If You Need Help, Just Ask: Underestimating Compliance with Direct Requests for Help

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Abstract

A series of studies tested whether people underestimate the likelihood that others will comply with their direct requests for help. The authors contend that those who request help pay less attention to, or fail to appreciate, the social costs of saying “No” (i.e., the potential embarrassment a person might feel for rejecting a request) than do those who are asked to provide help. In the first three studies, people underestimated (by as much as 50%) the likelihood that others would agree to a direct request for help, across a range of requests occurring in both experimental and natural field settings. Studies 4 and 5 demonstrated that experimentally manipulating a person’s perspective (as help-seeker or helper) could elicit this underestimation effect. Further, underestimation increased when potential helpers were confronted with direct rather than indirect requests for help, suggesting that help-seekers were less cognizant than potential helpers of the social costs of refusing a direct request for help.

KEYWORDS: helping behavior, help seeking, compliance, interpersonal relations
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Requesting help is something people do almost every day. However, before asking others for help, they often wonder, “If I ask for help, what are the chances I’ll get it?” That is, before imposing on someone else for assistance, most people want to know whether that person is likely to say “Yes” or “No” in response (DePaulo, 1982). If they believe the potential helper is likely to say “No,” they may withhold their request or ask someone else they think would be more likely to agree (Blau, 1955; Lee, 1997). Indeed, the risk of being denied help is real and meaningful, not just because the help-seeker is denied valuable assistance, but because rejection can be awkward and uncomfortable (Goffman, 1955; Downey & Feldman, 1996). Thus, how accurate people are in judging whether someone else will agree to a direct request for help becomes an important concern for social psychologists interested in the determinants of help-seeking.

We examined whether people underestimate the likelihood that others will comply with their direct requests for help. Beyond demonstrating this tendency, we consider the underlying psychology of such underestimation. Accurate judgments of compliance require insight on a potential helper’s mental state, attitudes, and incentives, but people may not account for all these critical factors, or at least not account for them adequately. In particular, help-seekers may fail to consider a potential helper’s difficult position in receiving a request for help. If the potential helper decides to reject the request, she will be violating an implicit norm of benevolence (Goffman, 1971; Gouldner, 1960; Brown & Levinson, 1987). While this discomforting pressure to comply is salient to the potential helper, it may escape the attention of the help-seeker or at least not receive as much consideration. Overlooking this pressure to comply may lead help-
seekers to underestimate the likelihood that others will say “Yes” in response to their requests for help.

Our first three studies focused on judgments of others’ compliance, or whether people could accurately predict how successful they would be when soliciting help from strangers. We begin with a manufactured favor request, test the robustness of the finding with more realistic requests, and finally seek replication in a naturally occurring field setting. In Study 4, we attempt to demonstrate the underestimation effect by manipulating the participant’s perspective (as help-seeker or helper) and asking her to estimate the likelihood of compliance in a series of helping scenarios. We examined whether those who assumed the role of the potential helper would give higher estimates of compliance compared with those who assumed the role of the help-seeker and if the participants’ ratings of perceived discomfort would mediate the influence of role on estimated compliance. Finally, in Study 5, we manipulated the potential helper’s level of discomfort in refusing help in order to provide more compelling evidence that the help-seeker’s failure to account for these feelings of discomfort partially explained their tendency to underestimate others’ willingness to comply.

These studies extend theory and research in a number of important ways. First, we broaden past work on estimating compliance in helping behavior by moving away from cases where the predictor will never pose the request (e.g., Milgram & Sabini, 1978; Epley & Dunning, 2000) to estimates made by the requesters themselves. Second, we provide strong evidence of an underestimation bias in predicting compliance—help-seekers believe they are less likely to receive help than is actually the case. Third, we identify the help-seeker’s lack of appreciation for the helper’s circumstances as a primary source of underestimation, thereby adding to a growing stream of research on the important consequences of attention focus,
egocentrism, and perspective-taking in helping behavior (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997; Savitsky, Van Boven, Epley, & Wight, 2005). Fourth, and more generally, we contribute to a broad scholarly interest in the determinants of helping, demonstrating that people may be more willing to help than others generally assume.

**How help-seekers estimate compliance**

Estimating others’ willingness to comply with a request for help requires an understanding of others’ motivation to provide assistance. Past research on helping behavior suggests that help-seekers closely attend to the instrumental costs they impose on a potential helper before making a request for help (Greenberg, 1980; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). DePaulo and Fisher (1980), for example, found that help-seekers were less inclined to request assistance when they felt that the assistance was more inconvenient for helpers to provide. In general, people are less willing to ask for favors that are more burdensome or effortful, even if their need for assistance is legitimate (e.g., Latane & Darley, 1970; Pruitt, 1968; Gross & Somersan, 1974; Gergen, Ellsworth, Maslach, and Seipel, 1975). Such reluctance to pose substantial requests for help is partly driven by an expectation that others are less likely to comply with larger favor requests (DePaulo, 1983). Thus, people partly calibrate their estimates of others’ willingness to comply according to their impression of the instrumental costs involved (i.e., others will be less likely to comply as the instrumental costs increase).

Although past research has demonstrated that help-seekers attend to the instrumental costs of agreeing to a request for help, these studies have not shown whether and how help-seekers attend to the non-instrumental costs that potential helpers face. In many cases, people are motivated to comply with a request for help in order to avoid the feelings of embarrassment that might be induced by noncompliance (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Milgram &
Sabini, 1978). To date, help-seeking researchers have focused on understanding help-seekers’ motivation to avoid feelings of embarrassment, but not helpers’ motivation to do the same. Does a potential helper’s motivation to avoid feelings of discomfort factor into a help-seeker’s estimate of compliance? In the following section, we argue that it does not, and we explain how this failure to fully account for another person’s motivation to avoid embarrassment may bias help-seekers’ predictions of others’ willingness to comply with their help requests.

**Underestimating compliance with requests for help**

Social psychologists have found that people often are mistaken in predicting others’ behavior and its underlying causes (Ross, 1977; Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Given an egocentric view of the world, people tend to believe that others will share their thoughts and feelings, sometimes in spite of contrary evidence (e.g., Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004; Nickerson, 1999). They struggle to recognize how others’ internal states and intentions may be distinct, even if they have interacted in the past (Ames, 2004). In particular, casual observers may fail to appreciate an individual’s concern for potential embarrassment or discomfort as a primary driver of his or her behavior in social interactions. According to Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein (2001), people (particularly Americans) frequently misjudge others because they overlook another person’s motivation to avoid discomfort in a face-threatening interaction. Indeed, observers may be oblivious to this need to “save face,” even if the observer has experienced the same set of embarrassing circumstances in the recent past.

