# ENVY IN RESPONSE TO HELP: A HELPING AS STATUS RELATIONS MODEL

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## INTRODUCTION

Organizational life requires that employees engage in help exchanges that support coworkers and enhance work relationships and work performance (Mossholder, Richardson, & Settoon, 2011). Consistent with this notion, past research anchored on social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) suggests that employees generally perceive that help is supportive (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015), and receive help with gratitude, which facilitates future reciprocity and social exchange (Blau, 1964). Although organizational researchers widely assume that receiving help generates positive reactions, some studies suggest that help recipients might perceive threats to their self-esteem (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982) or help givers having ulterior motives to threaten their public image (Thompson & Bolino, 2018). Considering the prevalence of help-exchanges throughout organizations, we ask: When do help recipients perceive help as threatening and respond with discrete negative emotions? When and how do the responses affect help-exchange dynamics?

To address those questions, we draw on the helping as status relations framework (Nadler, Halabi, Harapz-Gorodeisky, & Ben-David, 2010), which suggests that helping interactions reflect status imbalances between the help recipient and the help giver. By receiving help, recipients experience diminished status, while by giving help, help givers increase their status. Additionally, help recipient/help giver characteristics might influence status imbalances. We show when recipients of task-related help may experience threats to their status and respond with envy, a painful emotion arising from upward social comparisons and emphasizing shortcomings in comparative status (Tai, Narayanan, McAllister, 2012). We propose that help recipients potentially experience status deprivation and then envy the help giver, depending on status differentials regarding their relative performance (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). We also examine whether envy then ironically motivates status-seeking behavior in which help recipients reciprocate by helping the help giver (Steckler & Tracy, 2014) and introduce a critical individual difference that may accentuate the envy-help link (Tai et al., 2012): internal locus of control, a tendency to perceive that internal factors such as ability or effort cause successes or failures (Weiner & Kukla, 1970).

## HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Help recipients may perceive help as supportive and/or threatening (Fisher et al., 1982).

On one hand, help recipients may perceive help as supportive as it provides instrumental benefits by solving task-related issues. On the other hand, help recipients may perceive help as threatening as it indicates a loss of status and inferiority (Smith & Kim, 2007). Although receiving task-related help may be perceived as supportive and/or threatening, the perceived threat to status becomes more salient and dominant when the receipt of help conveys a negative self-relevant message to the recipients (Nadler & Fisher, 1986). One primary determinant of whether receiving task-related help conveys such negative self-related information and represents a status threat is the help recipient's relative performance standing (Suls et al., 2002). Task performance is a salient social status indicator typically associated with rewards (Seta & Seta, 1996). People are generally motivated to outperform others and to view themselves as superior (Festinger, 1954). Thus, task performance represents one of the most important social comparison information that people consider when they compare themselves with others to determine their. When help recipients perform more poorly than help givers, the lower relative performance standing indicates lower relative status (Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002).

Low-status individuals tend to be more vigilant than high-status individuals in perceiving threat and danger from external stimuli, even when it is neutral or positive (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005). We propose that when help recipients perform worse than help givers, they are likely to perceive task-related help as threatening rather than enhancing their status, as highlighting their inferiority, and as widening the performance gap.

When help recipients have lower relative performance standing, the imbalance signals that help givers have relatively superior status, which will amplify threat perceptions. In this situation, receiving task-related help from a higher performing help giver may be negatively viewed by the help recipient as a strategy to further highlight their incapability (Fisher et al., 1982). Thus, the help recipient is likely to engage in an unfavorable form of upward comparison that may threaten his/her self-image and social status (Collins, 1996). As a result, the help recipient experiences envy (Parrott & Smith, 1993), which is the most prevalent emotional reaction directed toward higher-status individuals (Lange & Crusius, 2015). In contrast, help recipients who are better performers than help givers have higher relative performance standing and are likely to engage in downward comparison that enhances their self-worth and status (Collins, 1996), reducing the potential threatening effect of receiving task-related help (Nadler & Fisher, 1986). Furthermore, help may be perceived as status affirmation, rather than as status threat. Taken together, we hypothesize:

