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PERCEIVED AUTONOMOUS HELP AND RECIPIENTS' WELL-BEING: IS AUTONOMOUS HELP GOOD FOR EVERYONE?

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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that recipients' well-being is higher when help is provided through autonomous motivations rather than through controlled motivations. However, those studies did not experimentally control the helping situations. We conducted an experiment in which the helping situations were experimentally controlled. Participants undertook a group activity ostensibly with another participant in another room. During the task, they received autonomous or controlled help from their partner via the experimenter. Analyses revealed that participants with a high sensibility to indebtedness showed lower negative affect when they received autonomous help than when they received controlled help. Moreover, participants with a low need for relatedness showed lower self-esteem when they received autonomous help than when they received controlled help. These results suggest that the beneficial effects of perceived autonomous help depend on recipients' individual characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

Much research on prosocial behaviors has focused on when and why people help others (for a review, see e.g., Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). This research indicates that people help others sometimes with autonomous motivations (i.e., motivated by the helper's values or interests) and sometimes with controlled motivations (i.e., motivated by self-imposed pressures or external controls). However, only one research has experimentally examined how the effects of autonomous help and controlled help on recipients' well-being differ. Weinstein & Ryan (2010) predicted that autonomous help benefits recipients' well-being for two reasons. First, autonomous helpers may facilitate the development of close relationships with their recipients, and second, they put more effort into helping and thus accomplish more. Results of two experiments conducted by Weinstein & Ryan (2010) supported their hypothesis, suggesting that autonomous help is better than controlled help for recipients' well-being.

However, these previous studies did not experimentally control helpers' subtle behaviors, such as conversations with the recipients, and the amount of help provided. Therefore, it is unclear how the perception of autonomous help in itself affects recipients' well-being. In the present study, we

manipulate only the perception of autonomous help by controlling the amount of help and the setting to investigate the influence of perceived autonomous help on the recipient's well-being. Specifically, we create the situation in which the helper does not meet the recipient.

Effect of Perceived Autonomous Help on Recipients' Well-being

We developed three hypotheses after considering the multiple processes through which the perception of receiving help affects recipients' well-being. First, the positive affect of recipients with a high need for relatedness should be higher when they perceive that the help was autonomous rather than controlled. Autonomous help represents greater care for recipients as compared with controlled help (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010); therefore, recipients are likely to feel that their helpers considered their perspective if they perceive that the help was autonomous and not controlled. Furthermore, the belief that another person has successfully considered one's perspective is suggested to result in a greater sense of self–other overlap (Goldstein, Vezich, & Shapiro, 2014), and this satisfaction of the need for relatedness promotes positive affect (e.g., Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Considering these findings, it seems plausible that recipients' positive affect is higher when they perceive that the help was autonomous and not controlled. Given that the satisfaction of the need for relatedness enhances positive affect, such a pattern is expected from those with a high need for relatedness.

Our second hypothesis is that recipients with a high sensibility to indebtedness show higher negative affect when they perceive that the help was controlled and not autonomous. Although helping behaviors generally aim to improve the welfare of the recipients, they sometimes cause indebtedness, which is a type of negative affect, because helping behaviors are inseparable from helpers' costs (e.g., Greenberg & Shapiro, 1971). The costs of the helper seem to be more salient for the recipient when he/she received autonomous help than when he/she received controlled help because while the recipient can attribute the responsibility of the costs to the helper's volition when the help was autonomous, they cannot do so when the help was controlled. Moreover, the perception of the costs of the help enhances indebtedness (e.g., Naito, Wangwan, & Tani, 2005). Considering these patterns, it is plausible that recipients' negative affect is higher when they perceive that the help was controlled and not autonomous. Given that enhanced indebtedness leads to greater negative affect, this pattern is expected to be observed among those with a high sensibility to indebtedness.

