

# **Empathy gaps between helpers and help-seekers: Implications for cooperation**

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**Abstract**

Help-seekers and potential helpers often experience an “empathy gap” – an inability to understand each other’s unique perspectives. Both parties are concerned about their reputation, self-esteem, and relationships, but these concerns differ in ways that lead to misinterpretation of the other party’s actions, and, in turn, missed opportunities for cooperation. In this article, we review research that describes the role-specific concerns of helpers and help-seekers. We then review studies of emotional perspective-taking, which can help explain why help-seekers and helpers often experience empathy gaps. We go on to discuss recent work that illustrates the consequences of empathy gaps between helpers and help-seekers—social prediction errors that prevent helping and misguided intentions that can lead to unhelpful help. Finally, we discuss some promising directions for future research.

## Introduction

Imagine an employee who runs into trouble on an important project. He could really use some help from his boss, but unfortunately the employee is too concerned with his boss's opinion of him to ask for assistance. Without receiving any help, the employee continues to struggle with the project. Meanwhile, the employee's boss believes the project must be going fine. After all, if the employee was encountering problems and needed help, surely he would have asked for it.

Problems like this exist in many different walks of life. Someone needs assistance and another person could easily, and willingly, provide it. But such assistance never materializes, in part because episodes of helping and help-seeking are laced with perspective-taking failures. People in need and people who can help occupy different perspectives, which can lead to difficulties when trying to understand each other's behaviors and motivations. For example, potential helpers may miss clear opportunities to help people in need, while those in need may underestimate the availability of help. In addition, potential helpers and help-seekers might have different ideas about what kind of help is most useful.

In this article, we will review foundational research illustrating an "empathy gap" between helpers and help-seekers. This empathy gap refers to one party's inability to recognize and account for the other party's emotional concerns. We describe recent studies that illustrate the troubling consequences of this empathy gap, namely social prediction errors that lead to lower rates of helping and misguided intentions that lead to miscarried help. Finally, we will discuss some key issues for future research.

### **Foundational Research: The Empathy Gap between Helpers and Help-seekers**

In a situation that involves helping, helpers and help-seekers can experience intense anxieties regarding their reputation, their self-esteem, and their relationships. Indeed, the “hot” emotions associated with each of these roles can include guilt, fear, shame, anxiety, embarrassment, and pride, among others. Experiencing these emotions may make it difficult for potential helpers and help-seekers to see eye-to-eye. To wit, a help-seeker who is anxious about appearing incompetent is unlikely to fully appreciate the perspective of a potential helper who is anxious about appearing selfish.

In the following section, we describe the “emotional landscapes” faced by helpers and help-seekers. Specifically, we review some classic research on helping, help-seeking, and prosocial behavior that has uncovered a variety of emotional concerns faced by individuals in both roles. We then draw from research on emotional perspective-taking to explain why the “hot” emotions depicted in these emotional landscapes make it so difficult for helpers and help-seekers to understand each other.

**The Helper’s Emotional Landscape.** A potential helper confronted with a general appeal for help (e.g., an advertisement for a charity), a direct request for help (e.g., a face-to-face appeal for assistance), or information about someone in need (e.g., a news story about a destitute family) grapples with the question, “Should I help?” This thought process can elicit a wide variety of emotions: on one hand, a potential helper may experience fears that discourage him from helping someone in need. If a potential helper is not certain that an individual needs his help, he may fear appearing foolish by offering superfluous help (Latane & Darley, 1968; Latane & Darley, 1970; Miller & McFarland, 1987; Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001). He may fear being taken advantage of by an untrustworthy person (Grant & Sumanth, 2009; Herzlinger, 1996). He may fear

endangering himself if he was to intervene in dangerous circumstances (Pillivian & Pillivian, 1972). He may fear damaging his reputation if he lacks the ability to satisfy the help request (Kazdin & Bryan, 1971).

On the other hand, potential helpers may experience emotions that lead them *toward* helping someone in need. A potential helper may reflect on the “warm glow” she would experience from helping (Cialdini et al, 1973; Cialdini et al., 1987). That is, she may consider how good she would feel about herself if she were able to effectively help someone else (Grant & Gino, 2010; Grant & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Conversely, she may think about how bad (guilty and ashamed) she would feel about herself if she were to fail to help someone in need (Cunningham et al., 1980; Freedman, Wallington & Bless, 1967). She may consider how good she would look to others by appearing helpful (Grant & Mayer, 2009). And she may feel the pain of someone else’s suffering and be motivated to end it (Pillivian, Dovidio, Gaertner & Clark, 1981).

