

Acceptance of Help as a Function of Similarity of the Potential Helper and Opportunity To Repay¹

MARGARET S. CLARK, CAROLYN C. GOTAY, AND JUDSON MILLS²

University of Maryland

College students were given the task of making an object from balloons while being observed by someone who they were told had highly similar values (similar conditions) or highly dissimilar values (dissimilar conditions). Later they were to observe while the other made an object from wire coat hangers that were already unwound (no opportunity to repay conditions) or were not unwound (opportunity to repay conditions). In preparation for the subject's task, the balloons had to be blown up and the other offered to help. The number of balloons the subject gave the other was the measure of acceptance of help. An interaction between similarity and opportunity to repay was found. As hypothesized, acceptance of help was greater when the potential helper was similar than when he was dissimilar only when the opportunity to repay was anticipated; when no opportunity to repay was expected, the reverse was found.

A problem involved in getting help to those in need is that sometimes they are unwilling to accept aid when it is available. To deal with this problem, it is important to understand the conditions that affect the acceptance of help and the reasons people refuse aid. A variable that may influence whether one is willing to accept aid from a potential helper is how similar the other is perceived to be; that is, whether one thinks the other is the same kind of person as oneself. The effect of the similarity of the other on the acceptance of aid may be different, depending on whether there is an opportunity to repay the potential helper.

If one knows that he will have an opportunity to help the other in the future and that the other is aware of this opportunity, one may expect that if aid is

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²Requests for reprints should be sent to Judson Mills, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742.

accepted, the helper will call on the person to repay the aid when the opportunity occurs. This should not deter the acceptance of help if the other is similar. Similarity and liking are closely related (Berscheid & Walster, 1969; Bramel, 1969), and one may be glad to help someone that one likes.

However, if the other is dissimilar and thus disliked, one may prefer not to help him. One may try to avoid entering a situation where one is expected to repay help to someone who is dissimilar. A failure to repay the aid in such a situation may lead to bitterness and recriminations; yet one may not care to help the dissimilar other. Aid from a dissimilar person may be refused when an opportunity to repay is anticipated in order to avoid creating the expectation that one will help the dissimilar other in the future.

When there is no opportunity to repay, the desire to avoid being called on for help should not affect the acceptance of aid. However, another factor may inhibit accepting help. One may feel that accepting aid when one will be unable to reciprocate may create an inequitable relationship with the other (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). Greenberg and Shapiro (1971) found that persons were less likely to ask for and accept help in a situation where there was no opportunity to return it than when there was a chance for repayment. This finding also received some support in a study by Morris and Rosen (1971).

In their discussion of equity research, Walster, Berscheid, and Walster (1973) considered the question of when individuals perceive themselves in a relationship with, and compare their outcomes with, others. Among other things, they suggest that such comparisons take place with those perceived as similar. If one is not concerned about maintaining equity with dissimilar persons, this factor should not prevent one from accepting aid from a dissimilar other when there is no opportunity to reciprocate. However, if the other is similar, the desire to avoid an inequitable relationship may deter one from accepting help when there is no opportunity to repay.

Since the desire to avoid inequity that would be created by accepting the help would not apply if one has an opportunity to repay, the acceptance of aid from a similar person should be greater when an opportunity to repay is anticipated than when there is no opportunity to repay. On the other hand, the reluctance to accept help because it would create the expectation the other will call on one for help in the future would not apply if there is no opportunity to repay the help. Thus, acceptance of help from a dissimilar person should be greater when there is no opportunity to return the help than when an opportunity is anticipated.

An experiment was designed to test the following hypotheses. Acceptance of help will be greater when the potential helper is similar than when he is dissimilar if an opportunity to repay is anticipated, but acceptance will be less if there is no opportunity to repay. Acceptance of help will be greater when an opportunity to repay is anticipated than when there is no opportunity to repay.

if the potential helper is similar but will be less if the potential helper is dissimilar.