The last hypothesis is that the self-esteem of recipients with a low need for relatedness decreases when they perceive that the help was autonomous and not controlled. Although helping behavior is generally aimed at improving recipients' welfare, some research suggests that any help that exceeds recipients' expectations lowers their self-esteem because being helped may mean that they are less competent than their helpers (e.g., Nadler & Jeffrey, 1986). Moreover, people with a low need for relatedness are not considered to expect to receive help from others because receiving help is a form of interaction with others and it contributes to make the relationships with others. In support of this notion, research on help seeking shows men, whose needs for relatedness are lower than women (Okubo & Kato, 2005), are less likely to seek help than women (e.g., Rickwood & Braithwaite, 1994, Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). Considering these patterns, it is plausible that the self-esteem of those with a low need for relatedness is likely to decrease when they receive help from others. Given that autonomous help is considered to

represent greater care for recipients (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), thus also indicating the intention to be close to them, this pattern is expected when they receive autonomous help rather than controlled help.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-seven Japanese undergraduate students participated in the study in exchange for extra course credit. Two participants were excluded from the analyses because they strongly doubted the presence of their partner who was also participating in the research in another room, but in fact wasn't there. Of the 35 remaining participants, 17 were women and 18 were men. Their mean age was 20.20 years (SD = 0.87). Each participant was randomly assigned to the autonomous help or controlled help conditions (controlled help condition: 10 women and 8 men, autonomous help condition: 8 women and 9 men).

Procedure

When we recruited participants, which was about one week prior to the experiment, participants reported their baseline well-being, need for relatedness, and sensibility to indebtedness. Need for relatedness was measured using a subscale of the Psychological Needs Scale (Okubo & Kato, 2005, 9 items, 5-point Likert scale, α = .83) that was developed from the Basic Need Satisfaction in Life Scale (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sensibility to indebtedness was measured with a single item, "I'm concerned about reciprocation when someone gives me a gift," which was scored on a 7-point Likert scale. We used a single item because participants might doubt the presence and help of their partner or the aim of this study when they came to the lab if we asked multiple questions about how they would feel when they were helped. The single item was constructed based on the item which was the most highly correlated to the sum of the other items among all items of Indebtedness Scale (r = .61, Aikawa & Yoshimori, 1995).

Participants individually attended lab sessions. They were informed that the study aimed to investigate the effect of remote group activity, and that they would undertake a group activity with another participant in another room, who actually wasn't present. To make them believe this cover story, the experimenter showed them their partner's application form, which was in fact made by the researchers. Although private information on the application form, such as name, was blacked out, participants could know that the partner was a same sex student in the same class from this application form. Then, participants were told that they and their partner firstly would undertake different tasks in separate room and secondly would work together in the partner's room. They were then informed that the first tasks were a letter copying task and a proofreading task, and that they would undertake the former task while their partner would perform the latter task. Furthermore, they were also told that the products of the first tasks would be used in the second task, and that the first task was a part of the group activity. Following this explanation, the first task was started.

The letter copying task involved copying 1,000 letters of the English alphabet on 10 sheets of paper. During the first task, participants received autonomous or controlled help from their partner in the other room, who in fact was absent.

After the first task, participants completed a questionnaire that asked them to report their post-task well-being. After that, they completed another questionnaire which was ostensibly prepared for the case in which the interaction between participants occurred. In the questionnaire, they reported their perceived autonomy of the help received from the partner with the single item "To what extent do you feel that your partner decided to help you on his/her own will?" The responses were scored on an 8-point Likert scale, with 1 = not on his/her own will at all and 8 = absolutely on his/her own will. Participants were then debriefed.

Manipulation of Perceived Autonomous Help

Five minutes after the first task began, the experimenter's cell phone rang. The experimenter answered the phone, exited the room, and returned one minute later. The participants were subsequently informed that their partner had finished the task. Participants in the autonomous help condition were told as follows: "Excuse me. I heard from the experimenter in the other room that your partner has already finished the proofreading task because the task was easier than we had thought. When I told your partner that the letter copying task seems harder, he/she said that he/she wanted to help you if possible. Can I take 3 sheets of paper?" In the controlled help condition, the third sentence was replaced with "Because the letter copying task seems harder than the other one, we decided to ask your partner for help." Following the participants' approval, the experimenter pretended to take the papers to the other room.

Measures of Well-being

Baseline and post-task positive and negative affect were measured using the 8-item Japanese version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule scales (Sato & Yasuda, 2001; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988, scored on a 7-point Likert scale, baseline positive $\alpha = .62$, post-task positive $\alpha = .73$, baseline negative $\alpha = .89$, post-task negative $\alpha = .87$). Baseline self-esteem was measured using the 2-item Self-Esteem Scale (Minoura & Narita, 2013, 7-point Likert scale, $r = .66$) that comprises two aspects of the self-esteem concept: self-evaluation and self-acceptance. Post-task self-esteem was measured using the State Self-esteem Scale (Abe & Konno, 2007, 9 items, 5-point Likert scale, $\alpha = .85$) based on the Rosenberg (1965) Self-esteem Scale. We used 2-item Self-Esteem Scale (Minoura & Narita, 2013) and included other scales when we measure baseline well-being in order to decrease the risk that participants might notice the aim of the study.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

We conducted Welch's t test, which is a test for differences in means without the assumption that variances are equal, on perceived autonomous help with condition as an independent variable. Results indicated that participants in the autonomous help condition perceived that their partners

had decided to help them on their own will (M = 3.94, SD = 1.68) more than those in the controlled help condition (M = 1.72, SD = 0.83, $t(23.05) = 4.92$, $p < .001$, d = 1.66).