In the context of helping behavior, help-seekers may routinely fail to appreciate another person’s concern with rejecting a request for help, despite finding themselves in a similar position on a frequent basis (i.e., most people regularly slip in and out of the roles of help-seeker and helper). This argument is consistent with research on how people believe they will be judged
by others when they have acted inappropriately. Studies find that people tend to overestimate the likelihood that they will be treated harshly by others, particularly when the focal actor is feeling vulnerable (Swim, Scott, Sechrist, Campbell, & Stangor, 2003; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). These exaggerated fears of social rejection are produced, in part, by the tendency to be inordinately focused on one’s own misfortunes rather than factors that could mitigate others’ harsh reactions (e.g., Savitsky, Epley, & Gilovich, 2001). Help-seekers might similarly inflate their expectations of harsh treatment (i.e., they anticipate rejection) because they ignore, or at least fail to fully appreciate, others’ potential concern for embarrassment or discomfort in responding to a request for help.

We propose that help-seekers will underestimate others’ willingness to comply with a direct request for help and that such underestimation may stem from the help-seeker’s attention focus. For potential helpers, the social costs of saying “No” are salient and aversive, particularly in face-to-face interactions. For help-seekers, the potential helper’s difficult circumstances (often wanting to say “no” but feeling obligated to comply) may escape their accounting when estimating the likelihood of compliance. Further, even if help-seekers do attend to the potential helper’s predicament, they may not attach much importance to it because they are not faced with the same set of circumstances (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997). Given this difference in attention focus—help-seekers giving less weight than potential helpers to the costs of refusing a request for help—we would expect there to be a trend toward underestimating a person’s willingness to offer compliance because most help-seekers will not fully appreciate that person’s motivation to avoid a loss of face (i.e., to avoid saying “No” to a request for help).

Overview and Predictions
We make two central predictions. First, we believe that people tend to underestimate the likelihood of compliance in posing direct requests for help. That is, help-seekers will assume that another person is less likely to agree to provide help than is actually the case. Second, we highlight an underlying psychological mechanism for this effect—that help-seekers pay less attention to the social costs of rejecting a request for help than do potential helpers. This discrepancy will correspond to the difference between actual and predicted levels of compliance, so that people who more carefully consider the social costs of saying “No” to a request for help (i.e., how awkward, difficult, and embarrassing it may be to refuse assistance) will be less likely to underestimate an individual’s willingness to say “Yes.”

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested our main hypothesis that people underestimate whether others will agree to a direct request for help. Specifically, we asked participants to enact the role of help-seeker by posing the same request for assistance to several different strangers. Before making their requests, half of the participants predicted the likelihood that those they approached would comply (while the other half made no prediction).

Method

Participants

Fifty-two Columbia University students participated in this study in exchange for $15. Six participants withdrew voluntarily after reading the task description, three additional subjects failed to complete the task, and one subject never returned to the lab after leaving with the study materials. For each of our analyses, we focused on the 42 participants who completed the entire study.

Procedure and Design
At the beginning of the experimental session, participants were given the following instructions:

“In this study, you will ask strangers (in person) for a favor. The favor you will be asking them to do is to fill out a paper-and-pen questionnaire that takes approximately 5-10 minutes to complete.”

The two-page questionnaires included items from several personality scales (e.g., self-monitoring) and a few questions about the request and the requester. After looking over the questionnaire, participants then reviewed a set of guidelines for making their favor requests. First, they had to obtain compliance from five different people in order to complete the task. Second, they could approach only strangers (i.e., they were not allowed to approach people they knew in any way). Third, participants had to adhere to a script when making their request. They could ask only, “Will you fill out a questionnaire?” If pressed for details by the people they approached, participants were instructed to offer minimal information. Fourth, they were required to record the response (“yes” or “no”) of every person they approached (each participant was provided with a clipboard along with a sheet for tallying their responses).

After reviewing the details of the task, half of the participants were randomly chosen to provide estimates of compliance. In other studies, the measurement of actual behavior has often followed the measurement of participants’ predictions about such behavior (Goethals, 1986). This may be problematic because predicting one's behavior tends to alter that behavior significantly. Specifically, after making a prediction about an outcome, people tend to work harder toward enacting that outcome than if no prediction had been made (e.g., Greenwald,
Thus, we asked only half of the participants, “How many people do you think you will have to approach before you get five people to fill out a questionnaire?” The other half of the sample was not asked for a prediction, so that we could determine whether the results were influenced by the act of making a prediction.

Participants were given a clipboard, the questionnaires they would be asking other people to complete, and a tally sheet where they recorded compliance (i.e., “Agreed to fill out a questionnaire? (Y/N)”), sex, and the verbal response of each person they approached. The task instructions were repeated on the top sheet of the clipboard. Participants were then released onto the campus with additional instructions to go in separate directions and to stay out of view of one another. No more than five students were permitted to participate at a particular time to avoid saturating the campus with people asking for identical favors.

Upon returning to the lab with their completed questionnaires, participants were fully debriefed and compensated. As a check on the validity of our data, we asked participants to indicate on a slip of paper whether they had followed all of the instructions while completing the task. Specifically, they were asked to answer “Yes” or “No” to the following question: “Did you follow the task instructions completely? That is, were the five questionnaires you handed in filled out by five different strangers?” Participants were told that this act was voluntary and that the slips were anonymous. Before indicating their responses, participants were given a private space, and a sealed box was used to collect the completed slips of paper. All but one of the participants chose to complete the slip.

Results

Predicted versus Actual Compliance
Our hypothesis that participants would overestimate the number of people they had to approach in order to complete the task was confirmed. A paired samples t-test comparing predicted to actual compliance revealed a significant difference, paired \( t(22) = 3.99, p = .001 \). In fact, participants overestimated the number of people they thought they would have to approach by approximately twice the number of people they actually needed to approach in order to complete the task (\( M = 20.5, SD = 12.3 \) Predicted; \( M = 10.5, SD = 3.9 \) Actual; see Figure 1 for a summary).

The difference between predicted and actual compliance cannot be explained by the simple act of making a prediction. A one-way ANOVA yielded no significant difference between the actual compliance rates of the group that made a prediction (\( M = 10.5, SD = 3.9 \)) and the group that did not (\( M = 11.2, SD = 10.2 \)), \( F < 1 \).

**Validity Check**

Forty-one of our 42 participants completed the anonymous slip asking them to verify the validity of their data. Each of those 41 respondents confirmed that they had followed the task instructions completely, providing us with an encouraging, albeit rough, indication of the validity of our data.

**Discussion**

The results of Study 1 provide some initial evidence that people underestimate others’ willingness to comply with a direct request for help. Participants in our study anticipated that they would need to ask approximately twice the number of people they actually needed to ask for help with their task. Although encouraging, one limitation of this preliminary finding is that it is based on a single request for help, one that is unusual (asking a stranger to fill out a questionnaire). To assess the generalizability of the underestimation effect, we conducted a
follow-up study that used two different types of favor requests. In this follow-up study, we also attempted to address a second limitation of Study 1—ensuring that participants completed the task as instructed (rather than simply taking their word for it).

