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Abstract

Over and Carpenter (2009) recently found that 18-month old infants who had been primed with a social affiliation cue were more likely to offer to help another person. The present research investigated whether similar affiliation cues affect intentions to *seek* help, rather than *offer* help. Undergraduate psychology students ($N = 122$) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they viewed a photograph of two people who were either holding hands (affiliation condition) or not holding hands (nonaffiliation condition). Participants then indicated their intention to ask other people for help when they worked on a university coursework assignment. Participants in the affiliation condition had significantly stronger intentions to seek help than participants in the nonaffiliation condition. These results are consistent with the idea that social affiliation cues activate a broad prosocial orientation that applies not only to others (i.e., help-giving) but also to the self (i.e., help-seeking). Future research should investigate the potential influence of attachment style on the relationship between affiliation cues, help-giving, and help-seeking.

KEYWORDS: help-seeking, affiliation, prosocial, priming, attachment style.

Social Affiliation Cues Prime Help-Seeking Intentions

According to Over and Carpenter (2009), humans have evolved a tendency towards prosocial behaviour due to their relatively high dependence on social groups for survival. This connection between social groups and prosocial behaviour is thought to be so fundamental that simple cues of affiliation between people should automatically elicit helping and sharing behaviour.

In support of this hypothesis, Over and Carpenter (2009) found that 18-month old infants who had been primed with a social affiliation cue were more likely to offer to help another person. Specifically, infants who viewed photographs that showed two dolls facing one another were more likely to offer to help an adult who had accidentally dropped something compared to control participants who viewed photographs that contained no dolls, a single doll, or two dolls standing back to back.

Previous research has demonstrated that affiliation cues also prime help-giving intentions in adults. In particular, Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, and Nitzberg (2005) found that undergraduate students who were primed subliminally with the name of a security-providing attachment figure were more willing to help an unemployed widow than control participants who were primed with the name of a close person who was not an attachment figure.

However, no previous research has investigated whether affiliation cues prime help-seeking rather than help-giving. This research question is important because it cannot automatically be assumed that affiliation cues have the same effect on help-seeking as they do on help-giving. Help-seeking involves different social psychological processes than help-giving. In particular, help-seeking can often represent a source of threat to the self because it implies inadequacy and indebtedness (Karabenick, 2006). Consequently, affiliation cues may not be sufficient to promote help-seeking in the same way that they promote help-giving.

To investigate this issue in the present research, undergraduate students were randomly assigned to either an affiliation condition or a nonaffiliation condition, and their intentions to seek help from others during the completion of a coursework assignment were measured. Based on help-giving research, it was predicted that participants in the affiliation condition would report a greater intention to seek help for their assignment than participants in the nonaffiliation condition.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 125 students who were enrolled in a second-year psychology undergraduate course at an Australian university. Three participants were excluded from the data analysis because they did not follow the research instructions. The final sample consisted of 122 people (24 men and 98 women) who had a mean age of 23.04 years ($SD = 5.64$).

A 2 (condition: affiliation/nonaffiliation) x 2 (context: romantic/parental) between-subjects design was used. There were 57 participants in the affiliation condition (75.43% women) and 65 participants in the nonaffiliation condition (84.62% women). The context factor is discussed in more detail below.

Procedure and Measures

The research was introduced as an investigation of person perception and problem-solving. Participants completed the research on a voluntary basis and on their own time via an online questionnaire.

At the start of the questionnaire, participants responded to 12 statements that measured their chronic preference for general help-seeking. Example items include "I value other people's social support when making important decisions", and "In general, I do not like to ask other people to help me to solve problems" (reverse scored). Participants

responded to the statements in this measure and all of the other measures in the questionnaire using a 7-point Likert-type scale (*strongly disagree, strongly agree*).

Next, participants viewed a photograph of two people who were walking away from the photographer along a corridor. In the affiliation condition, the people were holding hands, and in the nonaffiliation condition the people were not holding hands. The two people were approximately the same distance apart from one another in the affiliation and nonaffiliation photographs.

Hand-holding can have different meanings depending on context. In order to investigate potential contextual variations in this factor, two pairs of models were used within each level of the affiliation factor (for details of this stimulus sampling approach, see Wells & Windschitl, 1999). In the affiliation condition, half of the participants viewed a man and woman holding hands, representing romantic affiliation, and half viewed a woman and child holding hands, representing parental affiliation. In the nonaffiliation condition, half of the participants viewed the same man and woman and half viewed the same woman and child. The only difference from the affiliation condition was that the models in the nonaffiliation condition were not holding hands.

