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Keywords

compliance, helping behavior, sequential requests, perspective taking

Disciplines

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Comments

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Once Bitten, Twice Shy: The Effect of a Past Refusal on Expectations of Future Compliance¹

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Abstract

Four studies examined help-seekers' beliefs about how past refusals affect future compliance. In Study 1, help-seekers were more likely than potential helpers to believe that a previous refusal would lead a potential helper to deny a subsequent request of similar size. Study 2 replicated this effect and found that help-seekers underestimated the actual compliance rate of potential helpers who had previously refused to help. Studies 3 and 4 explain this asymmetry. Whereas potential helpers' willingness to comply with a subsequent request stems from the discomfort of rejecting others not once, but twice, help-seekers rely on dispositional attributions of helpfulness to estimate the likelihood of hearing "yes" from someone who has previously told them "no."

Keywords: Compliance, helping behavior, sequential requests, perspective taking

Remember the last time you considered asking for help from someone who had once refused to help you. Did you think this person would be unlikely to say "yes" simply because he or she had previously said "no"? In the present research, we consider this dilemma that many help-seekers face—whether to request help from someone who has rejected them in the past. Specifically, we investigate help-seekers' beliefs about the impact of past refusals on future compliance, positing that this impact may be less negative than help-seekers fear.

Previous research on multiple requests has focused on requests of different magnitudes, and specifically on how sequential requests affect *actual* compliance. For example, research on the "door-in-the-face" technique (Cialdini et al., 1975) has found that requests for help are more likely to be granted when they are preceded by a refusal to a much larger request. These results, while intriguing, fail to consider *expectations* of compliance from the perspective of the person making the request (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). In the current research, we focus on help-seekers' expectations of compliance when making successive requests, particularly help requests of equivalent magnitude. We suspect that people often mistakenly assume that a potential helper who has rejected a previous request will be similarly unwilling to comply with a subsequent request.

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Research by Flynn and Lake (Bohns) (2008) suggests that potential helpers often agree to assist others because it is discomfiting to reject a request for help. Although Flynn and Lake's research focused on single requests, potential helpers likely feel this pressure to say "yes" regardless of whether they are responding to a single request or a subsequent one.

Nevertheless, this pressure to comply may be lost on help-seekers (see also Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001; Van Boven, Lowenstein, & Dunning, 2005), especially following a rejection. Failing to grasp the discomfort of saying "no" not just once, but twice, help-seekers may underestimate the likelihood that someone who has refused them in the past will agree to help them in the future.

If help-seekers fail to consider potential helpers' feelings of discomfort, what do they consider instead? Research on attributions suggests that help-seekers will explain a potential helper's initial refusal in stable, dispositional terms (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Harris, 1967). Such attributions should affect help-seekers' predictions of how likely a potential helper is to comply with a subsequent request. Put simply, for help-seekers it may be a case of "once unhelpful, always unhelpful," as they deem someone who has previously rejected their request unhelpful or ungenerous, and thus unlikely to comply with future requests.

The disparate perspectives of potential helpers and help-seekers suggest an intriguing possibility: Help-seekers may be too quick to assume that others are unwilling to provide help after a past refusal. They may do so because, smarting from the sting of a previous rejection, they fail to account for the discomfort of refusing to help a second time. Instead, help-seekers likely assume that past refusals signal an unhelpful disposition, and therefore portend future rejection.

Overview of Studies

We make two central predictions. First, we propose that help-seekers, relative to potential helpers, will overestimate the negative effect of a prior refusal on future compliance. That is, help-seekers who have previously been refused will erroneously expect that they are likely to be refused again when posing a similarly sized request to the same person. Second, we predict that help-seekers' and potential helpers' estimates of compliance with a subsequent request will be driven by different underlying psychological processes. While potential helpers' estimates of compliance will depend on how uncomfortable they feel saying "no" to a request, help-seekers' estimates will depend on how helpful they believe a potential helper to be. This difference will ultimately lead to divergent estimates of compliance following a rejection.

