

The Influence of the Costs Associated with Help-Seeking on the Perceptions of Help-Seekers and Help-Givers

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Abstract

Help-seeking behavior is when you ask others to help you meet a specific need. Help-seekers consider not only their own costs (e.g., anxiety), but also the costs for the help-givers (e.g., time, effort). In the present study, we focused on the costs attributed to potential help-givers. We conducted an experiment to examine the influence of manipulations to the costs on the perceptions of help-seekers and help-givers, comparing the control condition with each experimental condition (i.e., help-giving, face-saving, and guilt). The results revealed that there were no differences found in the experimental conditions, with the exception of the increased guilt condition. Future research is needed to reconfirm this finding, after further refinement of the manipulations, and an association of a gap between a help-seeker and a help-giver with help-seeking behavior.

Keywords: help-seeking behavior, costs to help-givers, consulting behavior

Introduction

In Japan, the number of patients suffering from mental illness has increased to over 3.2 million in 2011 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2011). These data include only those who have utilized mental health services. It is assumed that three to four times more people than the current statistic experience mental health problems (Science Council of Japan, 2005). In Western countries, the percentage of people using a formal mental health service is less than 25% of the population, in spite of the increasing incidence of mental illness (Pescosolido & Boyer, 2009). Therefore, it is important to encourage people to seek help if needed, for the prevention of mental illness.

Help-seeking behavior is asking another person for help when we cannot solve a problem on our own. DePaulo (1983) described help-seeking behavior: (1) an individual has a problem or need;

(2) the problem is of sort that might possibly be alleviated or solved if the time, effort, and resources of others were committed to it; and (3) the needy individual seeks the aid of another person in a direct way.

Help-Seeking and Mental Health

Research on help-seeking behavior has mainly focused on seeking help for mental health. Madianos, Medianou, and Stefants (1993) indicated that only forty percent of those who have serious mental problems have seen a doctor. Wilson, Deane, and Ciarrochi (2005) demonstrated that suicidal ideation significantly predicted a decline in seeking help. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that suicidal ideation and psychological distress are associated with help-negation (Wilson, Deane, Marshall, & Dalley, 2010) and that people who experience suicidal ideation have more negative attitudes toward help-seeking and lower intentions to seek help (Calear, Batterham, & Christensen, 2014). Additionally, suicidal ideation at a subclinical level inhibits help-seeking (Wilson & Deane, 2010). Many studies consistently suggest that suicidal ideation is negatively associated with help-seeking behavior. In contrast, well-adjusted adolescents tend to seek help and do not recognize the barriers to help-seeking (Sheffield, Fiorenza, & Sofronoff, 2004). As indicated above, help-seeking behavior is closely related to mental health and therefore, it is essential to examine the factors that prevent people from seeking help.

Anticipated Benefits and Costs of Help-Seeking

Takagi (1997) developed a model of the help-seeking process with a series of steps from recognizing a problem to obtaining help for it. The decision-making regarding help-seeking involves considering both positive and negative outcomes of performance or avoidance of help-seeking behavior (Takagi, 1997). For example, you may solve a problem more easily by seeking help. However, you could feel some anxiety seeking help because you may be concerned about whether a potential help-giver will comply favorably with the request, or whether he or she will consider you as weak and incompetent. This is what is termed as the anticipated benefits and costs of help-seeking. Vogel, Wade, and Hackler (2008) demonstrated that the anticipated benefits and costs mediate the relationship between emotional expression and attitudes toward seeking psychological therapy. Vogel and Wester (2003) also suggested that the anticipated risks of self-disclosure might predict negative attitudes towards counseling and decrease intentions to seek. Japanese junior high school students seem to be reluctant to seek help because they perceive the low benefits of help-seeking rather than the high costs of seeking help (Nagai & Arai, 2007). Previous studies have focused on these feelings of reluctance and anxiety, mostly from the perspective of help-seeker. Nevertheless, help-seeking behavior is an interactive communication

between a help-seeker and a help-giver. Therefore, it is also necessary to understand help-seeking from the perspective of a help-giver.

Costs of Complying With or Rejecting Help-Seeking

Like the help-seeker, the help-giver also experiences costs associated with rejecting or complying with help-seeking. Benefits and costs for a potential help-giver represent the positive and negative outcomes of providing or rejecting help (Takagi, 1997). Takagi (1997) mentioned that the benefits of providing help are gratitude from the help-seeker, a higher evaluation from people nearby, and increased self-esteem. The costs of giving help include spending time and money. On the other hand, the benefit of not giving help is the positive effect of the alternative action, and the costs of not giving help are blame from the help-seeker and others around, as well as a lowered evaluation from others and a lower self-esteem.