Study 2

We attempted to replicate our findings from Study 1 using two alternative favor requests that were more natural: borrowing a cell phone and asking for an escort to a specific destination on campus. For this follow-up study, we adopted the same general paradigm used in Study 1. Participants were asked to make predictions about how many people they would need to ask for a favor before going out onto the campus and approaching strangers with the request.

Method

Participants

Forty-eight Columbia University students participated in the study for $10 compensation. Participants were recruited through flyers posted around campus.

Procedure

In this study, participants were assigned to request one of two different favors. They either asked to borrow strangers’ cell phones or they asked for an escort to the campus gym. After reading about their task, thirteen people withdrew voluntarily leaving us with 35 participants (22 Female, 13 Male). Although this is a fairly high attrition rate, presumably the people who chose not to participate found the task especially daunting (i.e., more difficult to get others to comply with the request for help), thereby making our study a more conservative test of a self-selected group of individuals who felt confident enough to continue.
**Borrowing a Cell Phone**

Participants who agreed to perform the “cell phone” task were instructed to approach strangers and ask to borrow their cell phones so that they could make a phone call. The script they were asked to follow each time they approached someone with this request was, “Can I use your cell phone to make a call?” They were instructed not to deviate from this script. If pressed for details, the only information they could offer was that the phone call “would be quick” and that they needed to “call someone about a psychology experiment.” Participants were given the telephone number of the research lab where the study began and informed that they would need to call this number using a cell phone borrowed from three different people.

When successful in obtaining the use of another person’s cell phone, the participant dialed the lab telephone number and asked to speak to the experimenter. The experimenter recorded the participant’s subject number and location on campus before hanging up the phone. If the participant did not reach the experimenter, the participant was allowed to leave a voicemail message that included the participant’s subject number and location on campus. Once a participant called and spoke to the experimenter three times the participant returned to the lab to complete a follow-up questionnaire.

Any participant who did not call and speak to the experimenter three times was judged not to have completed the task. Four participants who began the task failed to complete it. Two of these participants claimed to have called three times, but on one of their purported calls they failed to speak to the experimenter or leave a voicemail message. One participant left the lab with the study materials and did not return. One participant withdrew voluntarily from the study after being refused by five potential helpers. Only the participants who completed the study are included in the analyses.
Asking for an Escort

In the “escort” group, participants asked for directions and a personal escort to the campus gym. The gym (Dodge Fitness Center) was chosen because its entrance is below campus level and therefore may be difficult to locate. However, the vast majority of Columbia students know where the gym is located, in part owing to their participation in physical education classes that are required of all Columbia undergraduates. The gym, which is in the northwest corner of the main campus, is approximately three street blocks from the middle of campus (a divided walkway called “College Walk”), where participants were asked to make their requests. After each participant completed an initial questionnaire in the lab, he or she was escorted by the experimenter to the College Walk area. Participants were instructed to stay just south of College Walk when making their requests.

Participants were once again given a script and instructed to follow it exactly. First, they were told to ask each person whether they were a Columbia student (to ensure that everyone who was asked would know where the gym was). If this person was a student, the participant was instructed to ask, “Can you show me where the gym is?” At this point, potential helpers usually pointed toward the gym or offered verbal directions, in which case our participants were then instructed to ask, “Will you walk me there?” If the potential helper continued to give verbal directions, participants were allowed to say, “I was just over there, and I couldn’t find it. Can you take me there?” This complete script was presented to participants before they made their predictions of compliance, and the experimenter reviewed the script with them again on the walk outside.

Finally, in this study, rather than have participants keep track of the potential helpers’ responses, the experimenter shadowed each participant inconspicuously and recorded whether
each potential helper complied. When someone agreed to walk a participant to the gym, the experimenter followed the participant and the helper from a distance. The participant was considered to have completed the task when they got one person to escort the participant within sight of the gym. This meant that all participants had to walk a minimum of approximately two blocks with an escort. The participants were informed in advance that they would be shadowed, but they were directed to ignore the experimenter. None of the escorts reported noticing that they had been followed. All participants who attempted the task successfully completed it, and, in doing so, faithfully followed the instructions given to them.

**Dependent Measures**

After reading about their task (but before beginning the task), participants made predictions about how many people they would need to approach in order to complete it. That is, depending on the task they were assigned, they would either make a prediction about how many people they would need to approach before 3 people agreed to let them borrow a cell phone, or how many people they would need to approach before 1 person agreed to walk them to the gym. To get a measure of actual compliance for the cell phone request, participants were given a tally sheet to carry with them in order to record the “yes”/“no” responses of each person they approached with their request. For those instructed to pose the “escort” request, the experimenter followed each participant and kept track of actual compliance on a tally sheet.

Participants were also asked the following questions before they left the lab and once again after they returned: (1) How difficult will it be (was it) to reach your goal; (2) How much of an imposition would this favor request be (was this favor request); (3) How large of a favor are you requesting (was the favor you requested); (4) How warmly will (did) people react. All of
these responses were made on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from “Not at all” to “Extremely”.

Results

Predicted versus Actual Compliance

Using two different types of favor requests, we replicated our findings from Study 1. Our hypothesis that participants would overestimate the number of people they would need to approach in order to complete their task was confirmed. Collapsed across both types of favors, participants predicted that they would need to approach more people (M = 8.61, SD = 7.10) than they actually had to approach (M = 5.12, SD = 2.83), $F(1, 27) = 7.62, p = .01$. This effect did not interact with favor type ($F < 1$), suggesting that participants were overestimating to a similar degree for both types of favors.

Participants in the cell phone group predicted that they would have to approach an average of 10.1 people in order to complete their task of getting 3 people to agree to their request. In fact, they needed to ask only 6.2 people, on average, $t(16) = 2.1, p = .05$. Participants who agreed to perform the “escort” task predicted that they would need to ask an average of 7.2 people to walk them to the gym before one person agreed, but they actually had to ask only 2.3 people on average, $t(11) = 3.01, p = .01$ (see Figure 1). Furthermore, this error was made by all but 6 of our 29 participants, or 79% of participants who completed the task and all of the measures.

Task Difficulty

We also considered how participants’ initial judgments of task difficulty changed after they completed the task. None of the responses given were qualified by an interaction with favor type (all $F$s $< 1.2$), so we report these results collapsed across the two types of favors. All of the
measures we collected revealed a drop in participants’ judgments about the difficulty of the task. Participants rated their goal as much more difficult to achieve before they began the task (M = 4.53) than after they had completed it (M = 2.46), F(1, 28) = 39.91, p < .001. They also changed their minds about the size of the request, reporting that either asking to borrow someone’s cell phone or asking for an escort was a much larger request before the task (M = 4.29) than after the task (M = 3.56), F(1, 28) = 9.96, p = .004, and reporting that these favors were a greater imposition on another person before the task (M = 4.69) than after (M = 3.11), F(1, 28) = 24.91, p < .001. Finally, participants rated the people they approached to be warmer (M = 4.56) than they had expected them to be (M = 3.43), F(1, 28) = 11.12, p = .002.