> *Hypothesis 1: Relative performance standing between help recipients and help givers moderates the positive relationship between receiving task-related help and envy, such that higher envy occurs only when the help recipient is a lower, rather than higher, performer compared to the help giver.*

From a socio-functional perspective, envy may be adaptive and inform envious individuals that they may suffer a loss of status which motivates correction action to maintain social status. Intuitively, we might expect envious individuals to counter superior advantages and restore psychological balance (Tai et al., 2012) through harmful behaviors such as social undermining (Duffy, Scott, Shaw, Tepper, & Aquino, 2012) or passively withholding help (Bamberger & Belogolovsky, 2017). However, others must convey the prestige and respect inherent in social status (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), and thus status may not be effectively regained through these antagonistic strategies. In contrast, giving help creates, preserves, or even

challenges status relations among help givers and recipients (Nadler et al., 2010). By helping their help givers, help recipients may cope with envy and rebalance the status relation by showing that they have sufficient resources to share (Ouyang et al., in press). Such reciprocal help signals competence, reduces the superiority gap, preserves status, deters feelings of inferiority and envy, and reestablishes the dyadic status balance. Supporting the status enhancing function of giving help, research shows that when individuals provide more help to others, they are perceived as having higher status (Hardy & Vugt, 2006). Therefore, we suggest that envious help recipients may balance status relations and adaptively cope with envy by helping the source of the threat (Nadler et al., 2010). Overall:

> *Hypothesis 2: Envy is positively related to help giving toward the help giver.*

Although help recipients might reduce their sense of inferiority by helping the envied help giver, some recipients may be unable to terminate dependency and regain status. We propose that internal locus of control influences whether envious help recipients are likely to help envied help givers for two reasons. First, individuals with high internal locus of control perceive that internal factors such as ability or effort cause successes or failures (Weiner & Kukla, 1970). Thus, they are more likely to take active steps to achieve desirable outcomes and cope with dissatisfied status (Giles, 1977). In our context, they may respond to envy by proactively helping their help giver, believing that their increased effort will increase their social status. Second, they will be more motivated to help higher-performing help givers as they are more likely to assume that the help givers have innate ability and work harder. Such attributions guide the envious help recipient to perceive the help giver as a high status actor who deserves favorable interpersonal treatments and from whom they may receive valuable information (Cheng, Cheung, Chio, & Chan, 2013), which could contribute to their status. In summary, internal locus of control positively shapes reactions to envy, such that internal locus of control will moderate the envy-helping link by increasing the tendency to help in response to envy. We also hypothesize a dual-stage moderated mediation model.

> *Hypothesis 3: Internal locus of control moderates the positive relationship between envy and helping the envied target (i.e., the original help giver), such that the positive relationship is stronger for individuals with higher internal locus of control, compared to those with lower internal locus of control.*

> *Hypothesis 4: Relative performance standing and internal locus of control will moderate the indirect effect between receiving task-related help and helping via envy: such that this indirect effect is stronger when the help recipient has higher internal locus of control and is a lower performer compared to the help giver.*

## OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We conducted three studies to investigate when receiving task-related help elicits envy and whether envy subsequently triggers reciprocal helping. Study 1 was a field study with a round robin design using a sample of sales representatives to test Hypothesis 1. Study 2 used a sample of student teams with a time-lagged design to constructively replicate Study 1 and examine the consequences of envy (Hypotheses 2 & 3). In Study 3, we sought to replicate and

substantiate Study 2 by experimentally manipulating receiving task-related help and relative performance standing and controlling for gratitude as an alternative mediator.