We tested these predictions in four studies. In Study 1, we assigned participants to the perspective of help-seeker or potential helper and asked how they thought a past refusal would affect future compliance. In Study 2, help-seekers in a live interaction made two sequential requests of a sample of strangers. Help-seekers' predictions of compliance following an initial rejection were compared with potential helpers' actual compliance following an initial rejection. In Study 3, we tested the first part of our proposed underlying mechanism—that potential helpers' estimates of compliance are driven by the discomfort of rejecting a second request; a discomfort that help-seekers fail to appreciate. In Study 4, we tested both parts of our proposed underlying mechanism—just as potential helpers are focused on a discomfort that help-seekers largely ignore, help-seekers are focused on dispositional attributions of helpfulness that potential helpers do not consider.

Study 1: The Anticipated Effect of a Past Refusal

Our initial study examined whether help-seekers are more likely than potential helpers to view a previous refusal as an indication that a subsequent request of similar size would also be refused. To test this prediction, we assigned participants to the perspective of help-seeker or potential helper, and asked them to indicate how a person's previous rejection of a request for help would affect his or her future compliance.

Method

For a chance to win a \$25 gift certificate, 178 adults (112 women) recruited from a nationwide pool completed an online questionnaire. Participants were assigned to one of the two conditions: help-seeker or potential helper. Depending on their perspective, participants imagined either posing a reasonable favor request that was rejected or rejecting a reasonable favor request that was posed. Participants then imagined asking [being asked by] the same person for a second favor of similar size (see Appendix for complete scenarios).

Using a scale from 1 (*more likely to say "yes"*) to 7 (*more likely to say "no"*), participants indicated what effect the previous refusal was likely to have on the potential helper's response to the new request, willingness to agree to the new request, and probability of saying "yes" to the new request. Participants also answered the question, "Chances are this person's [your] previous refusal will make him or her [you]" These four responses were combined into a single index of "effect of previous refusal" ($\alpha = .91$).

Results and Discussion

The "effect of previous refusal" was significantly higher in the help-seeker condition ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.39$) than in the potential helper condition ($M = 2.96, SD = 1.31$), $t(176) = 6.74, p < .001$. This result is consistent with our prediction that help-seekers would be more likely than potential helpers to believe a prior refusal indicated future refusals. However, participants in this study responded to a hypothetical scenario, which may not accurately reflect their reactions to a real help-seeking situation. To address this potential limitation, we designed Study 2 to replicate these findings in a live demonstration.

Study 2: Estimating Compliance in a Live Demonstration

In our second study, we conducted a live demonstration of equivalently sized, sequential requests for assistance. Help-seekers' predicted compliance following a refusal was compared to potential helpers' actual compliance following a refusal.

Method

Before conducting the live demonstration, we used a prestudy to identify two equivalently sized requests. In the prestudy, 82 adults (58 women) recruited from a nationwide pool rated 12 favors (e.g., watching someone's belongings for a few minutes; letting someone cut in front of you in line) on a scale from 1 (*very small favor*) to 7 (*extremely large*

favor). From these ratings, we rank ordered the favors and selected two—taking a one-page survey and dropping off a letter at a post office on one’s way—with similar means ($M_s = 3.00$ and $3.16, p = ns$).

Participants

Twenty-four Stanford University students (8 women) and 285 strangers participated in our main study. The students received \$20 for their participation. Five students withdrew from the study voluntarily. Our analyses focus on the 19 students (6 women) who completed the study.

Procedure

At the beginning of the experiment, participants were told: “In this study, you will be asking 15 strangers walking from Tressider [Student Union] toward White Plaza for two favors. First, you will ask them to fill out a one-page questionnaire. Then, regardless of whether they agree to fill out the questionnaire, you will ask them to mail a letter.” Given the location of the buildings, the post office was at most 50 yards out of the way for anyone walking from Tressider toward White Plaza.

Next, participants reviewed guidelines for their favor requests. They could approach only strangers. If a stranger agreed to fill out the questionnaire, participants were to wait until after the stranger had done so to reveal the letter. Participants were to adhere to the following scripts when making their requests: “Excuse me, would you be willing to fill out a one-page questionnaire?” and “Since you’re heading toward the post office, would you be willing to drop this in a mailbox?” For each of the 15 strangers they approached, participants were to record the response (*yes* or *no*) to each request.

After reviewing these details, participants were asked to estimate (a) the portion of the 15 strangers who would say “yes” to the first request, (b) of the strangers who said “no” to the first request, the portion who would say “yes” to the second request, and (c) of the strangers who said “yes” to the first request, the portion who would say “yes” to the second request.