Discussion

Study 2 replicated our main finding from Study 1—that people tend to underestimate others’ willingness to comply with a direct request for help. Indeed, participants seemed to be surprised by their success in obtaining help, reporting that the task seemed much easier than they had expected. We extended the generalizability of the underestimation effect by using different favor requests, particularly requests that seem more realistic (borrowing a cell phone and asking for an escort to a specific location). Further, rather than rely on self-reported compliance with the study instructions, we were able to confirm actual compliance by having an experimenter observe participants (at least for one task).

Although we have now replicated the underestimation effect using three different types of favors, it is worth noting that all three of these requests were contrived and all three studies relied on an undergraduate student population. In Study 3, we attempt to generalize these findings to a non-student population using a naturally-occurring favor request that involves meaningful costs and benefits for the people involved.
Study 3

In Study 3, we tested whether our predictions would replicate in the field drawing on a sample of volunteers who were asked to solicit donations on behalf of a nonprofit organization. We predicted that these volunteers, like our undergraduate participants in the previous two studies, would underestimate the likelihood that the people they approached would comply with a direct request for help.

Participants

One hundred twenty-seven Team in Training (TIT) volunteers (90 Female, 37 Male) participated in this study in exchange for a $25 contribution to the organization (this contribution counted toward their personal fundraising goal). Participants were recruited through TIT information sessions in the New York City metropolitan area and through a series of emails sent by local TIT organizers.

Team in Training

Team in Training is a division of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, a nonprofit organization that raises money to support clinical research and patient care for various blood cancers. TIT helps its volunteers train to run, walk, or bike a marathon, half-marathon, or triathlon by offering a comprehensive endurance sports training program in exchange for their volunteers’ fundraising efforts. According to the organization’s marketing materials, TIT is the largest endurance sports training program “in the world,” offering a four to six-month schedule of training activities, complete with experienced coaching as well as travel and accommodations for the volunteer’s race.

To take part in the TIT training program, volunteers must raise a minimum amount of money (between $2100 and $5000, depending on the race they are training for) by asking others
for donations. Those who participate in TIT’s fundraising programs have several months (on average, five) to reach their minimum fundraising goal. If any volunteer fails to reach her minimum fundraising goal by the deadline, she must either cover the remaining amount on her own or drop out of the program. Most volunteers (around 75%) reach their minimum fundraising goal without having to expend any of their own resources.

Team in Training offers an appropriate setting to test our predictions for several reasons. First, the request for help in this case occurs naturally—it is not forced, or contrived. Therefore, it is more likely that our results would generalize to similar settings, particularly those that involve the direct solicitation of donations. Second, the magnitude of the request is significant. The average donation obtained by a volunteer in the 2004 season was more than $50, and some donations exceeded $1,000. Third, the test of our underestimation hypothesis is stringent in this case because the participants have volunteered. Before deciding to volunteer, participants probably assumed that they could complete the task or else they would have decided against participating. In contrast, those who considered joining TIT (perhaps even attending their information sessions) but decided not to join were probably dubious about their chances of completing the fundraising challenge. One might reasonably assume that these individuals who opted out of the program would be more inclined to underestimate others’ compliance, thereby making the test of our hypothesis more conservative.

Procedure and Design

We asked Team in Training volunteers who agreed to participate in the study to complete a two-part web-based questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire was administered before participants began soliciting donations, and the second part was completed shortly after a participant’s fundraising deadline had passed. A link to the initial online questionnaire was
emailed to all TIT participants. One hundred twenty-four TIT volunteers completed the first questionnaire. Of these participants, 91 completed the second questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 72.4%.

**Pre-questionnaire.** In the pre-questionnaire, participants made a number of predictions about their upcoming fundraising task. Specifically, we asked participants to estimate the number of people they would need to approach in order to complete their fundraising goal, the number of weeks they would need to reach their goal, and the average donation they expected. They were also asked to rate the likelihood they would reach their fundraising goal on a scale ranging from 1 (Very Likely) to 7 (Very Unlikely), how difficult they expected the task would be on a scale ranging from 1 (Very easy) to 7 (Very difficult), and the size of the request they would be making on a scale from 1 (Not at all large) to 7 (Very large).

**Post-questionnaire.** The post-questionnaire was administered after the fundraising deadline had passed. We emailed each of the volunteers who completed the pre-questionnaire and asked them to complete the post-questionnaire, regardless of whether they had reached their fundraising goal. As part of its fundraising program, Team in Training requires its volunteers to keep a diary detailing their fundraising efforts. To encourage accuracy in participants’ post-fundraising reports, we instructed them to refer to their fundraising diary while responding to each of the items in the post-questionnaire.

Participants who completed the post-questionnaire were asked to report the number of people they approached for a contribution and the average amount of the contributions made. They rated the difficulty of the task (soliciting donations) on a 7-point scale from 1 (Very easy) to 7 (Very difficult), and the size of the requests they had made on a scale from 1 (Not at all large) to 7 (Very large). Participants were also asked to indicate how close they came to reaching
their fundraising goal and how much they supplemented their fundraising efforts with their own money, if they needed to do so.

Validity Check

Team in Training kept detailed accounting records listing each participant’s sponsors and their contributions. As a validity check, we compared the mean number of sponsors our participants reported in their post-questionnaire with the number of actual sponsors recorded in Team in Training’s accounting records. The means were not significantly different, paired t(81) < 1, which gives us some confidence that participants were honest and accurate in the reporting of their fundraising experience. All of our subsequent analyses are based on the numbers that participants reported in the online surveys.

Results

Predicted versus Actual Compliance

We found strong evidence that participants underestimated others’ willingness to comply with their direct request for help. Participants predicted they would need to approach significantly more people (M = 210.3, SD = 271.2) than they actually needed to approach (M = 122.2, SD = 118.6) in order to reach their fundraising goal, paired t(87) = 3.13, p = .002 (see Figure 1). In addition, participants underestimated the average amount that people would contribute, paired t(90) = 3.99, p < .001. They predicted their supporters would contribute $48.33 on average (SD = $24.83), while the average contribution was actually $63.80 (SD = $31.97), 24% more than the predicted amount. Thus, there seems to be evidence of two different forms of underestimation in this sample—not only were people more willing to comply with a direct request for help than participants predicted, but they were also willing to give more than participants predicted.
Task Difficulty

As expected, participants reported that the task of reaching their fundraising goal was less difficult than they had originally assumed. In the pre-task questionnaire, participants gave significantly higher estimates of task difficulty (M = 5.01, SD = 1.45) than they reported in the post-task questionnaire (M = 4.43, SD = 1.75), paired t(87) = 2.63, p = .01. Participants also evaluated the size of the request as being more substantial prior to beginning their fundraising efforts than after having gone through the process (4.16 vs. 3.67, paired t(88) = 2.20, p = .03).