In sum, the emotional landscape of potential helpers consists of conflicting egoistic and altruistic motivations (Batson & Powell, 2003). When faced with the decision of whether to help, potential helpers worry about how others will perceive them, how they will perceive themselves, and their own competence and safety, in addition to any other-oriented concerns regarding the person in need. Many of the emotions associated with these concerns – e.g., guilt, pride, fear, shame – are considered “hot,” consuming, or arousing emotions.

**The Help-Seeker’s Emotional Landscape.** The emotional landscape of the help-seeker is similarly conflicted and populated by anxieties related to reputation, self-esteem, and relationships. When faced with a challenge, emergency, or obstacle, a

potential help-seeker must decide whether to ask for help. The mere fact that an individual *needs* help can be distressing. One thing that distinguishes help-seeking from related behaviors such as feedback-seeking and information-seeking is that people seek help as a means of solving a particular problem with which they are faced (Lee, 1997). Thus, one form of anxiety faced by help-seekers concerns the consequences of what would happen were they *not* able to obtain needed help in solving their problem.

In addition to the anxieties a help-seeker may experience about her ability to obtain needed help, there are numerous anxieties related to the specific act of asking for help. By asking for help, a help-seeker faces the embarrassment of exposing her incompetence and inadequacies (Bohns & Flynn, 2010; Collins & Feeney, 2000; DePaulo & Fisher, 1980; Nadler & Fisher, 1956; Ryan & Solky, 1996). The help-seeker may feel indebted to, even dependent on, the helper, further resulting in feelings of guilt, shame, and low self-worth (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980; Lee, 1997). And, of course, a help-seeker faces the possibility of social rejection, an outcome associated with extraordinary distress (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

Altogether, the help-seeker's emotional landscape is similarly "hot" and rife with feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and pride, but in its own unique way. Help-seekers worry about how the act of asking for help will reflect on them, while simultaneously worrying about the personal consequences and social rejection associated with *not* receiving help.

**The Empathy Gap between Helpers and Help-seekers.** As described above, both helpers and help-seekers are faced with their own "hot" emotional states. With these emotional considerations in mind, imagine a situation in which these two

individuals might cooperate with each other. A help-seeker, feeling anxious about a problem that needs to be solved, guilty about imposing on another person, concerned with appearing incompetent, and afraid of being rejected must communicate his need for help to a potential helper who will subsequently feel anxious about appearing foolish, ungenerous, or both, concerned about his own personal outcomes, and distressed about his ability to help. By virtue of occupying these two opposing, emotionally heightened roles, both parties are likely to experience some misunderstandings as they try to predict and interpret each other's behavior.

Accurately predicting how another person will respond to *the same situation that one is currently in* (e.g., Does the person walking next to you on the street feel as comfortable saying “no” to the person soliciting donations as you do?) is difficult because other people have different knowledge, beliefs, and motives that can lead to different interpretations of the same events (e.g., Does the person walking next to you donate regularly to charity like you do?). To make judgments about another person's attitudes and behaviors—a process known as perspective-taking—an individual will typically draw on her own experience as a starting point and adjust from there. However, these adjustments are often insufficient, which can result in striking social prediction errors (e.g., assuming that most people feel comfortable enough with their charitable giving to easily say “no”) (Epley et al., 2004).

Predicting how another person will respond to a situation *that one is not currently in* (e.g., How does the person *asking* for donations feel as you walk by her and say “no”?) is even more difficult, especially for situations that elicit strong emotions or visceral states. This process, known as emotional perspective-taking, requires a perspective-taker

to make not just one, but two, adjustments (Van Boven et al., 2005; Van Boven et al., 2013; Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2005). First, an individual must make the same error-ridden initial adjustment from “self” to “other” described above. Second, the individual must make a second adjustment from “self in current emotional state” to “self in different emotional state,” which can lead to its own set of errors (Nordgren, Banas, & MacDonald, 2011; Nordgren, Morris McDonnell, & Loewenstein, 2011).

This second type of error has frequently been explored within the context of “cold-hot” empathy gaps (Loewenstein, 2005). Specifically, an individual who is currently in a non-emotional state will tend to underestimate the extent to which a “hot” or visceral emotional state would influence his own (or others’) behaviors and decisions. For example, an individual who is currently sated will underestimate how appealing spaghetti might sound for breakfast were he (or someone else) extremely hungry (Gilbert, Gill, & Wilson, 2002, as cited in Van Boven et al., 2013). However, there are also what could be referred to as “hot-hot” empathy gaps in which an individual who is currently in one “hot” emotional state (e.g., extremely thirsty) finds it difficult to comprehend the effect that another “hot” emotional state (e.g., extreme hunger) might have on his (or someone else’s) decision and behaviors (e.g., valuing a steak more than a glass of water) (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003).

