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Empowering Help: Does Gender Shape Its Impact?

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An important question for organizational citizenship is *when* and for *whom* is receiving help beneficial? In organizations, “help” is a prototypical citizenship behavior that can improve relationships among coworkers and contribute to organizational-level outcomes. Despite the general positive perspective regarding helping in the workplace, there are downsides, especially from the recipient’s perspective. That is, the gendered

dynamics in helping behaviors may foster an environment where women experience stereotype threats when receiving nonempowering help, potentially diminishing their perceived competence. By raising this question, we aim to shift the ongoing conversation from asking whether receiving help benefits recipients to asking *when* and for *whom* help would be beneficial.

We hypothesize that there is a disconnect between the assumption that helping benefits recipients and research showing that recipients may find the experience to be aversive and potentially detrimental to perceptions of competence. We specifically examine differences between empowering help (i.e. a situation where an employee is an interactive participant in the receipt of assistance with a work-related task from a co-worker) and nonempowering help (i.e. a less participative experience, as the recipient is not afforded the ability to be as actively involved in the helping process).

Our Study and Findings

In study one, we aimed to uncover the relationship between receiving help, competence, and other characteristics of the help recipient by conducting daily surveys with 107 employees at a public university. At midday, we measured the extent to which help was received and participants’ self-perceived competence. Also, by the end of the workday, we measured work-goal progress, participants’ enacted task-focused helping, and withdrawal (or avoidance of coworkers). Results from this study suggest that women (as compared to men) are less likely to benefit from receiving nonempowering help. Building on these findings, we conducted further analysis to bolster confidence in our arguments that receiving nonempowering help is more likely to be highlighting stereotype threats for women, but not for men.

In study two, we recruited 308 full-time employees who regularly interacted with coworkers. Each participant was asked to recall a time where they received help from a coworker on their workload within the past three weeks, and they were randomly assigned to recall receiving empowering or nonempowering help. Our findings supported our expectation that men and women perceive the receipt of nonempowering help differently, with women perceiving lower levels of competence than men upon receiving nonempowering help.

For study three, participants were asked to read a vignette describing a situation where they had to create a report using unfamiliar software. A scenario was then assigned to participants where they interacted with a colleague and received either empowering or nonempowering help. Participants were then asked to answer questions about their perceived competence. The results showed support for our findings on the differences between men and women when it comes to receiving nonempowering help.

Gender as a Moderator in Help and Competence Perception

Overall, our findings support our hypothesis. Receiving empowering help was positively associated with perceptions of competence, and this relationship was not contingent upon the recipient's gender. In contrast, the effect of receiving nonempowering help on perceptions of competence was qualified by gender. For women, receiving nonempowering help can have particularly detrimental effects, reinforcing stereotypes that women are less capable and need extra assistance to perform their roles effectively. This perception can contribute to stereotype threat, where fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one's group impairs performance and confidence.

Implications for Real Estate Managers

The insights from our study have practical implications for real estate. In an industry where teamwork and client relationships are critical, real estate managers should consider how their team members offer and receive help. Specifically, we recommend managers take steps to ensure that assistance is empowering rather than limiting. In the real estate environment, agents are often required to make quick decisions and negotiate assertively on behalf of their clients. Our conclusion is that nonempowering help is more likely to negatively impact women's performance than men's performance. Therefore, helping behaviors should be carefully tailored to encourage and positively impact women as well as men.

Recommended Reading

Lee, Young Eun, Lauren S. Simon, Joel Koopman, Christopher C. Rosen, Allison S. Gabriel, and Seoin Yoon (2023), "When, Why, and for Whom is Receiving Help Actually Helpful? Differential Effects of Receiving Empowering and Nonempowering Help Based on Recipient Gender," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 108(5), 773-793. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001049>

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Dr. Young Lee's (PhD – Texas A&M University) research focuses on understanding prosocial behaviors at work. In particular, she is interested in understanding when, why, and how employees engage in prosocial behaviors at work. Her areas of expertise are organizational citizenship behavior, motivation, and gender and diversity issues.

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Dr. Lauren Simon's (PhD – University of Florida) research focuses on individual and social factors that influence career success, including individual differences (e.g., personality, ability, and disability), new employee onboarding and adjustment, interpersonal work relationships (particularly among managers and employees), and leadership. Her work has been published in academic journals, including the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Personnel Psychology*, the *Journal of Management*, and the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* and has been featured in outlets such as *Science Daily*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *CBS News*, *Economic Times*, *United Press International*, and *WebMD*.

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Dr. Allison Gabriel (PhD – University of Akron) has made notable contributions in studying women’s health, motherhood, and their intersection with work, identifying how organizations can best support women. Dr. Gabriel’s research has been published in top journals in her discipline, and she regularly presents her research at the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology and the Academy of Management conferences. Her work has also been featured by *CNN*, *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

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Dr. Seoin Yoon (PhD – Texas A&M University) takes a vulnerability lens to research by exploring a wide range of workplace phenomena and understand the intricacies of human experiences. She examines the factors influencing when and why employees and leaders experience vulnerability in the workplace, as well as the negative outcomes associated with feeling vulnerable, with a particular interest in workplace mistreatment, work-life issues, and daily work experiences.



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