It is important for the help-seeker to appreciate these costs to a potential help-giver in the decision-making process of help-seeking (Aikawa, 1987). DePaulo and Fischer (1980) demonstrated that participants intend to seek help more often from a help-giver who is not busy than from a busier one. Shapiro's study (1980), in which the cost of help-giving was operationalized as an interruption of an opportunity for additional reward, found that participants in the lower cost condition sought help more often than those in the higher cost condition. These findings suggest that help-seekers not only consider the costs to themselves, but also the costs to the help-giver when they decide to seek help from others.

Do help-seekers correctly predict the costs to a help-giver? Flynn and Lake (2008) found that there is a gap between the costs perceived by the help-seeker and help-giver, in their investigation of various favors (e.g., filling out a questionnaire, borrowing a phone). That is, a help-seeker underestimates a help-refusal cost perceived by a help-giver. They pointed out that this gap could possibly inhibit help-seeking behavior. Takegahara and Ambo (2013) also suggested that a help-seeker who consults with friends regarding troubles would underestimate the help-refusal cost and overestimate the help-giving cost, thus supporting the finding of Flynn and Lake (2008).

The findings mentioned above suggest that a help-seeker cannot fully appreciate the costs to a help-giver, even though the help-seeker takes these costs into account. However, these findings are limited as they did not examine the costs at the time of seeking help. In a study by Flynn and Lake (2008), participants predicted the number of help-givers before the task. The participants might have felt anxious about the strangers' reactions to their requests for favors before the experiment, because the study dealt with asking a stranger to fill out a questionnaire. The task might also have been unfamiliar to the participants. Therefore, their feelings of anxiety and

reluctance towards the task might have influenced their predictions of the number of help-givers. Takegahara and Ambo (2013) examined help-seekers' predictions regarding help-givers with a questionnaire that asked respondents what they thought about approaching someone for help. Since the procedure involved imagining a close person as a potential help-giver, the mental picture could have been different from real life circumstances.

Thus, if a help-seeker could correctly predict a help-giver's costs, this prediction of costs by a help-seeker would change with increases to the costs. For instance, a help-seeker who saw a busy help-giver would make a higher prediction of the help-giving costs. Therefore, we expected that the perceived cost would depend on the help-giver's situation. In this study, we endeavored to examine whether increasing the actual costs would raise the perceived costs with help-seekers and help-givers. In this present study, we chose a consulting behavior between close friends, which was a common help-seeking behavior.

Aim of the Present Study and Hypotheses

The present study aimed to examine whether an increase in the actual costs to help-givers would lead to an increase in the costs perceived by help-seekers and help-givers. The experimental conditions were designed to increase the costs of help-giving and help-refusal.

A help-seeker is more likely to overestimate the cost of help-giving than a help-giver (Takegahara & Ambo, 2013). Moreover, a help-seeker is more likely to underestimate the cost of help-refusal than a help-giver (Flynn & Lake, 2008; Takegahara & Ambo, 2013). Therefore, we tested two hypotheses: (1) help-seekers in the experimental condition with increased help-giving costs would predict a higher help-giving cost than the help-seekers assigned to the control condition, and (2) help-seekers in the experimental condition with increased help-refusal costs would rate the help-refusal cost as higher than the help-seekers assigned to the control condition.

Method

Participants

Sixty-nine pairs of Japanese university students (26 male pairs and 43 female pairs, with a mean age of 20.57 years; $SD = 1.41$) participated in the present study. Each same-gender pair had been acquaintances for at least one year or more. They received book coupons as a reward for their participation in the experiment.

Procedure

First, participants were randomly classified as either help-seekers or help-givers. Participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of items measuring

various aspects, such as the anxiety experienced by a help-seeker and the costs for a help-giver. The participants who were classified as help-seekers rated their perceived level of anxiety associated with seeking help. The help-seekers also rated the help-givers' costs, predicting what the help-giving participant would think. In contrast, participants who were help-givers rated the level of anxiety associated with help-seeking, predicting what their partners would think. Help-givers also completed items regarding their own perceived costs of complying with or rejecting the request for help. The help-seeker participants also wrote down their current anxieties in the questionnaire.

Second, the experimenter left the experiment room for a short time with the help-seeker, and the help-seeker was instructed to consult with the other participant about his or her current anxiety as reported in the questionnaire. However, the help-giver would not usually recognize the contents of the discussion with the help-seeker. Therefore, we told the help-seeker that we would inform the help-givers that they were participating in a free conversation, rather than a consultation. After returning to the experiment room with the help-seeker, the pair of participants was asked to converse freely for fifteen minutes. The experimenters left the room during the conversation.