Positive Affect

To test the hypothesis regarding positive affect, we regressed post-task positive affect on condition (–0.5 = controlled help, 0.5 = autonomous help; mean centered), need for relatedness (1–5; mean centered), interaction of condition and need for relatedness, and baseline positive affect (1–7; mean centered). No significant effects were observed (see Table 1); thus, our hypothesis regarding positive affect was not supported. There were no significant effects even if baseline positive affect was excluded from the analysis.

Table 1. Results from the regression analysis predicting positive affect.

Variable	*b*	*SE*	df	*t*
Intercept	2.88 ***	0.13	30	22.86
Condition	− 0.12	0.25	30	0.48
Need for relatedness	0.39	0.24	30	1.65
Condition × Need for relatedness	− 0.07	0.46	30	0.15
Baseline positive affect	0.04	0.18	30	0.21
Adj R^2		− .01		

Note. *** $p < .001$.

Negative Affect

Next, we regressed post-task negative affect on condition (–0.5 = controlled help, 0.5 = autonomous help; mean centered), sensibility to indebtedness (1–7; mean centered), interaction of condition and sensibility to indebtedness, and baseline negative affect (1–7; mean centered). Baseline negative affect predicted post-task negative affect. Moreover, although the effects of condition and sensibility to indebtedness were not significant, the effect of the interaction of condition and sensibility to indebtedness was significant (see Table 2). Simple slopes analyses revealed that participants with a high sensibility to indebtedness showed higher post-task negative affect in the controlled help condition than in the autonomous help condition (b = −1.01, $t(30) = 2.61$, $p < .01$), but no such difference was found for those with a low sensibility to indebtedness (b = 0.59, $t(30)$ = 1.51, n.s., see Table 3). Thus, these results support our hypothesis regarding negative affect.

Table 2. Results from the regression analysis predicting negative affect.

Variable	*B*	*SE*	df	*t*
Intercept	2.49 ***	0.13	30	18.50
Condition	− 0.21	0.27	30	0.76
Sensibility to indebtedness	0.01	0.10	30	0.12
Condition ×Sensibility to indebtedness	− 0.48 **	0.17	30	2.91
Baseline negative affect	0.43 **	0.14	30	3.08
Adj R^2		.39 ***		

Note. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Estimated post-task negative affect by condition for lower (1 *SD* below the mean) and higher (1 *SD* above the mean) sensibility to indebtedness.

	Controlled Help Condition	Autonomous Help Condition
Low Sensibility to Indebtedness	2.18 (0.26)	2.77 (0.32)
High Sensibility to Indebtedness	3.02 (0.31)	2.01 (0.26)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate standard errors of the mean.

Self-esteem

Finally, we regressed post-task self-esteem on condition (–0.5 = controlled help, 0.5 = autonomous help; mean centered), need for relatedness (1–5; mean centered), interaction of condition and need for relatedness, and baseline self-esteem (1–7; mean centered). Baseline self-esteem predicted post-task self-esteem. Moreover, although the effects of condition and need for relatedness were not significant, the effect of the interaction of condition and need for relatedness was significant (see Table 4). Simple slopes analyses revealed that participants with a low need for relatedness showed higher post-task self-esteem in the controlled help condition than in the autonomous help condition ($b = –0.47$, $t(30) = 1.97$, $p < .10$), but no such difference was found for those with a high need for relatedness ($b = 0.28$, $t(30) = 1.25$, n.s., see Table 5). Thus, these results were consistent with our hypothesis about self-esteem.

Table 4. Results from the regression analysis predicting self-esteem.