METHOD

Overview

Under the guise of an experiment on the effect of the presence of another person on task performance, college students were given the task of making an object from balloons while being observed by someone of the same sex (a confederate) whom they had been led to believe had highly similar values (Similar conditions) or highly dissimilar values (Dissimilar conditions). Later *S* was to observe while the other made an object from wire coat hangers, which were already unwound and straightened (No opportunity to repay conditions) or were not unwound (Opportunity to repay conditions). In preparation for *S*'s task, the balloons had to be blown up, and the other asked if *S* wanted help. The number of balloons *S* gave the other to blow up was taken as the measure of acceptance of help.

Subjects

S's were 12 male and 30 female college students enrolled in introductory social psychology, who received extra credit toward their course grade for their participation. They were randomly assigned to the four experimental conditions: Similar—opportunity to repay; Similar—no opportunity to repay; Dissimilar—opportunity to repay; and Dissimilar—no opportunity to repay.

Procedure

When *Ss* and the experimental confederates who pretended to be subjects arrived, an *E* administered a questionnaire that asked them to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with 20 different value statements; e.g., "I'd rather live in the city than the country," "Television is one of my favorite forms of entertainment," "Abortion should be permitted under all circumstances," and "Capital punishment should be reinstated."

After collecting the questionnaires, *E* explained that the study was designed to examine the effect of the presence of another person on the performance of a task. They would be paired with another person and each one in the pair would perform a task in the presence of the other. One variable being investigated was the similarity of the person who was present to the one who performed the task, and their answers on the questionnaire would be used to determine the degree of similarity. To examine the effect of knowledge about the degree of similarity on the performance, there were two conditions: One in which the pairs were told how similar they were and one in which they were not. For that session *Ss* would be told their degree of similarity in terms of the following scoring scheme, which was written on a blackboard: 18 or more identical answers = very similar;

15-17 identical answers = similar; 11-14 = slightly similar; 7-10 = slightly dissimilar; 4-6 = dissimilar; and 3 or less = very dissimilar.

E pretended to score the questionnaires and then said that the two persons in the pair would be informed about how similar they were by showing them a card, so that the other *E* who was to give them the tasks would not know the degree of similarity. For *Ss* assigned to the similar conditions, the first *E* handed *S* a card that said "very similar." For *Ss* assigned to the dissimilar conditions, the card said "very dissimilar." After looking at the card, *S* gave it to the confederate who returned it to the first *E* without looking at it.

The second *E*, who was unaware of the similarity condition to which *S* was assigned, escorted *S* and the confederate to an experimental room. *S* was asked to go first and was told that his task was to make the most original object he could out of balloons in a limited amount of time by twisting them together. There were 12 balloons on the table together with an instruction sheet. The confederate was to start the timer when *S* was ready to begin and to allow him 5 minutes to complete the task. When the time was up, the confederate was to bring the completed object to the other room. Once the task was begun, *S* and the confederate were not to talk to one another.

The confederate's task, to be done later, was to make the most original object he could from wire coat hangers. For *Ss* assigned to the No opportunity to repay conditions, there were 6 unwound and straightened wire hangers on the table. *E* mentioned, "We've already straightened them out for you." For *Ss* assigned to the Opportunity to repay conditions, there were 6 normal unstraightened wire coat hangers on the table. In these conditions *E* said, "In preparation for the task, you'll have to straighten them out." When the confederate was ready to begin, *S* was to set the timer for 5 minutes. *E* remarked to *S* that he would have to blow up the balloons before he began his task and reminded the confederate not to start the timer until *S* was ready to begin. *E* mentioned that they were interested in the presence of just one other person while the tasks were performed and left the room.

The confederate waited for *S* to blow up one balloon, then said, "Would you like me to do some of those?" and then "Give me the ones you want me to do." Two persons who replied, "Take as many as you want" were not included as *Ss* because this response could not be quantified in terms of acceptance of help. One was in the Similar-no opportunity to repay condition and one was in the Dissimilar-no opportunity to repay condition.