After fifteen minutes of conversation, the participants completed a second questionnaire based on their memory of the conversation. This questionnaire was the same as the one administered previously, except for some changes to the order of the items and changes to the tense (past tense) of the item wording. In the end, we debriefed the participants about the purpose of this study and they exited the experiment room.

Manipulation

We set up four conditions: the control, help-giving, face-saving, and guilt conditions. These conditions were based on the costs to help-givers for complying with and refusing the help request which was used in Takagi's study (1997). Each experimental condition was designed to increase the particular cost in comparison to the control condition.

Help-giving condition: This condition was set up to increase the cost of giving help during the consultation in terms of time and effort. We asked the help-giver to write down as much of the content of the fifteen-minute conversation as possible.

Face-saving condition: This condition was designed to increase the face-saving cost of help-refusing, such as lowered evaluations from the help-seeker and others nearby. To manipulate this, we told the participants that they would be observed by two graduate psychology students during the conversation. After finishing the experiment, we informed them that this was a deception.

Guilt condition: This condition was devised to increase feelings of guilt for rejecting the consultation. The help-giver was asked to recall his/her previous experiences of receiving help from the other participant, and had to write down as many of these experiences as possible. Following this, we asked the help-giver to talk about those experiences which had the most impact on their lives.

Measures

Anxiety for Seeking Help: In order to examine feelings of anxiety and reluctance for seeking help, we compiled items selected from several scales. We selected items representative of the “negative response” and “lowering self-esteem” factors from the revised version of the expected costs/benefits of consultation scale developed by Nagai and Arai (2008). We added items to represent “stigma and bias for psychological help” and “concern and shame for psychological treatment” used in Ohata and Hisata (2009). Furthermore, we chose items that dealt with “concern and reluctance for help-seeking” from the trait help-seeking preferences measure of Tamura and Ishikuma (2006). Thus, we used a total of ten items to measure the level of anxiety associated with seeking help. Participants classified as help-seekers rated these items based on their own feelings and perceptions, and their help-giving partners rated these items according to how they expected their help-seeking partner would think. They rated each item on a 7-point scale, with responses ranging from 1 “not agree” to 7 “strongly agree.”

Costs of Complying With or Rejecting Requests for Help: To measure the help-giver’s costs of complying with or rejecting the help request, we prepared items that were based on the characteristics of helping behavior used in the study by Takagi (1982). The factors that were involved in the help-refusal costs were “face-saving,” “guilt,” “uncomfortable feeling,” and “lowering of self-esteem.” Factors related to the costs of help-giving had three characteristics: “effort,” “risk,” and “time.” We added two items to represent “blame from a help-seeker,” because we presumed that blame from a help-seeker would be a common anticipated help-refusal cost between close friends. We developed two items for each factor which resulted in a total of 18 items. The help-seeking participants were asked to rate the items and predict what their help-giving partners would think about the costs. The help-giving participants, on the other hand, rated the items according to how they felt. They rated each item on a 7-point scale, with responses ranging from 1 “not agree” to 7 “strongly agree.”

Intention to Seek Help: We used three questions to measure intentions to seek help by modifying the items used in Kasahara’s study (2003). The participants classified as help-seekers responded whether they intended to consult with the help-giver. The participants classified as help-givers also answered the same questions and predicted how the help-seeker would respond. They rated

the questions on a 5-point scale with responses ranging from 1 “not agree” to 5 “strongly agree.”

Intention to Give Help: The participants were asked to rate the extent to which they intended to comply with the help request on a 4-point scale with responses ranging from 1 “not at all” to 4 “very strongly.” The help-seeking participants predicted the possibility of the help-giver complying with the request.

Manipulation Check: To examine the closeness of each pair’s relationship, we administered certain items on the first page of the questionnaire. The items represented the concept of feelings of “reliance and security” with friends, which was used in the study by Enomoto (1999). Moreover, to test the validity of the experimental situation, we asked the participants to rate the reality of the experimental situation and the severity of the anxiety. They rated these items on a 5-point scale with responses ranging from 1 “not agree” to 5 “agree.”

Results

In the present study, we tested two hypotheses to examine whether the manipulation of a help-giver’s costs would influence the costs perceived by the help-seekers and help-givers. *Hypothesis 1* stated that help-seekers in the experimental condition with increased help-giving costs, would rate the help-giving costs as higher than help-seekers in the control condition. *Hypothesis 2* stated that help-seekers in the experimental condition with increased help-refusal costs, would predict a higher help-refusal cost than help-seekers in the control condition.