Participants were then given a clipboard, questionnaires, 15 stamped and addressed envelopes, and a tally sheet to record compliance. Each participant was accompanied by an experimenter who observed inconspicuously from a distance. Only one participant at a time took part in the study. After approaching 15 strangers, participants were paid and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants overestimated the negative effect of a previous refusal on future compliance (Figure 1). Although participants predicted compliance with the first request fairly accurately (predicted: $M = 34\%$, $SD = 21\%$; actual: $M = 33\%$, $SD = 15\%$) they lowered their predictions significantly when the first request was refused, whereas the true compliance rate actually increased (predicted: $M = 18\%$, $SD = 22\%$; actual: $M = 43\%$, $SD = 19\%$). Both help-seekers’ downward shift in *predicted* compliance (from 34% to 18%) and potential helpers’ upward shift in *actual* compliance (from 33% to 43%) were significant, predicted: paired $t(18) = 2.18, p = .04$; actual: paired $t(18) = -2.24, p = .04$. Thus, help-seekers significantly underestimated the compliance of potential helpers who had refused the first request, paired $t(18) = -5.19$,

$p < .001$.

This live demonstration confirms and extends our initial findings from Study 1. In a real help-seeking episode, help-seekers overestimated the negative impact of a previous rejection on future compliance, and therefore underestimated the likelihood of receiving post-rejection help. In Study 3, we return to hypothetical scenarios to explore the psychological mechanism for this bias.

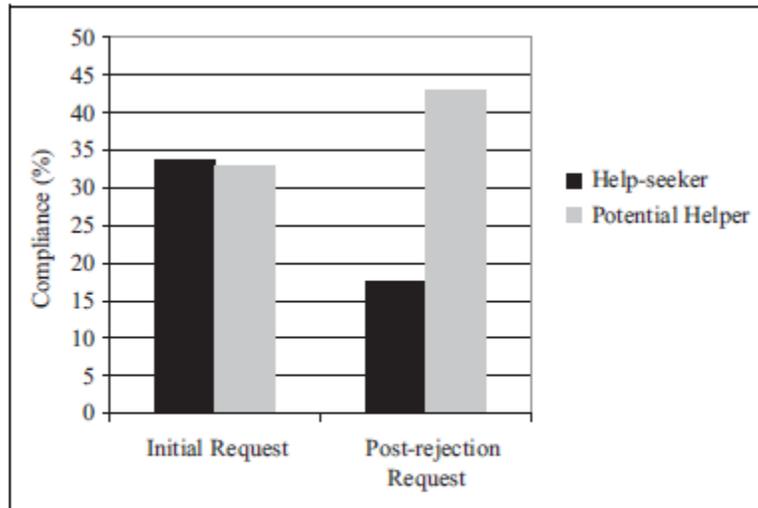


Figure 1. Help-seekers' expectations of compliance versus potential helpers' actual compliance for an initial request and a similarly sized request following a rejection (Study 2).

Study 3: Mediation by Discomfort

Study 3 attempted to identify one mediating psychological mechanism behind help-seekers' erroneous beliefs about the effect of a previous refusal on future compliance. Drawing on past research (Bohns et al., 2011; Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008), we predicted that the discomfort of saying "no" to a second request would be palpable for potential helpers even (or especially) if they had already rejected an initial request. However, we expected help-seekers would fail to appreciate this fact.

In testing this prediction, we also sought to clarify whether (a) help-seekers simply *underestimate* the discomfort of saying "no" compared to potential helpers, leading them to underestimate the likelihood of receiving help (a case of straightforward mediation) or (b) help-seekers *do not use* discomfort information in the same way potential helpers do when estimating compliance (a case of moderated mediation where perspective moderates the relationship between discomfort and compliance).

Method

For a chance to win a \$25 gift certificate, 101 adults (72 women) recruited from a nationwide pool completed an online questionnaire. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions in a 2 (Perspective: Help-seeker, Potential Helper) x 2 (Previous Response: Agreed, Rejected) design. Participants recalled a time when they had asked [been asked by] someone for a favor that was [they] then rejected/granted. Participants then imagined asking [being

asked by] the same person for a different favor of similar size.