The effect of empathy gaps persists despite the fact that every individual has had numerous experiences with feeling hungry, thirsty, sated, in addition to a variety of other visceral states. And just as we fail to draw sufficiently upon our prior experiences with hunger when we are not currently hungry, we are similarly unable to draw upon our prior experiences with seeking help when we are in the position of a potential helper, or our



prior experiences with being asked for help when we are in the position of a help-seeker. In essence, an empathy gap exists between helpers and help-seekers, one that makes it challenging for them to cooperate with each other.

### **Cutting Edge Research: Implications of the Helper/Help-seeker Empathy Gap for Cooperation**

The previous sections outlined the different emotional mindsets that helpers and help-seekers adopt and how an empathy gap between these two mindsets can emerge. In this section, we explore the consequences of this empathy gap. In particular, we review a variety of social prediction errors that can lead to missed opportunities to help, and we describe the misguided intentions of helpers that may lead to miscarried helping.

**Social prediction errors that lead to missed opportunities to help.** Two things typically need to happen in order for cooperation to occur: (1) A potential helper must determine that a need for help exists, and (2) A help-seeker must determine that help is available. However, the emotional divide between helpers and help-seekers can make it difficult for helpers to recognize cues that indicate that help is needed, and for help-seekers to recognize others' willingness to help.

Recall that help-seekers have numerous impression management and self-efficacy concerns that can lead to feelings of guilt, embarrassment, shame, and anxiety at the prospect of asking for help. These anxieties can be so great that they deter people in need from seeking help. Such concerns have prevented individuals living in poverty who are qualified for welfare from applying for public assistance (Cloward & Elman, 1966; Williamson, 1974) and bullied children from speaking up about abuse (Cowie, Naylor, Chauhan, & Smith, 2002; Naylor & Cowie, 1999). Yet the limits of emotional

perspective-taking can cause potential helpers to underestimate the power of these concerns, attributing help-seekers' behavior (e.g., a lack of help-seeking) to other, unemotional explanations instead (e.g., a lack of need).

Recent research has demonstrated that potential helpers think others are more likely to ask for help when they need it than is actually the case. In one study, Bohns and Flynn (2010) asked a sample of teaching assistants and a separate sample of peer advisors to predict the number of students who would come to their office hours to ask for help over the course of a college semester. They then kept track of the number of students who actually approached them for help during the semester. Both groups significantly overestimated the number of students who would ask for help. On average, peer advisors predicted that 12.6 of their advisees would ask for help when in fact only 7.6 advisees approached them over the course of the semester. Teaching assistants predicted that an average of 17.8 students would approach them over the course of the term, but they were actually approached by 14.7 students on average.

Subsequent studies have confirmed that these social prediction errors are the result of potential helpers' tendency to underestimate the discomfort that prevents many people in need from seeking help. Instead, potential helpers may misattribute a lack of help-seeking to a lack of need. In another study conducted by Bohns and Flynn (2010), participants read about a peer advisory program that had recently been implemented in a public school. Participants either read about the program from the perspective of a volunteer peer advisor or from the perspective of a student. The program was described as being used relatively infrequently compared to other peer programs in the school. When asked why this might be true, participants assigned to the role of "student" were

more likely than those assigned to the role of “peer advisor” to endorse the possibility that students felt awkward and uncomfortable using the program. As a result, participants in the student role chose to allocate more money to support the program. In contrast, participants in the peer advisor role chose to allocate less money to the program because they believed that the low rate of help-seeking indicated an underlying lack of need.

The studies described above demonstrate several flawed predictions made by potential helpers regarding the behaviors and reactions of help-seekers, but help-seekers are similarly flawed when predicting the behaviors and reactions of potential helpers. As discussed earlier, potential helpers have numerous impression management and self-efficacy concerns, which can be triggered by a help-seeker’s simple request for help. When faced with such a request, a potential helper risks appearing selfish by saying “no,” and opens herself up to a bevy of unpleasant emotions, such as guilt for failing to help someone in need, or embarrassment for breaking a social norm (Goffman, 1972). Yet help-seekers tend to overlook these concerns when estimating whether potential helpers will agree to help when asked.