In order to focus their attention on the stimulus materials, participants were asked to take a minute to imagine that they were one of the two people in the photograph that they viewed. Participants who viewed a man and woman in their photograph were asked to imagine that they were the woman, and participants who viewed a woman and girl were asked to imagine that they were the girl. Participants were asked to write down what they would be thinking and feeling if they were this person walking down the corridor.

Participants then responded to eight items that measured their intentions to engage in help-seeking behaviour in relation to a specific academic task. In particular, they indicated whether they intended to work on their own and whether they intended to seek help from other people when they completed a lab report later on during the semester. Example items included (1) "I'm unlikely to ask anyone for help with the lab report", (2) "I may ask a friend to check that I'm on the right track with the lab report", (3) "If I have trouble completing the lab report, I may ask someone for assistance", and (4) "If I run into problems with the lab report, I'll try to solve them by myself".

Participants were not informed about the relevance of hand-holding during the research, and there was no attempt to draw participants' attention to this part of the research. Nonetheless, it remained possible that participants might have somehow discovered the relevance of this aspect of the research and then responded in a way that they believed would confirm the research hypothesis in order to be "good" participants and not "ruin" the research (Orne, 1962). In order to test this possibility, Rubin, Paolini, and Crisp's (2010) Perceived Awareness of the Research Hypothesis (PARH) scale was included at the end of the questionnaire. This 4-item scale measures the extent to which participants believe that they are aware of researchers' hypotheses. Example items include "I knew what the researchers were investigating in this research" and "I wasn't sure what the researchers were trying to demonstrate in this research" (reverse scored).

Finally, participants responded to an open-ended item that asked them to indicate what they thought the research was trying to show and how it was trying to show it. Participants then indicated their age and gender before being debriefed.

Results

The measure of chronic preference for general help-seeking had good scale score reliability ($\alpha = .81$, 95% CI [.76, .86]). A 2 (condition: affiliation/nonaffiliation) x 2 (context: romantic/parental) ANOVA was performed on participants' mean scores. No significant effects were obtained ($ps \geq .672$). Hence, the random allocation of participants to conditions

had been successful in producing conditions that were equivalent in terms of participants' chronic preferences for general help-seeking.

The measure of intentions to engage in academic help-seeking also had good scale score reliability ($\alpha = .84$, 95% CI [.80, .88]). A 2 (condition: affiliation/nonaffiliation) $\times$ 2 (context: romantic/parental) ANOVA was performed on participants' mean scores. There was a significant main effect of condition, $F(1, 118) = 4.89$, $p = .029$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Consistent with predictions, participants in the affiliation (hand-holding) condition had stronger intentions to engage in academic help-seeking behaviour ($M = 4.87$, $SD = .83$) than participants in the nonaffiliation condition ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.10$). Hand-holding context (romantic vs. parental) had no significant effect either on its own or in interaction with affiliation condition ($ps \geq .71$).¹

The PARH measure had good scale score reliability ($\alpha = .85$, 95% CI [.81, .89]). A one sample t test showed that participants' mean PARH score was significantly below the scale's midpoint of 4.00 ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(120) = -4.70$, $p < .001$. Hence, on average, participants tended to disagree that they were aware of the research hypothesis. Consistent with this quantitative data, an analysis of participants' open-ended comments revealed that no participants mentioned hand-holding versus no hand-holding as a potentially relevant variable in the research.

In order to investigate whether participants' perceived awareness of the research hypothesis accounted for the significant effect of condition, the PARH index was included as a covariate in the ANOVA that was performed on the measure of academic help-seeking intentions. The main effect of condition remained significant, $F(1, 116) = 5.16$, $p = .025$, $\eta^2 = .04$, and the PARH index did not act as a significant covariate ($p = .072$). Hence, contrary to the demand characteristics explanation, participants' perceived awareness of the research hypothesis did not account for the significant effect of condition.

Discussion

Consistent with predictions, university students who were exposed to a photograph of two people holding hands were more likely to indicate that they would seek help on an upcoming coursework assignment than students who were exposed to a photograph of the same two people who were not holding hands. This evidence suggests that affiliation cues (i.e., hand-holding) prime intentions to engage in academic help-seeking behaviour.

Three points indicate that the observed effect represents a genuine psychological effect rather than an artefact caused by implicit demand characteristics. First, data from the PARH scale showed that participants significantly disagreed that they were aware of the research hypothesis. Second, an analysis of participants' postexperimental feedback comments confirmed that no participants identified hand-holding versus no hand-holding as the independent variable. Third, and most important, the effect of condition on academic help-seeking intentions remained statistically significant after controlling for participants' PARH scores.

