely that we will get what we need (more likely than we think), but we also tend to be judged less harshly than we might imagine—we may even strengthen our relationships by soliciting help. Yet, this is an area in which research findings never seem to find purchase in the "real world". Although there is great value in help-seeking, few seem to appreciate its potential value.

Take, for example, a typical employee performance appraisal. Almost every performance appraisal measures whether employees *offer* help to their co-workers. In contrast, performance appraisals rarely measure whether employees *ask* for help when needed. Yet, being willing and able to access the expertise of one's co-workers would seem to be a critical driver of collaboration in organizations.

Why is help-seeking so devalued? Perhaps help-seeking tends to be disregarded because it is often equated with weakness. Many people are all too familiar with the experience of sitting in a car for much longer than necessary because the driver will not stop to ask for directions—doing so may be an admission of incompetence. But, is help-seeking really a position of weakness? At first blush, it seems consistent with a common definition of power: the extent to which an individual can "modify others' states by providing or withholding resources" (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003, p. 265). According to this definition, a gas station attendant with first-hand knowledge of local roads and a stockpile of travel maps holds power over the driver—he or she has access to resources that will modify the state of the traveler from lost to found. Thus, the driver is in a position of weakness.

However, there is another, equally important definition of power: power as one individual's "capability of influencing" another (Cartwright, 1965, p. 4). In other words, power is the ability to access someone else's resources and, consequently, to change one's *own* state. Viewed in this light, help-seeking is not a sign of weakness; it is a powerful act. Upon taking a wrong turn, the lost traveler has immediate access to a means by which he or she can rectify the mistake. As our research has shown, he or she needs only to ask for help, and any target will find

that he or she is hard-pressed to refuse. In this sense, an individual's power—the ability to access needed resources—often lies in a simple "please," or a willingness to ask.

Conceptualizing help-seeking as a source of influence (rather than a signal of incompetence) can enhance the perceived value of asking for help. Discounting the value of help-seeking not only leads to less asking—and therefore less helping all around—but may serve to stigmatize those who do ask. For example, many bullied students do not seek out help because they worry about facing "derision and contempt from others" (Cowie et al., 2002, p. 456). Similarly, in our closest relationships, asking for help can make us feel defeated. According to Niall Bolger and colleagues (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000), the most effective form of support between couples is invisible support—that which the recipient never has to ask for and is provided covertly. Their research suggests that *even asking for help from one's spouse can make a person feel insecure*. If asking for help were viewed as a sign of strength rather than weakness, perhaps this stigma could be alleviated.

GOAL ALIGNMENT AND INFLUENCE

If we conceptualize help-seeking as a powerful weapon of influence, we must consider how such a weapon can be used wisely. Some people are uncomfortable with influence because they feel that the intent to manipulate others is immoral. According to this view, people should feel free to choose their own course of action rather than feel pressured to make a specific choice. Others counter that many influence attempts are made to persuade people to "do the right thing," or at least do something that would be in the interest of the groups to which they belong. They point to studies of blood donation (Miller & Ratner, 1998), charitable giving (Flynn &

Lake [Bohns], 2008), and environmental conservation (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008) as evidence of the social good that can be achieved through carefully designed influence attempts. We suspect that the benefits of using compliance tactics are maximized when the goals of the persuader and the target are in line. That is, the target may have some motivation to agree with a request, but he or she may need additional motivation to take action.

Influence as a "Nudge"

When we ask for help, we often assume that the benefit we obtain necessarily implies a loss for the other party. So, if we ask someone to spend their time helping us on a project and they agree, we assume they are sacrificing time they would have otherwise preferred to spend doing something else. However, this assumption is often incorrect. People are frequently asked or persuaded to do things they would actually *like* to do, but simply had no occasion, justification, or motivation to do. These targets simply need a little nudge to take action. It is likely that they will even feel happy about having been persuaded to act because they feel (perhaps in retrospect) that taking action was in their best interest and aligned with their own preferences.