In a series of studies, Flynn and Lake (Bohns) (2008) instructed participants to predict how often people would agree to number of help requests, including filling out a questionnaire, loaning a cell phone, escorting someone to another location on campus, and donating to a charity. After making their predictions, participants actually posed these requests and kept track of how many people agreed to help. Across every type of request, help-seekers underestimated the number of people who would agree to help by as much as 50%. Subsequent studies confirmed that these errors were the result of help-

seekers' failure to appreciate how awkward and uncomfortable potential helpers would feel saying "no" to their requests (see also Bohns et al., 2011; Flynn & Bohns, 2012; Newark, Flynn & Bohns, 2014).

In sum, the limits of emotional perspective-taking can lead to misunderstandings between potential helpers and help-seekers, such that potential helpers will overestimate the likelihood that help-seekers will ask for help if they need it and help-seekers will underestimate the likelihood that they will receive help if they were to ask. As a result, people who wish to help others (e.g., supervisors, teachers) may mistakenly assume that if someone needs help they will ask for it; conversely, people who need help may incorrectly assume that their requests for help will be rejected. Such misunderstandings can undermine opportunities for cooperation.

**Misguided intentions that lead to miscarried helping.** Misunderstandings between helpers and help-seekers can, in some cases, result in missed opportunities to provide help. In other cases, helpers may indeed provide assistance, but the value of their assistance is suboptimal. The asymmetry between helpers and help-seekers' concerns, and the limitations of their emotional perspective-taking, may lead helpers to provide help that ultimately is not very helpful (what is sometimes known as "miscarried helping"). Providing such support fulfills a helper's need to feel generous or effective, but may not ultimately meet a help-recipient's specific needs.

Within the domain of gift-exchange, for example, gift-givers routinely misgauge gift-receivers' reactions to various types of gifts. For example, Flynn and Adams (2009) found that gift-givers believed the amount of money they spent on a gift would be positively correlated with the extent to which gift-recipients appreciated a gift. In fact,

the amount of money spent on a gift was unrelated to gift-recipients' feelings of appreciation for the gift. In their attempt to appear more generous by spending more money, potential helpers overlooked the fact that gift-recipients cared more about the thoughtfulness of the gift than how much it set the gift-giver back.

In another set of studies, Gino and Flynn (2011) found that gift-givers overestimated the extent to which gift-recipients would appreciate an unsolicited gift rather than one that the recipient explicitly requested. In one case, gift-givers thought that purchasing a self-selected wedding gift (a gift that was not listed on the wedding registry) would be viewed as more thoughtful and would therefore be more appreciated by gift-recipients than purchasing a gift off the registry. However, gift-recipients were not more appreciative of self-selected gifts than those purchased off the registry. At the root of this disconnect between gift-givers and gift-recipients once again lies an empathy gap. Gift-givers were more influenced by their own anxieties surrounding the image their gift would convey to gift-recipients (e.g., "I'm demonstrating how generous I am because I put additional thought into this gift") than the needs and concerns of the gift-recipient (e.g., "I asked for X because I really wanted it, but I got Y instead"), ultimately resulting in suboptimal gift exchanges.

Another consequence of the limitations of emotional perspective-taking is illustrated by the phenomenon of miscarried helping. Initially described by Coyne, Wortman, and Lehman (1988), miscarried helping occurs when a helper intends to provide useful help, but the assistance is deemed unhelpful by the help-recipient. In one demonstration, Dakof and Taylor (1990) interviewed a sample of cancer patients and asked them to report (a) the types of support behaviors their family and friends had

engaged in (an indication of the behaviors *helpers* considered to be helpful), and (b) which of these behaviors were ultimately helpful and which were ultimately unhelpful (an indication of the behaviors *help-recipients* considered to be helpful). The researchers were able to identify a number of regular helping behaviors that were in fact unhelpful. For example, while helpers often share optimistic comments as a sign of support, help-recipients frequently characterized such comments as criticizing their negative reactions to the cancer diagnosis. Overall, 61% of patients could identify at least one unhelpful support attempt made by their spouse, 51% could identify at least one unhelpful support attempt made by a friend, and 69% could identify at least one unhelpful support attempt made by other family members. The frequency with which these attempts to offer support backfired suggests that helpers' concerns with being competent may be insufficient; that is, helpers need to see things from the help-recipient's perspective in order to give them the support they want (e.g., acknowledging the patient's frustration with his situation; see also recent research by Marigold and colleagues, in press).