The size of the observed effect is notable. An eta-squared value of .04 is equivalent to a Pearson r coefficient of .20. According to Cohen (1988), an effect of $r = .20$ can be classified as a small-to-medium sized effect ($r = .10$ is considered small and $r = .30$ is considered medium).

As Cohen (1988) noted, effect sizes should be interpreted in the context of other effects in the particular area of investigation that is under consideration. Consequently, it is instructive to note that an effect size of $r = .20$ is typical of the relationship between academic help-seeking and variables that predict academic help-seeking. For example, correlations of around .20 have been found between academic help-seeking and mastery-approach and performance-avoidance goals (Baranik, Stanley, Bynum, & Lance, 2010; Roussel, Elliot, &

Feltman, in press), perceived threat associated with help-seeking (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991), and socially prescribed perfectionism (Mills & Blankstein, 2000).

Previous research in this area has established that affiliation cues increase help-giving intentions and behaviour (Mikulincer et al., 2005; Over & Carpenter, 2009). The present research extends this previous research by demonstrating that affiliation cues can increase help-seeking intentions as well as help-giving intentions. Theoretically, these findings are consistent with Over and Carpenter's (2009) suggestion that affiliation cues activate a broad prosocial orientation. In particular, it appears that this prosocial orientation applies not only to others (i.e., help-giving) but also to the self (i.e., help-seeking).

Notably, the context of affiliation cues (romantic vs. parental) did not have a significant influence on intentions to seek help. Again, this evidence indicates the generality of the effect of affiliation cues.

Future research should investigate moderators of the relationship between affiliation cues and prosocial intentions and behaviours. Individual differences in relationship attachment style may be important here. Vogel and Wei (2005) found that attachment anxiety had a positive relationship with undergraduate students' intentions to seek help from professional counsellors. In contrast, attachment avoidance had a negative relationship with this help-seeking intention. Rowe and Carnelley (2003) found that people with a secure attachment style are more likely to expect positive interpersonal outcomes compared to people with avoidant and anxious-ambivalent styles. Notably, Rowe and Carnelley also found that experimentally primed secure attachment style led to relatively positive interpersonal expectations and positive affect. Hence, both chronic and transitory attachment orientation may interact with affiliation primes to determine subsequent help-seeking and/or help-giving.

Future research should also investigate the process by which affiliation cues activate help-seeking and help-giving. In particular, do affiliation cues trigger a "general prosocial orientation" (Over & Carpenter, 2009, p. 1192) that leads to both help-giving and help-seeking, or are these two forms of behaviour activated via separate processes? To address this question, future researchers should investigate the effects of affiliation cues on help-seeking and help-giving within the same study and measure the influence of potential mediating variables, including transitory attachment orientation, interpersonal expectations, positive affect, caregiving representations, and sense of affiliation (Mikulincer et al., 2005; Over & Carpenter, 2009; Rowe & Carnelley, 2003).

One limitation of the present research is that both male and female participants were asked to take the perspective of female targets (i.e., a woman or a girl) in the photographs that they viewed. Male participants may have found this task more difficult to perform than female participants. Future researchers should ask participants to take the perspective of same-gender targets in order to maximize the external validity of this manipulation.

A second limitation of the research is that 80% of the sample were women. Future research should use more balanced samples of men and women in order to allow more powerful investigations of potential gender differences in this area.

A third limitation is that the present research only investigated help-seeking intentions. Future research should investigate whether these intentions go on to predict actual help-seeking behaviour.

A fourth limitation is that the research only investigated help-seeking within an educational context. Future research should investigate help-seeking in other contexts such as counseling and health (e.g., Vogel & Wei, 2005).

In summary, the present study demonstrated that affiliation cues (viz., hand-holding) prime intentions to engage in academic help-seeking behaviour. This small-to-medium sized effect appeared to occur independent of demand characteristics, chronic preference for

general help-seeking, and the context of the affiliation cue (romantic/parental). This evidence is consistent with the idea that affiliation cues activate a broad prosocial orientation. Future research should investigate the potential interaction between relationship attachment orientation and affiliation cues in determining both help-giving and help-seeking.

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Footnotes

¹ A Pearson chi-square test found that there was no significant difference in the proportion of men and women in the affiliation and nonaffiliation conditions, $\chi^2(122) = 1.62, p = .203$. Furthermore, participants' gender did not significantly influence help-seeking intentions, $t(120) = .61, p = .542$, and the main effect of condition remained significant when gender was included as a covariate in the analyses, $F(1, 117) = 4.57, p = .035$.