At Stanford's Graduate School of Business, a high-status executive recently gave an address to the entire first-year MBA class. Impressed by the speech and curious to learn more, one of the students went online, downloaded the executive's e-mail address, and proceeded to send a message to her during the lecture. In his message, the student invited the guest speaker to share a small dinner with him and his classmates in their dorm room. Much to the surprise of the instructor, the student, and his dorm mates, the executive accepted the invitation and showed up

for dinner the following week! When others were told of the story, they expressed shock that the executive would agree to attend the dinner, but the executive confided to the instructor that she showed up because she thought it would be fun to meet some bright, young people, particularly those who have enough chutzpah to invite her to dinner during a lecture. Contrary to what the skeptics may have presumed, she was not convinced to do something unpleasant; rather, she was offered an opportunity to participate in an event she considered enjoyable.

Positive Mood as a Side Effect

Even when the task is not especially enjoyable, people often reap emotional benefit from helping others. Sometimes referred to as a "warm glow," helping someone in need can boost our self-esteem ("I'm a caring, helpful person") and has a positive effect on personal mood (e.g., McCullough Emmons & Tsang, 2002). In fact, some research supports a mood regulation model of helping in which people use opportunities to help others either to maintain a positive mood (e.g., Clark & Isen, 1982) or to boost a negative one (Ciladini & Kenrick, 1976). In such situations, in which a help-seeker needs something and a potential helper could use a means of maintaining or boosting his or her mood, both individuals' goals are aligned.

Joint Gain

Finally, there are situations in which two people stand to create joint gain if both are willing and able to exert their influence and push for what they need or want. Imagine a struggling student who approaches a teaching assistant for help with a difficult concept. The TA's first attempt to explain the concept may be muddled and imperfect, leaving the student even

more confused. Both individuals now face a choice in this situation. The student, out of embarrassment or to save face for the TA, can either falsely claim that he now understands the concept, or he can continue to ask for the clarification he needs, pushing the TA to explain it more clearly. The TA, on the other hand, can take the student's claim of understanding at face value, or ask the student to demonstrate his or her grasp of the concept. As uncomfortable as it may feel in the moment, both stand to gain from such persistence: The student will get the help he needs, the TA will improve her teaching skills, and both will walk away with a richer understanding of the concept.

In summary, a help-seeker's and a helper's goals are often compatible in many respects. Some potential helpers may be persuaded to do something they would enjoy doing, but could not bring themselves to do without provocation. Others may be persuaded to do something that allows them to feel good about themselves. Still more may be persuaded to do something that is aligned with their own goals. In such cases, "influence" operates more like a gentle "nudge" in the right direction, whereby people feel happy about having been persuaded to act because they recognize that taking action provides mutual benefit.

INFLUENCE WHEN GOALS ARE MISALIGNED

Although goal alignment between helpers and help-seekers can be beneficial, inevitably times occur when a help-seeker's goals conflict with a potential helper's. Politicians, managers, and even parents must often persuade others to take action that contradicts their own inclinations, such as supporting another party's candidate, coming into work on the weekend, or eating their vegetables. In these situations, influence tactics can still be effective in obtaining compliance, but

the target may offer their compliance only because they feel "trapped". As one might expect, persuading people to comply with a request that runs counter to their goals can have a significant downside. The target may attribute his or her compliance to the influence of the persuader, interpreting the behavior as externally rather than internally motivated ("I don't really like vegetables, I just eat them because I'm told to do so.") Further, the target may resist the persuasion attempt or resent the persuader, thereby limiting opportunities for future interaction.

To demonstrate this problem, we investigated the tradeoffs of using commitment-inducing scripts (Flynn & Bohns, 2010). In a field study at New York City's Penn Station, targets were approached by an experimenter and asked to fill out a two-page questionnaire. In one condition, they were given a straightforward request, "Would you fill out a questionnaire?" In a second condition, they were asked, "Can you do me a favor?" before hearing the same request (to fill out a questionnaire). Fifty-seven percent of the targets in the former condition complied, whereas 84% of those in the second condition agreed to help. And, for those subjects in the second condition who offered an immediate affirmative response to the "Can you do me a favor" script (e.g., "Yeah sure, what is it?"), the compliance rate was near 100%. In short, targets acted in line with the commitment and consistency principle—they offered some pre-commitment to comply with the request before hearing the complete details and then found it difficult to go back on their promise.