First, we calculated Cronbach’s α for the questionnaire to check the factor structure of the items on costs to help-givers, based on the structure used in the study by Takegahara and Ambo (2013). The α values for all of the factors were above .65. Therefore, we used the same factor structure as the Takegahara and Ambo study. The structure consisted of four factors: face-saving ($\alpha = .87$), blame from help-seeker ($\alpha = .71$), guilt ($\alpha = .68$), and time and labor spent giving help ($\alpha = .81$). We computed the participants’ scores by averaging their ratings for each of the four factors and this was used for further analysis.

To test the influence of the manipulation of costs on the costs perceived by the help-seekers and help-givers, we performed an analysis of covariance with the position (help-seeker vs. help-giver) and condition (control vs. experimental) as independent variables and the ratings of the cost of help-giving after the free conversation as the dependent variable. We used the ratings of the costs of help-giving before the conversation as a covariate for the analysis. With respect to the factor of time and labor spent giving help, the main effect of the position was significant, $F(1, 62) = 6.02, p < .05$. As shown in Table 1, the participants who were classified as help-seekers ($M = 2.58, SD = 1.18$) tended to rate the time and effort for help-giving more highly than participants who were help-givers ($M = 1.92, SD = .91$). The main effect of the condition and the interaction

between the position and condition were not statistically significant.

Table 1. Mean scores for help-giving costs based on position and condition

position	condition		control	
	M	SD	experimental (help-giving)	
			M	SD
Help-seeker	2.44	.97	2.80	1.45
Help-giver	1.84	.93	2.04	.91

None of the main effects of the position or condition, or the interaction between those variables was significant for the face-saving costs condition (Table 2).

Table 2. Mean scores for the face-saving costs condition based on the position and condition

position	condition		control	
	M	SD	experimental (face-saving)	
			M	SD
Help-seeker	2.25	.98	3.00	1.25
Help-giver	2.96	1.46	2.53	1.27

For the condition concerning costs in terms of blame from the help-seeker, the main effect of the position was significant, $F(1, 64) = 5.23, p < .05$. Table 3 shows us that the participants who sought help ($M = 2.48, SD = 1.26$) rated the help-refusal cost that involved blame from the help-seeker, as higher than participants who were classified as help-givers ($M = 2.28, SD = 1.07$). The effect of the condition and the interaction of the position and condition were not significant.

Table 3. Mean scores of blame from a help-seeker based on the position and condition

position	condition		control	
	M	SD	experimental (face-saving)	
			M	SD
Help-seeker	2.17	1.18	2.93	1.29
Help-giver	2.35	1.14	2.18	.99

The interaction of the position and condition was significant for the condition where guilt was manipulated, $F(1, 63) = 5.11, p < .05$ (Figure 1). None of the main effects were significant. The participants who were help-seekers in the guilt condition ($M = 4.18, SD = 1.17$) gave higher ratings of the guilt for refusing to help than participants who were help-seekers in the control condition ($M = 3.00, SD = 1.46$), $F(1, 63) = 4.67, p < .05$. Moreover, the help-seekers in the control condition ($M = 3.00, SD = 1.46$) predicted lower levels of guilt for refusing to help than help-givers

in the control condition ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.69$), $F(1, 63) = 6.86$, $p < .05$.

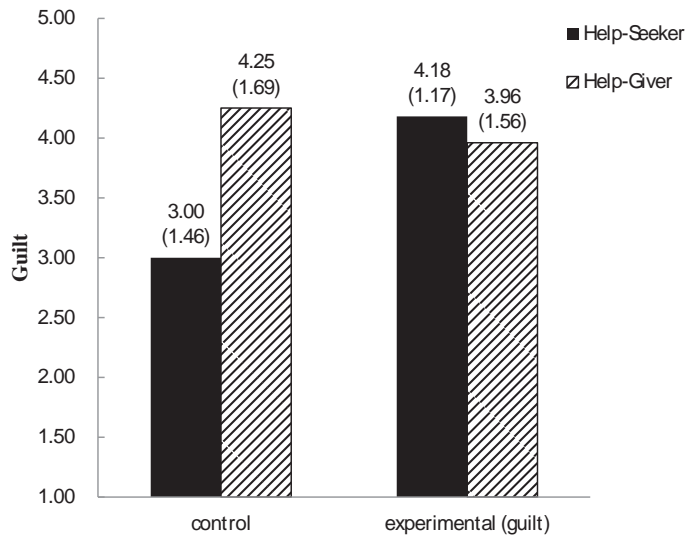


Figure 1. Mean scores for the guilt condition based on the position and condition