Discussion

In Study 3, we replicated the effect we found in our previous studies—that people underestimated others’ willingness to comply with a direct request for help (we also found that people underestimated the magnitude of help given). In this case, we examined a naturally occurring episode of help-seeking behavior, rather than an artificial request. Further, the results of this exercise were meaningful for both the participants (who obtained training assistance) and the people they approached (who made a significant financial contribution). Taken together with the results from our previous studies (Study 1 and Study 2), the cumulative evidence strongly suggests that people believe others are less willing to comply with their direct requests for help than is actually the case. In the studies that follow, we examine more closely the underlying psychological mechanism for this underestimation effect.

Studies 4 and 5

Studies 1 through 3 demonstrated that people are more likely to agree to direct requests for help than we might expect. We have proposed that the reason for this underestimation effect is a lack of appreciation for the potential helper’s perspective in responding to a request for help. Specifically, those who solicit help fail to fully account for the social pressure facing potential
helpers—they feel an obligation to adhere to an implicit norm of benevolence that makes it difficult for them to reject a request for help, even when it is made by a stranger.

To test this idea, we conducted two additional studies in which participants were asked to review several scenarios where they purportedly acted either as a help-seeker or a potential helper. Participants were asked to make judgments about the average person’s willingness to comply with each request. We presumed that participants assigned to the role of the “potential helper” would predict higher levels of compliance compared with those assigned to the role of the “help-seeker”. In addition, we expected participants in the role of “potential helper” to be more sensitive than participants in the role of “help-seeker” to information about the social costs of saying “No” to a request for help.

Study 4

In Study 4, we asked participants to read several scenarios written from the perspective of a help-seeker or a potential helper. For every scenario, participants assigned to each role estimated the percentage of people who would comply with the help request and the potential helper’s feelings of discomfort if he refused to provide help.

Participants

Sixty-three Columbia University students participated in this study in exchange for $5. Participants were recruited by flyers posted around campus.

Procedure and Design

Participants were randomly assigned to a condition in which they were instructed to assume the perspective of someone being asked for help or someone asking for help. To reinforce the role assignment, we asked participants to recall and describe (in a few sentences) a
recent episode in which they had played their assigned role. For example, those assigned to the help-seeker condition were asked to read the following instructions:

Please take a moment to recall a time recently when someone agreed to do a favor for you. Think about what it was like to ask for that favor. What did you think? How did you feel? In the space below, please write a few sentences about what the favor request was and what the experience was like (e.g., your emotions, your concerns).

The instructions for those assigned to the potential helper condition were highly similar, but written from the viewpoint of the person being asked for help. Specifically,

Please take a moment to recall a time recently when you agreed to do a favor for someone. Think about what it was like to be asked for that favor. What did you think? How did you feel? In the space below, please write a few sentences about what the favor request was and what the experience was like (e.g., your emotions, your concerns).

After completing this preliminary task, participants were presented with four scenarios that described different episodes of helping behavior. To avoid a ceiling effect, we tried to describe requests that were inconvenient enough to elicit some variance in reported compliance rates. Each of the scenarios was written from the participant’s perspective in the role she had been assigned. For example, participants who were assigned to the potential helper condition were asked to read the following:

Imagine it's the middle of finals. You've been studying all week for your final exam in a course that's very important to you. You really want to do well. The exam is tomorrow
morning. After spending the entire day in the library studying for the exam, you are exhausted. You go back to your dorm room for a bit to take a short break and relax. As you walk in the door, your roommate looks up from her desk. ‘Would you read my final paper and give me feedback on it tonight?’ she asks you.

Those assigned to the help-seeker condition read the same scenario written as follows:

Imagine it's the middle of finals. Your roommate has been studying all week for a final exam in a course that's very important to them. They really want to do well. The exam is tomorrow morning. After spending the entire day in the library studying for the exam, your roommate is exhausted. They go back to your dorm room for a bit to take a short break and relax. As they walk in the door, you look up from your desk. ‘Would you read my final paper and give me feedback on it tonight?’ you ask them.

Participants in both conditions were then asked the same set of questions. First, they were asked to estimate the percentage of people who would agree to the request. Second, they were asked three questions having to do with the discomforting circumstances facing the potential helper: (1) How difficult do you think it is to say “No” to this request?; (2) How awkward do you think it would be to say “No” to this request?; (3) How embarrassed do you think one would feel if they said “No?” Responses to these three items were then averaged to create an overall measure of appreciation for the potential helper’s awkward position. The coefficient alpha for this three-item scale was .87.
The other three scenarios involved giving someone a ride home from the airport, letting another person borrow your cell phone, and picking up a package at the post office on behalf of someone else. A summary of the scenarios is reported in Table 1. Each participant was asked to review all four scenarios. Four participants skipped at least one question about the estimated percentage of compliance and are therefore excluded from all collapsed analyses.

Results

We predicted that ratings of others’ willingness to comply would be higher when participants were asked to assume the role of the potential helper rather than the help-seeker. Our hypothesis was confirmed. The estimates were submitted to a 2 (role: help-seeker vs. potential helper) X 4 (type of scenario) mixed model ANOVA with repeated measure on the second factor. The interaction was not significant, $F < 1$, suggesting that the pattern of results did not differ according to the content of the individual scenarios. Relevant to the current investigation, a significant main effect of role emerged, $F(1, 58) = 17.4$, $p < .001$. On average, people in the potential helper condition gave higher percentage estimates of compliance compared with people in the help-seeker condition (49.6 vs. 34.3). Looking at the results within each scenario, people in the potential helper condition gave higher estimates of compliance compared with people in the help-seeker condition in each case. These results are summarized in Table 2.

Finally, we suggested that participants in the help-seeker condition would not only give lower estimates of others’ willingness to comply, but they would also underestimate the difficulty others might have (i.e., the social costs one might incur by) refusing to agree. Indeed, this difference was significant across all four scenarios (4.3 vs. 3.4, $F(1, 60) = 9.88$, $p = .003$. A mixed model ANOVA showed that the type of favor did not interact with this effect, $F(3, 60) < 1$. As expected, the correlation between the measure of perceived discomfort in refusing
compliance and estimated compliance was both positive and statistically significant ($r = .50, p < .001$), indicating that a failure to perceive others’ difficulty in refusing compliance might correspond to a decrease in estimating others’ willingness to comply.

A mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) was conducted to test whether the impact that assigned role (help-seeker vs. potential helper) had on estimates of compliance was mediated by perceived discomfort in refusing the request. An initial regression model showed that role predicted estimates of compliance, such that those assigned to the potential helper role gave higher estimates of compliance ($\beta = -.48, p \leq .001$). A separate model confirmed that the impact of role on perceived discomfort in refusing the request (i.e., help-givers gave higher ratings on the measure of perceived discomfort than did help-seekers) was significant ($\beta = -.38, p \leq .01$). In turn, perceived discomfort in refusing the request predicted estimates of compliance ($\beta = .52, p \leq .001$). In a combined model, the effect of role on estimated compliance dropped ($\beta = .33, p \leq .01$). To assess the magnitude of the decrease in explanatory power, we calculated the Sobel statistic. In this model, the Sobel value is 2.33 ($p = .02$), which suggests perceived discomfort in refusing the request acted as a mediating variable. However, we would not characterize these results as full mediation because the independent variable remained significant after the mediating variable was included in the same equation.

**Discussion**

The results from this study provide some initial evidence for the mechanism underlying the underestimation effect. We found that when people were asked to assume the role of the potential helper rather than the role of the help-seeker, they gave higher estimates of others’ willingness to comply. In addition, people in the role of the potential helper gave relatively higher estimates of how discomforting (e.g., awkward, embarrassing) it would be to refuse to
comply with a direct request for help compared with those in the help-seeker condition. Finally, this perceived discomfort variable mediated the influence of assigned role (help-seeker or potential helper) on estimated compliance.

The results from this study are intriguing. However, by measuring rather than manipulating social costs such as embarrassment and awkwardness, the findings are still inconclusive. To address this concern, we conducted a fifth, and final, study in which we manipulated the social costs of refusing to provide help.

Study 5

In Study 5, we tested our hypothesis that the social costs involved in refusing to provide help are more salient for the potential helper than for the help-seeker by manipulating these social costs (via directness of the request) in addition to once again manipulating participants’ roles in a series of vignettes. Thus, the following study is a 2 (Role: Potential helper, Help-seeker) x 2 (Social Cost: High, Low) between-subjects design.

We predicted an interaction whereby participants’ estimates of compliance in the “potential helper” condition would be higher when the request was made directly (high social cost of refusing help) than when it was made indirectly (low social cost of refusing help). In contrast, we predicted that participants’ ratings in the “help-seeker” condition would not vary according to whether the request was made directly or indirectly (by social cost condition).

Participants

Eighty-three participants completed the study. Fifty-seven participants were Columbia University students recruited by flyers posted around campus who received $5 for their participation. The remaining twenty-six participants were employees of a financial services organization who completed the questionnaire as part of an “in-house” executive education
If you need help, just ask

seminar. The patterns of results for these two groups were nearly identical, so their responses are collapsed in each of our analyses.

Procedure

As in Study 4, participants were randomly assigned to a condition in which they were instructed to assume the perspective of someone being asked for help or someone asking for help. They were presented with four scenarios. One of the scenarios (borrowing a cell phone from a stranger in Times Square) was taken from Study 4. The three additional scenarios were new vignettes describing various episodes of helping behavior between strangers, including helping a woman carry a stroller down a flight of stairs to a subway platform, giving up one’s seat to a man on the train, and signing a petition for a fellow student running for student government. The other three scenarios used in Study 4 concerned helping behaviors between people who knew each other well; we wanted to limit our scenarios to helping behaviors between strangers and thus rule out explanations involving familiarity. Each of these scenarios was written from the perspective of either the potential helper or the help-seeker.

In addition to manipulating role, we manipulated the social cost of refusing to help by altering the directness of the request. Each scenario was written so that the request for help was either asked of the potential helper directly or was indirectly implied. For example, in the case of the woman who needs help carrying a stroller down the stairs, the scenario was written to say that she either catches someone’s eye and clearly needs help (indirect/low social cost of refusing to provide help), or that she explicitly asks someone for help by saying, “Will you help me with this?” (direct/high social cost of refusing to provide help). Each participant was assigned to a single “social costs” condition in which the help requests were made either directly or indirectly.
For a summary of the scenarios, please see Table 3. As in Study 4, participants in all conditions were asked to estimate the percentage of people who would agree to the request.

To test whether the vignettes used in Study 5 effectively manipulate feelings of discomfort for the potential helper (by manipulating direct versus indirect requests), we asked an independent sample of people to read the vignettes from the perspective of the potential helper and then rate the extent to which each scenario engenders feelings of discomfort. Half of the respondents received the “direct request” scenarios and the other half received the “indirect request” scenarios. For each scenario, we asked them “How uncomfortable do you think it would feel to avoid helping in this situation?”, “How embarrassed would you feel if you decided not to help?”, and “How awkward would you feel if you decided not to help?” Using a 7-pt. scale ranging from 1=”Not at all” to 7=”Extremely,” participants gave higher ratings in the “direct request” condition for the uncomfortable item (Direct M = 5.377, Indirect = 4.532, F(1, 124) = 14.328, p < .001), the embarrassed item (Direct M = 5.035, Indirect = 4.143, F(1, 125) = 16.050, p < .001), and the awkwardness item (Direct M = 5.24, Indirect M = 4.294, F(1, 125) = 17.51, p < .001), looking at responses collapsed across scenario. Thus, the manipulation appeared to be effective.

Results

Main Effect of Role

Looking at the responses given in the “direct request” condition, we replicated our main finding from Study 4. Participants who adopted the perspective of the “potential helper” in a direct request scenario estimated that a significantly higher percentage of people would comply with the request (M = 63.8%) than did those assigned to the “help-seeker” role (M = 50.8%), F(1, 40) = 7.18, p = .01.
Role x Directness Interaction

To test our primary prediction for this study—namely, an interaction of role with directness of the request—the dependent variable of percentage compliance was submitted to a 2 (role: help-seeker vs. potential helper) X 2 (directness of request: direct vs. indirect) X 4 (type of scenario) mixed model ANOVA with repeated measure on the last factor. The three-way interaction of the two between-subjects measures with scenario type was not significant, $F(3, 79) < 1$, so the pattern of results did not differ by scenario.

We proposed that participants in the “potential helper” condition would respond more to the directness of the request than participants in the “help-seeker” condition. As predicted, a significant interaction emerged between role and directness, $F(1, 79) = 7.3$, $p = .01$. Participants in the “potential helper” condition expected a significantly greater percentage of people to comply with the requests when they were asked directly ($M = 63.8\%$) than when they were asked indirectly ($M = 52.2\%$), $F(1, 38) = 6.64$, $p = .01$. However, this pattern was reversed for participants in the “help-seeker” condition ($M = 50.8\%$ Direct; $M = 57.6\%$ Indirect, $F(1,41) = 1.81$, ns), although this difference was not significant. For a summary, see Figure 2.

Discussion

By manipulating the magnitude of social costs (i.e., pressure to comply that corresponds to the directness of a request for help), these results provide additional, more conclusive evidence for our argument that people asking for help pay less attention to the social costs of saying “No” to a request for help than do those who are being asked. In addition, these findings suggest that this difference may act, at least in part, as a mechanism underlying the underestimation effect. When people were asked to assume the role of the potential helper, they gave higher estimates of others’ willingness to comply than did people who were asked to
assume the role of the help-seeker, particularly when the social pressure to comply was more intense.