## STUDY 1

We collected data from 128 sales representatives (408 dyads in 31 teams) of a major telecommunication service company in China. The sales associates worked in teams of four or five members primarily to sell mobile phone service plans and provide office support. Their performance was evaluated based on individual sales quotas publicly posted on the company's internal notice boards, creating opportunities for comparing performance. Using a round-robin design, we asked each employee to rate task-related help received from each team member (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002) and how often they felt envious toward each team member (Fiske et al., 2002). Relative performance standing is operationalized as the difference between how many telecommunication service packages help recipients and help givers sold in each dyad. We controlled for gender, age, dyadic tenure, team size, positive affectivity, negative affectivity, and the receipt of person-related help. We used the hierarchical linear modeling application of the social relations model (Kenny, 1994) in MLwin (Goldstein et al., 1998) to test our hypothesis.

Results supported Hypothesis 1 by showing that the interaction between receiving task-related help and relative performance standing significantly predicted envy (B = -.06, SE = .03, $p$ < .05). Simple slopes analyses showed that when help recipients performed relatively better than help givers, receiving task-related help from help givers was not related to envy toward them (simple slope = -.02, ns). In contrast, when help recipients performed relatively worse than help givers, receiving task-related help was positively related to envy toward the help giver (simple slope = .10, $p$ < .05).

## STUDY 2

We collected data from undergraduate business students (102 students within 22 teams forming 386 dyads) at a major university in Hong Kong. Working in teams of three to six members, the students had to complete a team project (i.e., business plan) in one semester as part of the evaluation component in a business-related module. Similar to work teams in organizations where team performance will have a significant impact on individual performance, helping interactions in student project teams are necessary to ensure the progress of the project and the quality of work each team member puts in. We collected data at two time points across the semester, using a round-robin design. At Time 1, after students had worked together for two months, and two weeks after the release of mid-term examination results, we measured demographic information, internal locus of control, positive affectivity, negative affectivity, receipt of task-related and person-related help from team members, and feelings of envy toward team members. The instructor provided mid-term examination scores. At Time 2, one month later, we again measured receipt of task-related help from each team member since the last survey. The measure served as an other-rated indicator of task-related help a student provided to each team member. Except for internal locus of control, we used the same measures from Study 1 and adapted them to the student project team context. We used the same analytical strategy to test our hypotheses.

Results again supported Hypothesis 1. Relative performance standing moderated the relationship between receiving task-related help and the help recipient's envy toward the help

giver (B = -.06, SE = .03, $p < .05$). Simple slope analyses found the same interaction pattern as that in Study 1: when the help recipient performed better than the help giver, receiving task-related help from this help giver was not related to the help recipient's envy toward the help giver (simple slope = .01, ns); when the help recipient performed worse than the help giver, receiving task-related help from this help giver was positively related to envy toward him/her (simple slope = .12, $p < .05$). Supporting Hypothesis 2, envy was positively related to reciprocal helping (B =.12, SE = .04, $p < .01$). Furthermore, internal locus of control moderated the relationship between envy and help giving toward the original help giver (B = .11, SE = .04, $p < .01$). Results from simple slope analyses showed that envy was positively related to help giving toward the envied help giver only among individuals with higher internal locus of control (simple slope = .23, $p < .05$), but not among those with lower internal locus of control (simple slope = .02, ns), supporting Hypothesis 3. Hypothesis 4 stated a conditional indirect effect of receiving task-related help on help giving to the original help giver via envy when the help recipient performed worse than the help giver (i.e., low relative performance standing) and had higher internal locus of control. Supporting Hypothesis 4, results showed that the indirect effect of receiving task-related help on help giving through envy is 0.03 (95% CI: [0.005, 0.060]) when the help recipient performed worse than the help giver and had high internal locus of control. For the indirect effect associated with all other combinations of relative performance standing and internal locus of control, the 95% CIs included zero, indicating a lack of indirect effect.