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine whether an increase in the costs to help-givers would influence the perception of costs by the help-seekers and help-givers. To achieve this aim, we tested two hypotheses: (1) help-seekers in the experimental condition with increased help-giving costs would make higher predictions of the help-giving costs than the help-seekers assigned to the control condition (*Hypothesis 1*), and (2) help-seekers in the experimental condition with increased help-refusal costs would rate the help-refusal costs as higher than the help-seekers assigned to the control condition (*Hypothesis 2*). We conducted an experiment to test these hypotheses. The results did not support *Hypothesis 1*; there were no significant differences in the ratings of time and labor spent giving help between the control and experimental condition with the increase in help-giving costs. In addition, the experimental manipulation in the face-saving condition did not influence either of the face-saving scores: the scores for lower evaluations from others and blame from the help-seeker for rejecting the request for help. On the other hand, there was a significant difference in the predicted level of guilt between the control and experimental condition with the increase in guilt. The help-seekers in the experimental condition made higher predictions of guilt for rejecting the help request than help-seekers in the control condition. Moreover, the difference between the guilt scores of help-seekers and help-givers in the experimental condition was not statistically significant, while the difference between those scores in the control condition was significant. From these results, we can say that *Hypothesis 2* was

partially supported, especially when guilt was manipulated.

For the ratings of time and labor spent giving help and blame from the help-seeker, the differences between the help-seekers and help-givers were consistently significant, regardless of the condition (control vs. experimental). The participants who were help-seekers predicted higher help-giving costs, such as time and effort, as well as higher costs associated with the help-seeker's complaining and rejection of the help request than participants who were help-givers. This result was consistent with the findings of Takegahara and Ambo's (2013) study.

We proposed several reasons for the lack of differences between the control and experimental conditions. Firstly, the participants in the help-giving cost condition had the opportunity to coordinate the facilitation of the writing down of the conversation, such as talking slowly. It was likely that the participant seeking help would behave altruistically to decrease the burden to the help-giver. Costs of help-giving mainly refer to when a help-seeker imposes a burden on a help-giver. Therefore, a help-seeker may often act to regulate the cost imposed on a help-giver. In spite of this effort, a help-seeker tends to overestimate the costs of giving help. This dilemma that the help-seeker faces needs to be examined in more detail. The increase in face-saving costs was not associated with blame from the help-seeker because the manipulation of this condition, that is, when the participants were told they were being observed by graduate psychology students, did not influence the communication between the pairs of help-seekers and help-givers nor their evaluations of each other.

There was no difference in the face-saving scores when comparing conditions (i.e., control vs. experimental) or positions (i.e., help-seeker vs. help-giver). In the present study, we operationally defined consulting as the help-seeking behavior. However, people often consult with others in situations where only the help-seeker and help-giver are present. In this study, the two participants conversed alone in the experiment room as they could not view the experimenters through the one-way mirror, although they were told about the presence of the experimenters in the next room. Therefore, the participants may have hardly experienced any social pressure. Furthermore, a consultation regarding one's private troubles is often unknown to a third person under normal circumstances. This situation only occurs when a help-seeker, whose request for a favor was rejected, speaks to the third person about the rejection. In the present study, there was little risk of exposure because the experimenter and associates were not acquaintances of the participants.

Finally, we discuss the limitations of the present study and directions for future research. The first limitation involved dealing with the help-giver's costs separately. To examine the ratings of a help-seeker and a help-giver for each factor with respect to the help-giver's costs, we manipulated each cost individually. However, we usually perceive and evaluate multiple costs in

daily life, depending on the situation and the particular help-giver. Thus, it was difficult to examine all of the combinations of costs through an experimental design. Second, it is likely that the manipulations of the help-giver's costs were not fully operationalized. In regards to the ratings of the manipulation check, the effects of the manipulation were confirmed to a certain extent. However, the ratings of the costs were not influenced by the manipulation, if the manipulation failed to influence the item scores for rating the costs. Therefore, the experimental design needs to be revised to take into account each construct for the costs and items used to measure it.

In this study, we did not obtain the expected results, with the exception of the experimental condition for increased guilt. More subtle manipulations may have revealed the costs to the help-seeker and consequently, changed their perceived costs. To change the perceived costs intentionally may encourage thinking that promotes help-seeking behavior. There was also a partial gap between the costs to the help-seekers and help-givers, but this gap only matters if it prevents help-seeking behavior. Thus, future research could investigate the association of the gap with an intention to seek help and help-seeking behavior.

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