The results also cast doubt on an alternative explanation for the underestimation effect—the possibility that people underestimate others’ altruistic inclination to help others (and therefore underestimate the likelihood that they will say “Yes”). We indirectly tested this idea by varying whether the request in each of our vignettes was “direct” or “indirect.” If the alternative explanation that “people underestimate altruistic motives” was correct, then we should find evidence of underestimation in the “indirect” request condition because people would still have an opportunity to act on their altruistic motives. However, we find no evidence of underestimation in this condition, which suggests a lack of support for the alternative hypothesis. Instead, we find evidence that the underestimation effect is limited to direct requests, which strengthens our claim that help-seekers are failing to account for the social pressures that potential helpers face in responding to direct requests.

General Discussion

Help-seeking has been described as an uncomfortable, if not embarrassing, act that requires at least a modicum of courage (Shapiro, 1983). In addition to appearing inadequate or incompetent, most people fear the possibility of rejection. Thus, before posing any request, help-seekers are motivated to carefully consider whether the potential helper will agree to it (DePaulo, 1982). If they suspect this person will not be inclined to say “Yes,” many help-seekers will refrain from requesting help because they would rather avoid being rejected. But, do we get it right? That is, are we able to judge accurately whether others will reject us and our requests for assistance, thereby saving ourselves some embarrassment? Or, do we tend to underestimate others, particularly their willingness to comply with our direct requests for help? In the present
research, we examined this issue in a series of studies that highlighted our tendency to underestimate others’ willingness to agree to a direct request for help and an underlying psychological explanation for this bias.

In our first three studies, we asked participants to predict the likelihood that others would comply with a direct request for assistance and then had the participants make the request on their own. The nature of the request varied across studies. In two studies, the participants asked a stranger to complete a questionnaire, to loan the use of a cell phone, or to escort the participant to a specific destination. Participants underestimated by as much as 50% the likelihood that others would agree to these direct requests for help. In contrast, the third study involved a naturally-occurring favor request. People voluntarily asked others (some they knew very well) to contribute money on their behalf to a charitable organization. Again, the participants’ predicted rate of compliance fell significantly below the actual rate. That is, people were more willing to offer help in response to a direct request than our participants assumed.

We examined a possible underlying psychological explanation for this underestimation effect—a failure on the part of participants to account for the potential helper’s discomforting position, particularly the difficulty he or she may have saying “No” to a direct request for help. Although denying a request for help can be awkward and embarrassing because it violates a social norm to assist those in need, help-seekers may not attend to this social pressure faced by the potential helper. To test this idea in our final two studies, we randomly assigned people to adopt the perspective of the help-seeker or the perspective of the potential helper. Those in the help-seeker condition were less likely to acknowledge the discomfort that people faced in responding to direct requests for help (i.e., gave lower estimates of how awkward or
embarrassing it is to say “No”), which, in turn, corresponded to their relatively lower estimates of whether others would offer compliance.

Taken together, these results shed new light on the subject of help-seeking, particularly the matter of estimating others’ willingness to comply with direct requests for help. People often rely on assistance from others to achieve their personal, social, and professional objectives, but such assistance may not be offered spontaneously. Rather, help-seekers typically bear the responsibility of requesting assistance, something they may dread because they fear rejection. The findings from the present research suggest that this fear of rejection is somewhat unfounded. Instead, people are more willing to help than others assume (although their interest in helping may be driven by face-saving needs, rather than altruistic motives). Thus, the systematic tendency to underestimate others’ willingness to comply might present a significant, albeit seemingly baseless, hurdle to obtaining help.

Theoretical contributions

The link between embarrassment and help-seeking has a rich history in social psychology research. In one classic study, for example, Milgram instructed several of his graduate students to ask fellow subway passengers to give up their seats (for a rich description of this study, see Blass, 2004). His students found the exercise unnerving and, in one case, even nauseating. Many of them refused to continue the experiment because they were too upset by it. An important fact often overlooked in subsequent discussions of this study is how uncomfortable the passengers who were propositioned may have felt—approximately 68 percent of these individuals agreed to turn over their seats perhaps, in part, because many felt it would be too awkward to refuse (Milgram & Sabini, 1978). In general, research that examines how the fear of embarrassment acts as a deterrent to help-seeking has focused almost exclusively on the help-seeker’s
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perspective (e.g., Shapiro, 1983, DePaulo, Dull, Greenberg, & Swaim, 1989; Friedman, 1980; Nadler & Fisher, 1986; Phillips & Bruch, 1988). However, we suggest that the helper’s fear of embarrassment (induced by social pressure to adhere to an implicit norm of benevolence) might be another critical determinant of helping.

How help-seekers derive estimates of compliance has become a critical concern in the literature on helping behavior. In particular, Miller and Ratner (1998) found that people overestimated the influence of self-interest on others’ intentions to perform charitable acts. Likewise, in our studies, people may have been more generous than our participants were prone to think, but it seems clear that the failure to account for a potential helper’s feelings of discomfort also had some effect on help-seekers’ estimates of compliance. We believe that both misconceptions of potential helpers’ motives—underestimation of fear of embarrassment and overestimation of self-interest—could be working simultaneously in lowering help-seekers’ expectations of compliance. Which bias may be more pronounced may depend on the circumstances. Whereas the myth of self-interest might have a more significant effect on estimates of compliance when a potential helper’s competing self-interest is more salient, a failure to consider the pressure to “save face” may have a larger effect when the potential helper’s face-saving needs are more intense.

Our findings also resonate with recent research on egocentrism and estimating the likelihood of helping behavior or the magnitude of helpful contributions (e.g., Epley & Dunning, 2000; Savitsky, Van Boven, Epley, & Wight, 2005). These studies demonstrate that people believe they are more charitable, on average, than their peers. Findings from the present research complement this work—people not only overestimate their own charitable contributions, but underestimate others’ as well (cf. Epley & Dunning, 2000). Further, the underestimation of
compliance seems to be rooted in an egocentric perspective, whereby people pay less attention to, or fail to fully appreciate, the social pressure that often leads people to offer compliance. This apparent link to the egocentric literature may suggest several conditions that enhance or diminish the underestimation effect, including similarity (Ames, 2004), time pressure (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004), and target ambiguity (Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995).

**Future Directions**

There are many possible directions for future research to take, including the role that cultural norms may play in the process of estimating compliance. Past research on cultural differences in help-seeking suggests that a strong emphasis on self-reliance in American culture encourages U.S. citizens to withhold their requests for assistance (Nadler, 1983). Indeed, a study by Graf, Freer, and Plaizier (1979) found that help-seeking requests posed by Americans were judged more harshly by fellow Americans than the same requests posed and judged by Dutch citizens, purportedly because Dutch citizens were less likely to enforce a norm of self-reliance. A strong concern with appearing self-reliant could cause Americans to focus more heavily on the imposition involved in agreeing to a request for help. In turn, this focus on a potential imposition (and how such an imposition might be considered inappropriate) may lead Americans to anticipate lower levels of compliance than would help-seekers from other cultures.