In sum, even when cooperation does occur, empathy gaps between helpers and help-seekers may result in a suboptimal exchange of help in the form of unwanted gifts or insensitive social support. Helpers may be so focused on appearing generous and competent that they fail to appreciate what help-seekers really want or need.

### **Key Issues for Future Research: Reducing Empathy Gaps or Reducing the Importance of Emotional Perspective-Taking in Helping?**

Empathy gaps can lead help-seekers to underestimate the availability of help, potential helpers to underestimate the need for help, and helpers to provide suboptimal help. Given these negative consequences, an obvious area for future research is finding

ways to facilitate cooperation despite these empathy gaps. One approach might be to eliminate these gaps, thereby reducing problematic behaviors resulting from errors in emotional perspective-taking (Van Boven et al., 2013). Indeed, several researchers have focused on the role of empathy and perspective-taking as a means of increasing potential helpers' willingness to help (Batson et al., 1981; Batson et al., 1983; Batson, Fultz & Schoenrade, 1987; Batson, Early & Salvarani, 1997; Cialdini et al., 1997). Their findings suggest that having better perspective-taking skills and a more empathic disposition can lead helpers and help-seekers to better understand each other's point of view.

Another possible direction for future research can be found in emerging technologies that aim to facilitate cooperation. Rather than making helpers more sensitive to the concerns of help-seekers so that they are better able to identify those in need, and rather than making help-seekers more sensitive to the concerns of helpers so they can better identify available help, computer-mediated cooperation can eliminate the destructive influence of empathy gaps by offering a "cooler" emotional environment in which help-seekers can explicitly state what they need and potential helpers can explicitly state what they are willing to offer. In many cases, these requests for help are stated anonymously, expectations of giving and receiving help are normative, and helpful resources are archived so that they can be accessed directly.

Consider the popular online question and answer website, Quora, which is edited and organized by individual users. Any Quora user can pose requests for advice and assistance and subsequently get expert help from people they have never met before. The benefit of Quora is accessing a larger pool of potential helpers, which means that diverse resources can be brought to bear on a single help request. One might reasonably expect

that people who use tools like Quora are more likely to get the assistance they need, and get higher quality assistance, not only because the tool can facilitate the efficient matching of helpers and help-seekers on a larger scale (a similar premise drives the popular use of crowdsourcing tools), but also because its format allows users to avoid many of the pitfalls of emotional perspective-taking.

That said, technology also has its limitations. Many attempts to create websites or applications that can facilitate helping have failed (see Mahalo Answers, Friendly Favor, or Formspring). For example, Aardvark, another question and answer website, was purchased by Google in early 2010 for \$50 million, but then was discontinued about a year and a half later. There may be many contributing factors to Aardvark's failure, but it seems that one factor was the challenge of getting people to pose requests for help (particularly for help they could not get by conducting a simple Google search). Cases like this make it abundantly clear that technology platforms are not a panacea for empathy gaps in helping behavior, but rather these tools may be effective when used in the right set of circumstances.

What makes technological tools that offer help and advice work? Researchers have just begun to scratch the surface on open-source communities, websites that offer helpful reviews, and tools that enable people to solve common problems, like avoiding traffic or overpaying for gas (e.g., Waze, GasBuddy). A recent study by Willer, Flynn, and Zak (2012) offers one attempt to identify a necessary condition for facilitating online exchange. The researchers studied patterns of giving and receiving on Freecycle, an immensely popular platform for giving away items free of charge to other people in your community. The researchers were keenly interested in understanding how Freecycle



works with no expectation of *quid pro quo* and what makes people give away items that, in many cases, they could sell for a profit. The data suggest that Freecycle users have a clear sense of social identity, though the overwhelming majority of Freecycle members have never met one another. To the extent that individual members felt a sense of identity, or psychological attachment, to their Freecycle community, members were more likely to give away items for free.

Are there ways in which technology can embolden reluctant help-seekers to pose requests for assistance? By the same token, how can it enable potential helpers to be more successful in acting on their good intentions? These questions are clearly deserving of further research.

### **Conclusion**

Many people are willing to give help, but those who need it may be unwilling to ask. At the same time, many people are in need of help, but those who can give it may be unable to notice. Unfortunately, one of the barriers to developing healthy patterns of prosocial behavior, like helping, is misalignment between the perspectives of help-seekers and potential helpers. The empathy gap that separates these two parties undermines their ability to act on prosocial motives and to obtain valuable assistance. This area of research is emerging quickly, and it will attract further interest, not only because of the theoretical insights it can offer, but the important practical benefits it may provide our society.

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