Variable	*B*	*SE*	df	*t*
Intercept	3.49 ***	0.08	30	45.27
Condition	− 0.09	0.16	30	0.60
Need for relatedness	0.05	0.14	30	0.38
Condition × Need for relatedness	0.64 *	0.29	30	2.20
Baseline negative affect	0.39 ***	0.06	30	6.15
Adj R^2		.52 ***		

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Estimated post-task self-esteem by condition for lower (1 *SD* below the mean) and higher (1 *SD* above the mean) need for relatedness.

	Controlled Help Condition	Autonomous Help Condition
Low Need for Relatedness	3.70(0.18)	3.23(0.15)
High Need for Relatedness	3.38(0.18)	3.67(0.14)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate standard errors of the mean.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the effect of perceived autonomous help on recipients' well-being. Our findings supported the hypotheses regarding negative affect and self-esteem; however, they did not support the hypothesis about positive affect. In particular, participants with a high sensibility to indebtedness showed lower negative affect when they perceived that the help was autonomous rather than controlled. Furthermore, participants with a low need for relatedness showed lower self-esteem when they perceived that the help was autonomous rather than controlled. However, for all participants, perceived autonomous help did not influence positive affect.

The hypothesis regarding positive affect was not supported probably due to the following two reasons. First, the process assumed in the hypothesis did not work as anticipated. We hypothesized that the recipients in the autonomous help condition would believe that the helper had considered their perspective and this belief promoted satisfaction of relatedness needs, thus enhancing positive affect. However, as we had informed the participants that this study aimed to investigate the effect of remote group work, some might have thought that their partner helped them because he/she wanted to improve group work efficiency rather than because he/she thought about them. Therefore, they did not believe that the helper had considered their perspective, and as a result, their needs for relatedness were not satisfied. Second, baseline positive affect might not have been measured appropriately, as indicated by the relatively low reliability of baseline positive affect. Indeed, the baseline did not predict post-task positive affect. Future research should reexamine the hypothesis about positive affect with a situation in which participants can easily believe that the helper had considered their perspective when they received autonomous help and by measuring baseline positive affect more properly.

Our findings have a practical implication for maintaining better relations between helpers and recipients. Although helping behaviors generally aim to improve the welfare of the recipients, they sometimes have negative effects on their well-being (e.g., Greenberg & Shapiro, 1971). Considering the results of this study, telling that the help was done autonomously to the recipients with a high sensibility to indebtedness and that it was done in a controlled way to those with a low need for relatedness may be one of effective ways to build better relations. It is not empirically investigated whether or not people can accurately understand others' sensibility to indebtedness and need for indebtedness. However, given that people can, to some extent, accurately predict personality traits and social identities from subtle cues (e.g., Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992), it is plausible to think that they may also be able to predict others' sensibility to indebtedness and need for indebtedness to some extent.

Although this research contributes to the research on prosocial behavior and has a practical implication, there are some limitations. First, in this study, perceived autonomous motivation to help was neutral; therefore, future research should take measures to strengthen the manipulation of perceived autonomous help so that the autonomous motivation to help is greater than neutral. Second, we used only one item to assess sensibility to indebtedness and different self-esteem scales before and after the task. Although this procedure was adopted in order to reduce the risk that participants might doubt the presence and help of their partner or the aim of this study, it might decrease the validity of the results to some extent. Future research should measure sensibility to indebtedness with multiple items and use same scale to measure baseline self-

esteem as the one to measure post-task self-esteem by, for example, asking them at the beginning of the semester. Third, we investigated the effect of autonomous help on recipients' well-being in only one situation among many of them. Relationships between a helper and the recipient varies. For example, helping behaviors may occur between not only acquaintances but also family members, friends, and strangers. Future research should explore whether the relationship between helpers and recipients affect the effect of perceived autonomous help on the recipients' well-being.

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APPENDIX

Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Condition (0 = Controlled, 1 = Autonomous)	-								
2. Baseline Positive Affect	.06	-							
3. Baseline Negative Affect	-.07	-.06	-						
4. Baseline Self-esteem	.21	.20	-.48**	-					
5. Need for Relatedness	.04	.33†	.25	.04	-				
6. Sensibility to Indebtedness	.15	.10	.54**	-.22	.01	-			
7. Post-task Positive Affect	-.07	.13	.15	.13	.31†	.06	-		

8. Post-task Negative Affect	-.14	.01	.55**	-.16	.16	.30†	.38*	-	
9. Post-task Self-esteem	.09	.31†	-.53**	.70**	.17	-.17	.10	-.29†	-

Note. ** = $p < .01$, * = $p <. 05$, † = $p <. 10$, N =35

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