Next, participants indicated the willingness, likelihood, and probability that the potential helper would agree to the new request on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). These responses were combined into a single expected compliance index ($\alpha = .98$). Participants also indicated how awkward, embarrassed, guilty, bad, comfortable (reverse scored), and anxious the potential helper would feel saying “no.” These responses were combined into a single index of discomfort saying “no” ($\alpha = .90$).

Results and Discussion

We predicted that help-seekers would view a past refusal as an indication that a subsequent request would likewise be refused. Conversely, we hypothesized that potential helpers would not exhibit this tendency because (a) they feel more discomfort than help-seekers anticipate at the prospect of saying “no” a second time and (b) they are more likely than help-seekers to consider discomfort when estimating compliance.

Expected Compliance

Consistent with previous research (Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008), there was a main effect of perspective on expected compliance. Overall, help-seekers rated expected compliance to be significantly lower ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.96$) than did potential helpers ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.53$), $F(1, 97) = 4.31$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. There was also a main effect of previous behavior. When potential helpers had complied with the previous request, they were rated more likely to comply with the subsequent request ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.08$) than when they had refused ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.79$), $F(1, 97) = 44.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$.

As predicted, there was a significant interaction of Perspective x Previous Response on expected compliance: $\beta = -1.86$, $SE = .55$, $t(95) = -3.4$, $p = .001$ (Figure 2a). When a potential helper had previously agreed to a request, help-seekers ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 0.99$) and potential helpers ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.20$) thought it equally likely that the potential helper would say “yes” to a subsequent request, $F(1, 45) = 0.09$, $p = .77$. However, as in Studies 1 and 2, following a refusal, help-seekers ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.52$) thought it much less likely than did potential helpers ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.6$) that the potential helper would say “yes” to a subsequent request, $F(1, 50) = 16.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$.

Discomfort Saying “No”

Help-seekers also underestimated the overall discomfort of saying “no” ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.69$), compared with potential helpers ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.33$), $F(1, 95) = 4.32$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Furthermore, when potential helpers had complied with a previous request, their discomfort saying “no” to a subsequent request was estimated to be higher ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.38$) than when they had refused ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.38$), $F(1, 95) = 26.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$. There was a significant interaction of Perspective x Previous Response on discomfort: $\beta = -1.56$, $SE = .52$, $t(93) = -2.98$, $p = .004$. Planned contrasts revealed no difference by perspective when potential helpers had said “yes” to a previous request (potential helpers: $M = 4.89$; help-seekers: $M = 4.96$), $F(1, 46) = 0.03$, $p = .87$. However, when potential helpers had

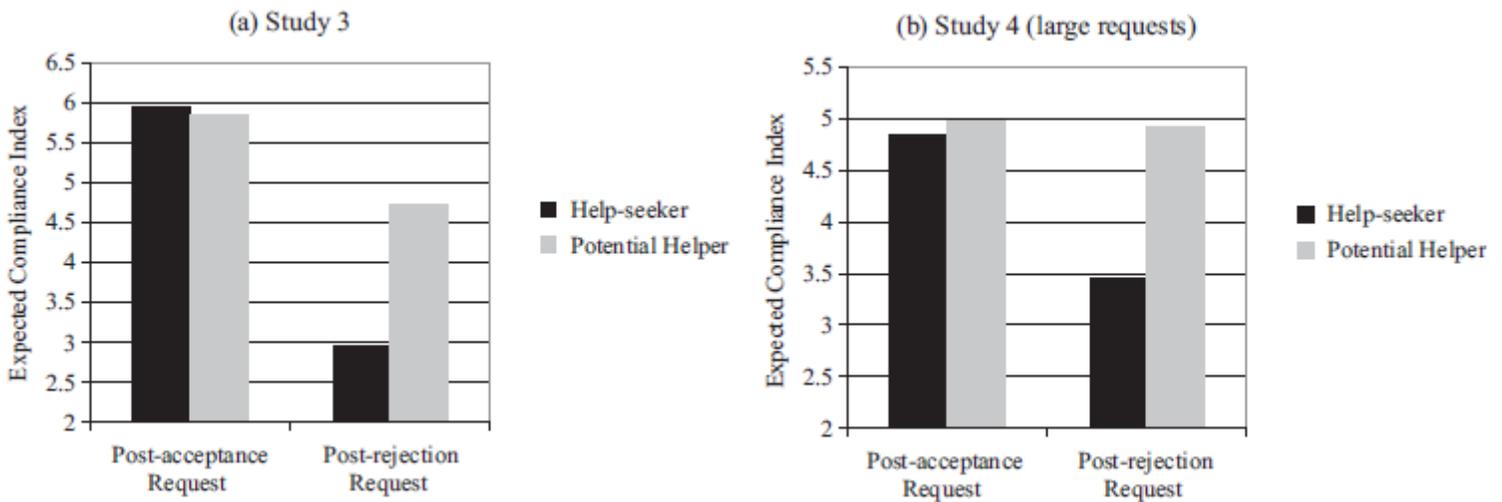


Figure 2. Effect of Perspective \times Previous Response on expected compliance. (a) Study 3. (b) Study 4 (large requests).

said “no” to a previous request, potential helpers continued to find the prospect of saying “no” to a subsequent request uncomfortable ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.15$), while help-seekers’ discomfort estimates ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.19$) decreased to levels significantly lower than potential helpers’, $F(1, 47) = 19.90, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$.

Mediation

To examine whether discomfort could explain help-seekers’ underestimation of compliance following rejection, we conducted a mediation analysis for participants in the previous refusal condition using 1,000 bootstrap resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The bias corrected confidence interval (CI) around the indirect effect coefficient (-0.65) did not include 0 (95% CI [$-1.42, -0.02$]), suggesting that discomfort mediates the effect of perspective on expected compliance following a prior refusal.

We then tested for moderated mediation to see whether this indirect effect was conditional on perspective. Using 1,000 bootstrap resamples (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007), the CI around the conditional indirect effect coefficient (-1.2) for potential helpers did not include 0 (95% CI [$-2.2, -0.35$]). However, the CI for help-seekers did include 0 (95% CI [$-0.87, 1.07$]). These findings suggest that the effect of discomfort on expected compliance is moderated by perspective; there was a significant effect for potential helpers, but not for help-seekers.

Discussion

A previous refusal seems to cause help-seekers’ and potential helpers’ estimates of future compliance to differ. Help-seekers thought it much more likely that they would be refused again than did potential helpers. Notably, help-seekers and potential helpers agreed on the likelihood of compliance after an initial request had been granted.

We found evidence of a mechanism for this post-rejection asymmetry. Help-seekers seem to (a) anticipate less discomfort than do potential helpers when considering how difficult it would be to say “no” a second time and (b) pay little attention to potential helpers’ discomfort when estimating likelihood of compliance. Potential helpers, on the other

hand, are highly attuned to their discomfort when estimating compliance.

Study 4: Mediation by Discomfort and Dispositional Attribution

In Study 3, we found evidence that help-seekers ignore potential helpers' discomfort saying "no" to two sequential requests. In Study 4, we test whether help-seekers instead focus on dispositional attributions of helpfulness when estimating compliance after a rejection. Also, while the requests in our previous studies were small or unspecified, Study 4 tested our predictions with more significant requests.

Method

To identify two equivalently sized requests of significant magnitude, we conducted another prestudy. Fifty-three adults (28 women) rated the magnitude of 15 different favors (e.g., house sitting; helping to assemble furniture) on a scale from 1 (*very small favor*) to 7 (*extremely large favor*). From these ratings, we selected two requests—helping someone move and having someone stay over for a weekend—with similar means ($M_s = 5.55$ and 5.65 , $p = ns$).

For our main study, 116 adults (69 women) recruited from a nationwide pool were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions in a 2 (Perspective: Help-seeker, Potential Helper) x 2 (Previous Response: Agreed, Rejected) design. Participants imagined asking someone [being asked] to stay over for the weekend, and having that request rejected [rejecting that request] or having that request accepted [accepting that request]. Participants then imagined asking [being asked by] the same person to spend a day helping them move.

Participants answered the same questions as in Study 3 about expected compliance and discomfort saying "no"; their responses were combined into the same indices (expected compliance $\alpha = .92$, discomfort $\alpha = .89$). Additionally, participants were asked how generally helpful they considered the other person [themselves] to be and to what extent they thought the other person [they] had a generous and giving personality. These responses were combined into a single index of the potential helper's dispositional helpfulness ($\alpha = .96$).

Results and Discussion

As in our previous studies, we predicted that previously-rejected help-seekers would underestimate the likelihood of future compliance compared with potential helpers. As in Study 3, we hypothesized that potential helpers would be more attuned than help-seekers to the discomfort of saying "no" a second time. In this study, we also hypothesized that previously-rejected help-seekers' estimates of compliance would be driven by their beliefs about potential helpers' dispositional helpfulness, which potential helpers would be unlikely to consider.

Expected Compliance

Once again, there were main effects of both perspective and previous behavior on expected compliance, perspective: help-seekers ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.38$), potential helpers ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.61$), $F(1, 112) = 10.25$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$; previous behavior: reject ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.54$), accept ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.50$), $F(1, 112) = 6.87$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. We also replicated a significant interaction of Perspective x Previous Response on expected compliance: $\beta = -1.33$, $SE = .54$, $t(110) = -2.46$,

$p = .02$ (Figure 2b). Once again, there were no differences when a potential helper had said “yes” to a previous request (help-seekers [$M = 4.85, SD = 1.09$], potential helpers [$M = 4.98, SD = 1.81$]), $F(1,48) = 0.09, p = .77$. However, following a refusal, participants in the help-seeker condition estimated compliance with a subsequent request to be much lower ($M = 3.46, SD = 1.27$) than did participants in the potential helper condition ($M = 4.92, SD = 1.46$), $F(1, 62) = 18.25, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$.

Discomfort Saying “No” and Dispositional Attributions

Discomfort. A similar pattern emerged for our discomfort index, though this time the difference was only marginally significant, perhaps reflecting that potential helpers find it easier to say “no” to large requests. Help-seekers underestimated the discomfort of saying “no” to large requests ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.13$) compared to potential helpers ($M = 4.39, SD = 1.51$), $F(1, 110) = 3.4, p = .07, \eta_p^2 = .03$. There was also a main effect of previous behavior, though it was in the opposite direction of Study 3. When potential helpers were said to have complied previously with a request, the discomfort of saying “no” was estimated to be lower ($M = 3.88, SD = 1.39$) than when they had refused ($M = 4.37, SD = 1.29$), $F(1, 110) = 3.8, p = .05, \eta_p^2 = .03$.

There was a marginally significant interaction of Perspective x Response to Previous Request on discomfort: $\beta = -.92, SE = .50, t(108) = -1.85, p = .07$. As in Study 3, when a previous request had been granted, both helpers ($M = 3.86$) and help-seekers ($M = 3.9$) thought it equally uncomfortable to say “no” to a subsequent request, $F(1, 46) = 0.01, p = .92$. However, when a previous request had been refused, potential helpers found the prospect of saying “no” to a subsequent request to be even more uncomfortable ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.30$), while help-seekers’ estimates of discomfort remained constant ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.14$). This resulted in a significant difference, $F(1, 62) = 8.29, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .11$.

Disposition. Not surprisingly, potential helpers’ own ratings of dispositional helpfulness ($M = 5.92, SD = 0.90$) were significantly higher than help-seekers’ ratings ($M = 4.84, SD = 1.70$), $F(1, 114) = 18.33, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12$. There was also a main effect of previous behavior. When potential helpers had agreed to the previous request, they were rated as significantly more helpful ($M = 5.98, SD = 0.78$) than when they had rejected the previous request ($M = 4.94, SD = 1.67$), $F(1, 114) = 16.7, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$.

As predicted, there was a significant interaction of Perspective x Previous Response on dispositional attribution: $\beta = -1.43, SE = .45, t(112) = -3.14, p = .002$. There were no differences following request agreement (potential helpers [$M = 6.1, SD = 0.74$]; help-seekers: [$M = 5.9, SD = 0.81$]), $F(1, 48) = 1.22, p = .28$. However, when potential helpers had said “no” to a previous request, they continued to consider themselves relatively helpful ($M = 5.77, SD = 0.99$), while help-seekers’ estimates of potential helpers’ dispositional helpfulness decreased to significantly lower levels ($M = 4.1, SD = 1.8$), $F(1, 64) = 21.74, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .2$.