## STUDY 3

Our last study, which is a scenario-based experiment, involved 113 full-time employees recruited from Prolific Academic. We adopted a 2 (receiving help: yes vs. no) × 2 (relative performance standing: high vs. low) between-participants design. Participants first completed a measure of internal locus of control before they were randomly assigned to read one of four versions of a scenario. Specifically, participants read a scenario where they were told to imagine themselves as an employee who has been working for some time in a reputable multinational company and that they work with a few other coworkers on team projects. Participants then read that they encountered a task-related issue for the current team project and they spent some time thinking about it. In the receiving help (no help) condition, the scenario explained that Jamie, a coworker, who has been working in the same team for several months helped (did not help) solve the problem. In the low (high) relative performance standing condition, Jamie was a higher (lower) performer as compared to them. After participants read the scenario, they completed the measures for envy, gratitude, helping intention, and manipulation check questions. We used Mplus 7 to conduct path analyses, with gratitude controlled as an alternative mediator.

We again found support for our hypotheses. There was a significant interaction effect of receiving task-related help and relative performance standing on the help recipient's envy toward the help giver (B = -1.28, SE = .52, $p < .05$). When the help recipient performed better than the help giver, receiving task-related help from this help giver was not related to the help recipient's envy toward the help giver (simple slope = .24, ns); when the help recipient performed worse than the help giver, receiving task-related help from the help giver was positively related to envy toward him/her (simple slope = 1.52, p < .01). Additionally, envy was positively related to reciprocal help toward the original help giver (B =.18, SE = .07, $p < .05$) after controlling for the effect of gratitude, and internal locus of control moderated the relationship between envy and help giving toward the original help giver (B = .19, SE = .08, $p < .05$). Simple slope analyses

showed that envy was positively associated with reciprocal help toward the envied help giver only among individuals with higher internal locus of control (simple slope = .33, $p < .001$), but not among those with lower internal locus of control (simple slope = .03, ns).

We tested our proposed moderated mediation model in Hypothesis 4 while controlling for the alternative indirect relation between receiving and giving task-related help through gratitude. Results showed an indirect effect of receiving task-related help on reciprocal helping through envy: 0.50 (95% CI: [0.076, 0.930]) when the help recipient performed worse than the help giver and had a higher level of internal locus of control. We did not find significant indirect effect associated with all other combinations of relative performance standing and internal locus of control where the 95% CIs included zero. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

## DISCUSSION

Across three studies, we find progressive support for our proposed relationships based on the helping as status relations framework. That is, we show that receiving task-related help can evoke envy when help recipients have lower relative performance standing than their help givers. To cope with their envy and preserve their status, help recipients may then reciprocate by helping the help giver, especially when help recipients have higher internal locus of control.

Our research makes significant contributions to the helping literature largely grounded in social exchange theory (e.g., Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). First, we offer a new perspective of looking at how receiving help influences the help recipient by leveraging the helping as status relations framework. Our findings suggest that positive reciprocity may not necessarily be driven by qualities/utilities of the dyadic interaction and their positive emotional exchanges (Lawler, 2001), but it could be driven by the status-related emotional mechanism of envy that motivates reciprocity as a way to strive for status balance between recipients and givers. In doing so, our research concurs with recent research that emphasizes the prevalence of matching between an individual's help receiving and giving for status attainment (Ouyang et al., in press). Furthermore, we provide a different perspective regarding how lateral working peers react when receiving help creates status imbalance and evokes envy, requiring help giving to maintain a balanced interpersonal status hierarchy. Our study also extends the envy literature by uncovering antecedents and consequences of envy (e.g., Bamberger & Belogolovsky, 2017; Yu, Duffy, & Tepper, 2017). To our best knowledge, our empirical studies are among the first to identify help interactions and performance differentials as relational antecedents of envy. Furthermore, we add to emerging research showing that envy can engender positive consequences (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004; Yu et al., 2017). By finding that internal locus of control strengthens the positive relationship between envy and helping, our study provides empirical support for the idea that individuals with high internal locus of control might become "inspired after being confronted with others who outperform them" (Van de Ven et al., 2012: 203).

Despite the strengths of our research designs, our studies have several limitations. First, we did not measure whether they solicited the help. Second, we cannot ascertain whether the positive reciprocity elicited by envy has prolonged effects. Third, we did not consider potential contextual moderators of the relationship between receiving task-related help and envy. We encourage future research to extend our research by capturing the characteristics of helping interactions, as well as other potential moderators.

## REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS