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Helping behaviors can negatively impact long-term well-being
How “skin in the game” more effectively helps others

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Abstract

Purpose – Recently, organizational scholars and social scientists began emphasizing the importance of compassion and altruism and called for increased demonstrations of assistance, giving, empathy and other prosocial conduct toward those in need. Generally, we assume that help is beneficial to those who receive it, and current research on these positive behaviors primarily focuses on the advantages to those who provide it. Despite recent calls for increased levels of aiding the needy and underprivileged, helping may have downsides and adaptive costs to those who receive support that are frequently overlooked. The purpose of the study is to bring to light the potential harm in helping those who lack commitment to improvement, having “skin in the game”.

Design/methodology/approach – In addition to a literature review, the authors present a model to explain how support in response to human pain and suffering can sometimes result in negative effects on aid recipients. The model specifies two mechanisms, including participation of affected beneficiaries of assistance in the actual aid process and duration of help as factors that may expose vulnerable populations to more risk.

Findings – The literature strongly suggests that in some instances, helping can be detrimental, to the point where helping can even result in dependency. The authors do not suggest casting a blind eye to those in need, but rather to provide assistance that leads to self-sufficiency.

Research limitations/implications – Additional research – especially over the long-term – can provide researchers with more detailed results of this approach.

Practical implications – The findings of this paper can serve as a model approach to provide help that does not create dependency.

Social implications – Using this approach could provide the ideal method to address long-term social issues that would break the cycle of dependency.

Originality/value – The authors believe that this approach to helping based upon the two-stage model could become the primary effective method for providing assistance to those in need without creating dependency in the long run.

Keywords Help, Dependency, Helping

Paper type Viewpoint
“It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Jesus); “True happiness lies in helping others” (Hindu proverb); “Our prime purpose in this life is to help others and if you can’t help them at least don’t hurt them” (Dalai Lama); “Life’s most urgent question is: What are you doing for others?” (Martin Luther King, Jr.); “No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another” (Charles Dickens); “Whosoever alleviates [the lot of] a needy person, Allah will alleviate [his lot] in this world and the next” (Muhammad).

Introduction
Helping others appears to be a universal social phenomenon across time and cultures (Hunt, 1990). Over the millennia, many have argued and written in favor of acts of charity, mercy and kindness in the context of the ethic of beneficence (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013). Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Islamic and Native American spiritual traditions highlight the flourishing that follows from a life of unselfish love, compassion and altruism (Post, 2003). Some philosophers have asserted a moral obligation to assist people in need (Herman, 1996; Kant, 1969/1785).

Research on helping has identified numerous positive consequences of helping the helper, beneficiary, group and organization (Spitzmuller and Van Dyne, 2013). This research on the benefits of doing good has primarily focused on the “bright side” of generous behavior, and the benefits to favor-doers. However, one review of prosocial behavior scholarship noted that “recipients’ reactions to receiving help […] remains a relatively neglected area” (Clark, 1991, p. 8). In part, this may occur because well-meaning advocates have made raising questions about helping others taboo (Oakley, 2013). By and large, this work does not refute the positive consequences of helping but instead seeks to understand the conditions under which helping may negatively impact others.

These competing streams of research highlight a fundamental tension that exists in the helping literature exemplified by the question: Is helping good or bad? In this manuscript, we suggest that a more appropriate question may be: Under what conditions is helping positive or negative for those assisted? Accordingly, our goal is to build a bridge across the gulf separating research on the beneficial and detrimental outcomes of help for actors by incorporating both perspectives into one theoretical model. In so doing, we attempt to create consensus between these divergent streams of research. We do this by first discussing the positive and negative aspects of helping and then introduce two key examples that provide a sharper focus on the costs and unintended consequences of prosocial phenomena. Our intent here is not to be comprehensive, but instead to offer a broad overview of studies that illustrate the positive and negative consequences of helping. We follow this by presenting a 2 × 2 model and conclude by suggesting some areas where future research could help address unanswered questions so that a complete understanding of the consequences of helping can be understood.

Beneficial effects of helping
Moyo (2009a, 2009b, p. 18) found that Western countries have a culture of helping where persons who are better off subscribe to the notion that helping the less fortunate is the right thing to do: “In a world of moral uncertainty one idea is sacred; one belief cannot be compromised: the rich should help the poor […]”. Individuals are approached on the streets and goaded with pleas on flights to help others; and letters are sent to individuals to mail gift boxes reminding them that humans have a moral imperative to assist those in need. Helping has become an integral part of the entertainment industry with media figures, film stars and rock legends eagerly embracing aid, proselytizing the need for it, upbraiding people for not giving enough, scolding governments for not doing enough, and governments respond in
kind, fearful of losing popularity and desperate to win favor. Smith et al. (2006) found that 73 per cent of TV shows had some altruism and that about three altruistic behaviors were shown every hour. Keltner (2008, p. 8) goes a step further, arguing that individuals have evolved to be compassionate and that there is a “compassionate instinct”.

Indeed, the US society respects and trusts those who are acting from empathetic concern and thus does not carefully analyze or criticize their behavior as much as may be needed. Many people believe charitable acts to be supererogatory and therefore immune from critique. Helping and giving have become symbols of virtuousness, and those who would question the fruits of well-intentioned charitable initiatives are met with hostile resistance when attempting to call attention to flawed practices and are often mischaracterized and demonized (e.g. “you are starving children”; “you are waging a war on the poor”). Steele (1998) observed that “Those who do not identify [with particular prosocial endeavors] are not simply wrong; they are against virtue and therefore evil” (p. W11) and worthy of ad hominem attacks. We often assume that helping is constructive and beneficial (Fisher et al., 1981; Zarri, 2013). In part, this view may be a reflection of good intentions associated with prosocial behavior.

On good intentions
It appears that altruistic intentions are self-justifying; that is, the desire to help alleviate suffering and assist the less fortunate relieves individuals of responsibility for the results of such action (Mitschow, 2000). There appears to be a blind trust in charitable causes and the belief that if a goal is altruistic and compassionate, then one’s actions need no explanation.

Although compassion, generosity, charity and other prosocial doings can be wonderful and have noble intentions, they are no substitutes for effective helping strategies. Nobel Prize-winning economist Friedman (1975) observed in an interview that:

One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results. We all know a famous road that is paved with good intentions.

Moreover, because of its pervasiveness, Levitt and Dubner (2009, p. 14) have elevated unintended consequences to the status of a law (“[…] one of the most powerful laws in the universe […]”). Every action has both seen and unseen consequences, obvious and not so obvious effects, positive and negative and short- and long-term outcomes. Good intentions can sometimes have unintended pernicious consequences (Grant and Schwartz, 2011).

For example, recent changes in military policy that now allow for payment of death benefits even in cases of suicide have, it seems, helped create the recent epidemic of suicides in the military (Grazier, 2013). Long-term detrimental effects have also been reported in American families of many well-intentioned welfare programs (Funiciello, 1993; Voegeli, 2010). Consider also that lack of resilience in the face of failure and adversity – loss of “grit” – may also arise from excessive efforts to make things easier for others (Duckworth and Seligman, 2005; Dweck, 2006; Tough, 2012). Note too that the well-intentioned efforts to raise self-esteem have instead increased a increasing narcissistic behavior (Twenge et al., 2012).

As another illustration, consider the US sub-prime mortgage crisis. When many high-risk subprime mortgage borrowers could not make loan payments nor sell their home for a profit, they defaulted, went bankrupt and found themselves in greater financial difficulties than before they purchased the home. Beneficence may be well intended; however, good intentions may not always translate into good outcomes (Wade-Benzoni, 2002).

Building on the premise that bad tends to be stronger than good (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin and Royzman, 2001), individuals must realistically examine the impact of helping behavior. Failure to rigorously examine the results of helping breeds cynicism and
undermines the credibility of social activists who fight for the underprivileged. By and large, this paper does not refute the positive consequences of helping, but instead seeks to understand the conditions in which aiding others can negatively impact them. Worse still, it may harm the very people helping activities are meant to assist. We now discuss in more detail how helping others can exact unintended tolls on the needy and underprivileged.

**Detrimental effects of helping**

Although in some instances those who receive help often really need the assistance and may indeed feel appreciative and grateful to those who aid them, receiving help may also have some negative consequences. Findings show that recipients of help may experience feelings of dependency and inferiority vis-à-vis the helper, and therefore, seeking and receiving help may threaten recipients’ self-esteem (Nadler, 1991; Nadler and Fisher, 1986). Indeed, prosocial behaviors can leave recipients with negative feelings of indebtedness or dependence (Beehr et al., 2010), resulting in increased vulnerability to harm.

Thus, government programs, such as those based on affirmative action, although likely to be helpful for the people who receive them, may also lead those very same people to feel dependent on others and become tainted with the stigma of incompetence (Heilman, 1994). Alternatively, help could refer to a situation where the recipient government is discouraged from expending any efforts toward inducing development because it anticipates that foreign assistance is coming. Indeed, foreign aid supplies large amounts of unearned capital to governments in a windfall-type manner (Nager, 2013). When vulnerable groups are exposed to the international relief system, the end result may be wholesale destruction of cultures. Moyo (2009b, p. 10) notes:

> Evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that aid to Africa has made the poor poorer, and the growth slower [...] [Western] insidious aid culture has left African countries more debt-laden, more inflation-prone, more vulnerable to the vagaries of the currency markets and [...] it’s increased the risk of civil conflict and unrest [...] Aid is an unmitigated political, economic, and humanitarian disaster. [...] It is the disease of which it pretends to be the cure.

To better understand these advantages and drawbacks, we adopt an integrative model which suggests two mechanisms that may influence the bright and dark sides of helping. These are discussed below. In general, helping behaviors can fall into four categories and are described in Table I below.

### Two factors impacting the efficacy of helping

Before introducing the details of our helping model, we present two scenarios that illustrate our understanding of this framework. In the first example, we have a well-known story of a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>LESD (low engagement, short duration): The recipient does not do much to help himself or herself, but no atrophy occurs because of the brevity of the helping behavior. These activities could be stabilizing activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>HESD (high engagement, short duration): The recipient is highly involved over a limited period of time. These activities could be to address a specific deficit or need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>HELD (high engagement, long duration): The length of time is extended but atrophy is less likely to occur because the recipient must perform specific tasks to continue to receive benefits. These activities could be to address a chronic need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>LEED (low engagement, long duration): The recipient only has to demonstrate actual or perceived need, and this remains the standard for continued help. Atrophy and dependence occur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.

The engagement – duration model
young boy who spent hours observing a caterpillar attempting to free itself from its cocoon. After watching the caterpillar for a few minutes struggle, the boy elected to help the caterpillar and opened the cocoon so that the caterpillar would fly away. Instead, the caterpillar fell to the ground dragging its withered body and wings, unable to fly. Without the struggle from the cocoon, the caterpillar would never fly because that struggle was nature’s way of preparing it’s wings for flight. Despite the boy’s good intentions, he accidentally killed the caterpillar he was trying to help (Bliss and Burgess, 2012). The caterpillar’s survival depended on its ability to engage.

The second example relates to the current opioid epidemic in the USA as another instance where help can often hurt. Opioid prescribing policies changed in the late 1990s as patient advocacy groups and pain specialists successfully lobbied state medical boards and state legislatures to change statutes and regulations to lift prohibitions of opioid use so as to help individuals wanting relief from discomfort and suffering due to non-cancerous pain. Since then opioids have been commonly prescribed for pain (Franklin, 2014) and have been established as beneficial (American Pain Society, 2009) for use with chronic pain (pain lasting longer than three months or past the time of normal tissue healing outside of active cancer, palliative and end-of-life care). Nevertheless, opioid use has the potential for serious harms as risks become more prominent over time (Dowell et al., 2016). For example, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) reported that since 1999, the number of overdose deaths involving opioids quadrupled. From 2000 to 2015, more than half a million people died from drug overdoses, and that 91 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose. Deaths from prescription opioids – drugs like oxycodone, hydrocodone and methadone – have more than quadrupled since 1999. It appears that the patient’s subjective experience of pain now takes precedence over other, potentially competing, considerations. In contemporary medical culture, self-reports of pain are above question, and the treatment of pain is held up as the holy grail of compassionate medical care (Lembke, 2012). Data on opioid usage suggest that duration of assistance may be an important factor in determining the costs and benefits of help. These examples illustrate a model of helping that highlights two key factors that determine the efficacy or toxicity of aid: the level of participation and involvement individuals have engaged in to obtain the assistance and the duration of assistance. These two factors are discussed below in greater detail.

Engagement/agency

There is a constellation of related themes such as participation, involvement, ownership, actively helping oneself, engagement and agency that might apply to this dimension. Axelson and Flick (2010) defined engagement as the quantity and quality of physical, cognitive and emotional energy used by individuals to influence an outcome. When addressing social needs with individuals or communities, approaches that do not engage the recipient’s physical, cognitive and emotional energy most likely lead to false-starts, resentment, atrophy and dependence (Lupton, 2011). To be engaged is to be agentic. To be an agent is to influence intentionally one’s functioning and life circumstances. In this view, personal influence is part of the causal structure. People are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating and self-reflecting. They are not simply onlookers of their behavior.

An important characteristic of help related to engagement and agency that determines recipient reactions is its autonomy or dependency orientation (Nadler, 2002). Dependency-oriented help consists of providing recipients with the full solution to their problem. In this kind of help, the helper solves the problem for the recipient; in the words of a well-known simile, the helper gives the recipient a fish for a day.
In autonomy-oriented help, individuals are, metaphorically speaking, taught to fish so they can eat for a lifetime. Autonomy-oriented help reflects the helper’s belief that, if given appropriate tools, recipients of aid will be able to cope with the situation. Autonomy-oriented help tells recipients that they are strong and capable enough to use the tools bestowed on them to solve the problem on their own, and involves the recipient in the solution. This participative assistance allows recipients to retain their view of themselves as independent actors (Brickman et al., 1982) and reinforces the expectation that they can transform dependency into self-reliance by investing in self-help efforts. Such assistance has a lower self-threat potential than dependency-oriented help.

These two kinds of help convey different messages to recipients. Dependency-oriented help conveys the message that recipients are weak and unable to contribute to resolving the problems they face. Such help often reinforces perceptions of lack of control and dampens the probability of future self-reliance. When such help is given to recipients who expect that they can solve their problems on their own, it becomes self-threatening. If it arises against the background of expectations of dependency, such help will be debilitating.

Irrespective of these problems, it is not suggested that autonomy-oriented help is always the preferred option. In extreme emergencies, dependency-oriented help may be the only viable route. When people are starving, they need to be given food rather than be taught how to cultivate land and grow it on their own. This can come later. In many helping interactions the autonomous or dependent nature of help shapes recipient’s expectations about their ability to transform dependency into agency.

**Duration of help**

The second factor in our model refers to how long the help is provided. Autonomy- and dependency-oriented help have implications for the broader distinction between transient and chronic dependency. Autonomy-oriented help implies transient dependency; it is limited in degree and duration to the transfer of specific tools or instructions from the helper to the recipient, who will then use this assistance from the helper to regain self-reliance within a relatively short period. Dependency-oriented help, on the other hand, implies chronic dependency. It solves the problem for the aid recipient and does not rely on him or her to do so. It will, therefore, be given again whenever the need arises. Duration – the longer a helping behavior is provided to individuals or organization, the more likely the development of atrophy and dependence.

In Figure 1, High Engagement, Short Duration includes examples such as Habitat for Humanity, Community Gardens and Drug Court. In the lower right quadrant, Low Engagement, Short-Duration includes the Red Cross, Federal Emergency Management Agency and Temporary Emergency Foreign Aid.

Engagement – the smaller the amount of actual or perceived activity an individual contributes to their well-being, the more likely the development or atrophy and dependence.

As help is protracted, the anticipation of help can induce people to diminish *ex ante* protection activities and to shirk responsibilities. A history of receiving help eventuates in an expectation of charity which often creates a moral hazard. Broadly speaking, moral hazard occurs when one party has a tendency or incentive to behave inappropriately; i.e. people who have a reasonable expectation of altruists assisting them in case of need often alter their behavior to shift the costs of preventing needs onto altruists (Browne and Hoyt, 2000). Moral hazard sometimes referred to as charity hazard (Browne and Hoyt, 2000) or disaster syndrome (Kunreuther, 2000) posits a downside to private or public help because recipients may begin to rely on free aid and others’ assistance, instead of their own efforts.
This creates a situation in which one party may decide to care less because they are insulated from risks and their consequences (Buchanan, 1975).