Another important question to address is whether an accurate understanding of others’ willingness to offer help will embolden people to request help. That is, if help-seekers think they are more likely to get assistance, will they necessarily be more likely to ask for it? The answer might depend on the help-seeker and their understanding of the potential helper’s motivation. If a help-seeker appreciates a potential helper’s difficult circumstances—not necessarily wanting to help, but wanting to avoid embarrassment—she might empathize with the potential helper’s
plight and hold off on making a request. Whether the help-seeker becomes more or less emboldened to request help could depend on her level of empathy. For those who are more attuned and sensitive to the potential helper’s circumstances, they may be disinclined to ask for help if it means taking advantage of another individual’s difficult position and causing that person some discomfort (cf., Nadler, 1983; Shapiro, 1983). Studies that account for the help-seeker’s empathic disposition are needed to test this idea.

Finally, a critical issue that remains is the potential downside of asking for help when compliance is driven by a strong motivation to avoid feelings of discomfort. On one hand, if the helper believes her motivation for complying with a request for help is to adhere to social pressure (rather than her altruistic inclinations), she may feel “trapped” and subsequently resent the help-seeker’s imposition. Thus, people may be worse off if accurately estimating compliance motivates them to ask for more help because they might receive more assistance but simultaneously elicit animosity. On the other hand, some research suggests that when we help someone, we may be inclined to justify this action by convincing ourselves that the receiver is an attractive, likable, and deserving person (e.g., Jecker & Landy, 1969). Future studies might attempt to reconcile these conflicting viewpoints—to test whether or not those who are aware of the social pressure that potential helpers face and take advantage of it will eventually encounter a backlash in the form of lower levels of liking and trust.

**Conclusion**

No one likes being rejected. As a result, we avoid requesting assistance from those whom we think will not agree to provide it. But are we accurate in estimating whether others will be willing to comply with our requests for help, or do we wrongly assume that we will be rejected when this is not the case? We find that people generally underestimate the likelihood of
compliance in making a direct request for help, in part, because they fail to fully appreciate that while it is difficult for help-seekers to risk rejection, it is also difficult for potential helpers to offer rejection. Recognizing and overcoming this paralyzing, and in many cases unfounded, fear may bear meaningful consequences, not just for individuals but for the good deeds they hope to accomplish. The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, specifically, might be more successful in raising money to support cancer research if its volunteers’ expectations of success in soliciting donations were more accurate. More generally, success in help-seeking may be more likely than we tend to assume.
References


Goethals, G.R. (1986). Fabricating and ignoring social reality: Self-serving estimates of consensus. In J.M. Olson, C.P. Herman, & M.P. Zanna (Eds.), *Social comparison and*


Table 1. Favor Scenarios in [potential helper/help-seeker] formats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cell Phone</td>
<td>Imagine [someone is/you're] stuck in Times Square and [they are/you're] running late for a doctor's appointment. [They/you] try hailing a taxi, but [they're/you're] not having much luck, so [they/you] decide to call [their/your] doctor to let her know [they're/you're] running late. [They see that you are/you see someone who is] just about to put [your/their] cell phone away, so [they approach you/you approach them]. &quot;Can I use your cell phone to make a phone call?&quot; [they/you] ask.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finals</td>
<td>Imagine it's the middle of finals. [You've been/your roommate has been] studying all week for a final exam in a course that's very important to [you/them]. [You/they] really want to do well. The exam is tomorrow morning. After spending all day in the library, [you/they] are exhausted. [You/they] go back to your dorm room for a bit to take a short break and relax. As [you/ they] walk in the door, [your roommate looks up from her desk/ you look up from your desk]. &quot;Would you read my final paper and give me feedback on it tonight?&quot; [she asks/you ask].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car</td>
<td>Imagine that [you are/a friend of yours is] the only one of your friends with a car. Also imagine that it's Friday night and [you/they] have plans to go out. [You've/they've] been invited to a party tonight by someone [you've/they've] had a crush on for a while. [You/they] can hardly contain your excitement. As [you're/they're] getting ready for tonight's party, [you get a phone call/you give them a phone call]. [It's one of your best friends who doesn't have a license/You're one of their best friends, and you don't have a license]. &quot;The arrangements I made to pick up my grandmother from the airport tonight just fell through. Would you pick her up? &quot; [they/you] ask.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Package</td>
<td>Imagine it's the beginning of the school year and [you've been/your friend has been] running around all day long. [You've/they've] had to wait in line all day at the registrar's office, the bookstore, and the ID office. Finally, all of [your/their] errands are finished, [you/they] return to [your/their] dorm room, where all [you/they] want to do is relax. [Then you get/then you give them] a phone call. [It's your friend who is/you are] away on vacation. &quot;The UPS office in Brooklyn is holding a package that was sent to me. Will you go pick it up for me?&quot; [they/you] ask.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Predicted compliance for "potential helper" versus "help-seeker" conditions by scenario

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cell Phone</td>
<td>Potential helper</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help-seeker</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finals</td>
<td>Potential helper</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help-seeker</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car</td>
<td>Potential helper</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help-seeker</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Package</td>
<td>Potential helper</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help-seeker</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All 4 Scenarios</td>
<td>Potential helper</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help-seeker</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 63
Table 3. Favor Scenarios for Study 5 in [indirect/direct] formats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cell Phone</td>
<td>Imagine the following case of a man stuck in Times Square. He is running late for a doctor’s appointment. He tries hailing a taxi, but he isn’t having much luck, so he decides to call his doctor to let her know he is running late. He looks over and sees that you are just about to put your cell phone away. [You can tell by his look that he’d like to use your phone to make a call./“Can I use your cell phone to make a call?,” he asks.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subway</td>
<td>Imagine that a man has just gotten on the subway and there are no seats available. The man is exhausted and really wants to sit down. He is standing right in front of you, and he is blatantly scanning the subway car in the hopes of locating a seat. [“Would you be willing to give up your seat?,” he asks you.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stroller</td>
<td>Imagine that a woman is standing at the top of the subway staircase with a baby stroller. She needs someone to help her carry the stroller down the stairs. She catches your eye as you are walking down the stairs, clearly hoping you will help her. [“Will you help me with this?” she asks.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Government</td>
<td>Imagine that a student is planning on running for student government. In order to run, he needs to obtain a number of signatures on a petition. All of his friends have already signed the petition, so now he needs to start asking people he doesn’t know. He is sitting in the student center and you are sitting reading right next to him. He strikes up a conversation. “I’m running for student government, and I need people to sign my petition,” he says [hoping you will get the hint./“Will you sign it?”]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Predicted versus actual compliance in Studies 1 through 3.
Figure 2. Estimated compliance by role and request directness in Study 5.