In this study, use of the commitment-inducing script was effective in increasing compliance. However, we also asked targets, at the end of the questionnaire, to report how much they expected in return for their cooperation (i.e., how large a gift they should be given for their trouble). Targets reported higher expectations of reciprocation when they heard the commitment-

inducing script than when they heard only the direct request for help (more than twice as much). In other words, whereas using the script made others more inclined to help immediately, it also made them inclined to request more in return because they felt they had been "trapped" by the experimenter. These results suggest that persuaders' success in using influence tactics can entail tradeoffs—they may get what they want in the short term but perhaps at a higher price in the long term.

Those individuals who are interested in leveraging the power of asking for help may wish to consider the potential risks they incur by doing so. In some cases, targets of help requests could resent an imposition, particularly if they feel they are being coerced into doing something against their will. They may say "yes," but their help may also come at a steep price. At the same time, help requesters may feel encouraged to know that people are more willing to provide help than requesters think. Indeed, many people may respond favorably to the subtle use of pressure to say "yes" to a request for help, so long as they view the helpful act as being consistent with their own preferences and goals. To put it succinctly, people are often willing to help others in need, but may need a small push to move them in the right direction.

NO REGRETS

Despite the risks involved in seeking help, research suggests that, in the long run, we are more likely to regret *not* asking for help than having a request rejected. Consider the findings from a study by Gilovich and Medvec (1994), who asked a random sample of Upstate New Yorkers, "When you look back on your experiences in life and think of those things that you regret, which would you say you regret more, those things that you did but wish you hadn't, or

those things that you didn't do but wish you had?" Seventy-five percent of those polled said they experienced greater regret for the things they *didn't* do. Similarly, when another sample of participants were asked what they would do differently if they could live their lives over again, participants of all ages (20 to over 64 years old) were more likely to say they would rectify some regrettable inaction from their past rather than a regrettable action (Kinnier & Metha, 1989). This effect grows even stronger with the passing of time. People asked to report their biggest regrets from the past week more often report things they *did*, but those asked to report their biggest regrets over the course of their lives, report things they *didn't* do (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994).

There may be several explanations for this phenomenon. For one, it is easier to fix regrettable things that one has done, whereas missed opportunities often are fleeting and difficult to recapture (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). For example, had the student who invited the high-status executive to dinner been met with reproach for making an inappropriate request, he could have apologized and effectively rectified his mistake. But, had he hesitated to ask in the first place, the executive would have left, and with her the opportunity to connect. An alternative explanation for this effect is based on our emotional responses to regrettable actions versus inactions. When we do something we regret, we often experience an immediate "hot" emotional reaction (e.g., embarrassment or anger) that fades over time. However, when an opportunity presents itself and we fail to act, we are likely to experience despair and "wistfulness," emotions that are equally troubling and prone to linger (Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998). In this sense, any embarrassment brought about by the student's bold action would fade more quickly than the wistful despair he might experience by letting the opportunity slip away.

All of this suggests that, although the sting of rejection may hurt, it will also be fleeting. Yet, the anxiety of not knowing what the answer to our request for help *would have been* can stick around to haunt us. In the long run, we are probably better off asking for help than playing it safe. And, in many cases, those we seek help from stand to benefit as well. Just as the book *Influence* has helped many people avoid being talked into things they would rather *not* do, our aim here is to talk people into asking for the things they do want. We believe that this can increase the incidence of helping behavior, allowing many people to get the assistance they so desperately need.

CONCLUSION

Cialdini's book, *Influence*, reveals the many ways in which people can be persuaded to agree to almost any request. But perhaps the most significant revelation is the extent to which we are unaware of these influence tactics—not just unaware of their potency, but also their potential. We have the ability to acquire valued resources, obtain critical assistance, or build strong support if we can recognize why people decide to say "yes." As for our own research, we suggest that people can be persuaded to say "yes" if you just give them a chance. In short, what Cialdini's work has taught us, along with a large percentage of the general public, is that you don't need a fancy title or massive wealth to have power over others—you just need to know a little bit about the psychology of compliance. This key insight—a peek at the power that is available to all of us—is why Cialdini's *Influence* endures.

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