When all balloons were blown up, the confederate allowed *S* 5 minutes to complete the task and then took the finished object and left the room. Shortly thereafter the second *E* returned and, after asking where the confederate was, said, "Before going on there is something more to this than we've told you about so far; I'm curious, do you have any idea what it might be?" The responses of six persons indicated suspicion about the procedure. They either doubted the

information concerning similarity or thought the confederate was part of the experiment or said the purpose was to study cooperation. They were not included as Ss. Two were in the Similar—opportunity to repay condition; one was in the Similar—no opportunity to repay condition; one in the Dissimilar—opportunity to repay condition; and two in the Dissimilar—no opportunity to repay condition.

Finally, the true purpose of the experiment was explained and Ss promised not to discuss it with others.

RESULTS

The measure of acceptance of help was the number of balloons *S* gave to the confederate when the confederate said, "Give me the ones you want me to do." The number of balloons given by the male Ss to the male confederate did not differ significantly from the number given by the female Ss to the female confederate; therefore, data from the two sexes were combined. The mean number of balloons given to the confederate in the different experimental conditions is presented in Table 1. The results were as expected from the hypotheses. The mean number of balloons given the confederate in the Similar—opportunity to repay condition was greater than in the Dissimilar—opportunity to repay condition, while the mean for the Similar—no opportunity to repay condition was less than the Dissimilar—no opportunity to repay condition.

Looking at the results from a different perspective, the number of balloons given in the Similar—opportunity to repay condition was greater than in the Similar—no opportunity to repay condition, while the number given in the Dissimilar—opportunity to repay condition was less than in the Dissimilar—no opportunity to repay condition. An analysis of variance of the number of balloons given the confederate showed that the interaction between similarity and opportunity to repay was significant ($F = 5.35$; $df = 1,38$; $p < .05$). Neither of the main effects approached significance.

TABLE 1
MEAN NUMBER OF BALLOONS GIVEN IN RESPONSE
TO THE CONFEDERATE'S OFFER TO HELP

Opportunity to repay the help	Confederate	
	Similar	Dissimilar
Opportunity to repay	3.1(11)	1.9(9)
No opportunity to repay	1.8(12)	3.3(10)

Note.—*N*'s given in parentheses.

DISCUSSION

The results provide support for the hypotheses: acceptance of help will be greater when the potential helper is similar than when he is dissimilar if an opportunity to repay the help is anticipated but will be less if there is no opportunity to repay acceptance of help will be greater when there is an opportunity to repay than when there is no opportunity if the potential helper is similar but will be less if the potential helper is dissimilar.

Two different reasons that one may refuse aid are involved in the rationale for the hypotheses. First, the acceptance of help would create the expectation that one will give the other aid in the future. It was assumed that this reason would operate when the potential helper is dissimilar and an opportunity to repay the aid is anticipated. Second, one may avoid accepting help because it would produce an inequity in the relationship with the other. This reason was assumed to operate when there is no opportunity to repay the help and the other is similar.

From a theoretical viewpoint, the present results provide evidence that the desire to maintain equity in relationships and to avoid relationships which would be inequitable is strong when the other is similar but not when the other is dissimilar.

From a practical standpoint, the present study suggests that when people are unwilling to accept needed aid, one should consider how similar they perceive the potential helper to be to themselves as well as whether they have an opportunity to repay the aid. If they perceive the helper as similar to themselves, then one should try to make it possible for them to do something of value for the helper. If the helper is perceived as dissimilar, one should try to minimize the possibility of their repaying the aid. If there is an obvious opportunity to repay the help, one should try to increase the similarity of the helper or at least emphasize whatever the helper has in common with those who need it. If there is no way they can possibly repay the aid, then it would be better to try to make the helper appear as dissimilar as possible.

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