Do financial institutions engage in riskier lending practices that pay handsomely if the investment turns out well because these loans have the potential for making the highest return, but expect to be bailed out by taxpayers if the investments turn out badly? Such helping, gifting or assisting can over time be problematic because it tends to create a situation in which one party gets involved in a risky event knowing that it is protected against the risk and the other party will incur the cost.

**Summary and conclusion**

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, well-known American politician and sociologist stated, “Everyone is entitled to his [or her] own opinion, but not his [or her] own facts”. People who want to have their own “facts” independent of truth fall victim to what is called a “confirmation bias”. This bias occurs when one thinks he or she knows something and tends to be blind and deaf to anything that disagrees with this belief. Even worse, people influenced by a confirmation bias selectively interpret information in a way that confirms their preconceived notions. Associated with the confirmation bias is belief perseverance, a psychological phenomenon in which people hold on tightly to their beliefs regardless of convincing evidence that shows that they are incorrect (Ross et al., 1975).

Helping others has many champions and has been conceptualized as having purely positive qualities. It can feel good as well as right because it is often viewed as an almost unilaterally positive trait in the psychological, organizational, religious, and popular literature and too obvious to require justification. Many of these works take it for granted that helping others must be encouraged wherever possible. The benefits of altruistic and prosocial behavior in modern society are often perceived as self-evident and helping is so highly regarded that it seems almost heretical to suggest that it can cause harm. Actions that appear to involve caring for others become such obvious and sacred qualities that the only possible motivation for those who might disagree with assistance policies must be those with malevolent intentions (Oakley, 2014). It appears that the potentially harmful aspects of helping have gone largely unrecognized in scientific inquiry. After all, “everyone” should know that helping is beneficial, and publishing negative information about it might discourage people from providing it. It may be
that this predisposition to believe what people perceive is genetically influenced by the same dopaminergic genes involved in the learning process (Doll et al., 2011). Because the prefrontal cortex actively works to reinforce information that has already been learned, the confirmation bias may be perpetuated by the human brain.

Box and Draper (1987, p. 424) observed: “all models are wrong, but some are useful”. It is hoped that the framework offered here will provide valuable insights on how assisting others may help or harm them. Rather than discouraging helping we hope the research and model presented here will lead to more positive effects for givers and particularly for receivers of aid. Our model is not a call for a reduction of helping but rather a call for rethinking strategies for helping and redesigning existing helping programs to increase their effectiveness.

Implications for managers
Managers want to be sure that their employees have “skin in the game”, a stake in the success of the organization. Effective leaders make an effort to involve employees as much as possible in the organization because they know that commitment and engagement are two critical elements in the success of organizations. Managers who fail to delegate sometimes “help” employees by doing things on their own rather than delegating tasks to employees. Often, a manager will fail to delegate to employees with lower skill levels (Milewski and Lewis, 1997) as they are concerned about the employee’s job performance or ability to complete the task in a timely fashion. However, when managers fail to delegate, they deprive employees of the opportunity to learn and grow in their work.

Entrepreneurs take “skin in the game” another step further when lenders and investors require the entrepreneur to have a financial stake in the success of the new business venture. So, instead of the entrepreneur borrowing all the money needed for the business and only investing “sweat equity”, the entrepreneur first has to come up with some of the startup cash. Without the financial stake in the business, the entrepreneur would not be as motivated in helping ensure the success of the new business venture.

An area for future research would be to examine more closely and in greater detail how helping impacts aid recipients. In some cases, helping can be viewed as a “double-edged” sword (Ilgen et al., 2005) because consequences can have drawbacks and advantages. Closer investigation of positive and negative consequences of helping thus becomes especially worthwhile. Another area where research is needed is to investigate what kind of participation is most beneficial for those helped. Finally, another area of fruitful research is to look more closely and specifically at the long-term and short-term effects of help; that is, the duration of help should be investigated more thoroughly. Research, for example, shows that prescriptions for opioids beyond three months for non-end of life medical conditions may be more harmful than helpful. We close with this quote [. . .].

The evil that is in the world almost always comes from ignorance and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding. –Camus (1972, p. 124)

References


Further reading


Habitat for Humanity (2017), available at: www.habitat.org/

Habitat for Humanity of Broward (n.d), Sweat Equity, available at: www.habitatbroward.org/homeownership/sweat-equity/


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