Mediation

To examine whether participants’ discomfort or dispositional attribution ratings could explain the discrepancy in estimated compliance after a refusal, we again conducted a simple bootstrapping mediation analysis using 1,000 bootstrap resamples. Neither the bias corrected CI around the indirect effect coefficient through discomfort (indirect

effect = $-.41$, 95% CI [-0.93 , -0.12]) nor dispositional attribution (indirect effect = $-.82$, 95% CI [-1.16 , -0.24]) contained 0. When we tested the two mediators simultaneously as parallel mediators, they both remained significant (discomfort: indirect effect = $-.34$, 95% CI [-0.78 , -0.08]; attribution: indirect effect = $-.45$, 95% CI [-0.90 , -0.10]).

To test whether the effects of discomfort and dispositional helpfulness on expected compliance were conditional on perspective, we again conducted a moderated mediation analysis using 1,000 bootstrap resamples. As in Study 3, the CI around the conditional indirect effect through discomfort (-0.56) for potential helpers did not include 0 (95% CI [-1.15 , -0.19]), while the CI for help-seekers did include 0 (95% CI [-0.81 , 0.07]). Once again, the effect of discomfort on expected compliance was moderated by perspective: There was a significant effect for potential helpers, but not for help-seekers.

To test whether the effect of dispositional helpfulness on expected compliance was also conditional on perspective, we ran the same analyses with dispositional helpfulness as the mediator variable. This time, the mediating effect was driven by help-seekers. In the case of dispositional attribution, the CI around the conditional indirect effect coefficient for potential helpers contained 0 (95% CI [-1.2 , 0.99]), whereas the CI for help-seekers did not (indirect effect = $-.77$, 95% CI [-1.28 , -0.38]).

Discussion

When a potential helper had previously refused a large request, we found a significant difference between help-seekers' and potential helpers' estimates of compliance with a subsequent request of equivalent size. Help-seekers thought it more likely that they would be refused again than did potential helpers. Both discomfort and attribution mediated the relationship between perspective and expected compliance following a rejection. However, these mediation effects were moderated by perspective. While potential helpers' estimates of compliance following a refusal were driven by their discomfort saying "no," help-seekers' estimates of compliance were driven by their estimates of dispositional helpfulness following a rejection.

General Discussion

In four studies, help-seekers believed prior refusals to be more foretelling of future rejection than did potential helpers. In contrast to help-seekers' expectations, potential helpers may actually be *more* likely to agree to a subsequent request after a previous refusal. At the root of this disconnect seems to be a fundamental difference in the way that help-seekers and potential helpers interpret rejection. For potential helpers, the discomfort of saying "no" to a second request is palpable even if (or especially because) they have previously rejected someone. However, rejected help-seekers ignore this discomfort, instead believing that the person who rejected them once must be an unhelpful person, unlikely to say "yes" in the future.

These findings underscore the importance of studying multiple requests. Although Flynn and Lake (Bohns) (2008) previously examined expected compliance from the help-seeker's perspective, they considered only single requests. Given how often individuals must decide whether to seek help from those whose help they have sought before, it is important to understand how help-seekers interpret previous responses and how accurate their interpretations are. The current

research suggests that help-seekers may actually do reasonably well predicting compliance after a previous request has been granted. On the other hand, they struggle to understand the implications of a previous rejection.

Future research might explore whether this underestimation effect applies to sequential request compliance tactics, such as the classic “door-in-the-face” technique (Cialdini et al., 1975). Are help-seekers who follow a rejected large request with a much smaller one surprised by how frequently the target is willing to comply with the second request? Future research should also explore how estimation effects in sequential requests depend on the relationship between help-seeker and potential helper. In our studies, participants interacted with or imagined interacting with everyone from strangers in a shared university community (Study 2) to a “very close friend” and “brother” (Study 3). More work is required to disentangle the effects of relationship closeness on the accuracy of estimated request compliance.

Other future research could build on our proposed mechanisms to explore when help-seekers’ tendency to underestimate compliance may be attenuated. For example, repeatedly asking someone for virtually the same thing may appear rude, making refusal less uncomfortable (Cialdini et al., 1975). There may also be cases in which not allowing sufficient time to pass between requests is annoying, making rejection easier. How do domain and delay affect potential helpers’ discomfort and, consequently, likelihood of compliance? It would also be important to know when help-seekers may refrain from making negative attributions after a rejection. Do help-seekers predict future compliance more accurately when potential helpers express regret, give reasons for their rejection, or make clear their desire to help another time? Finally, subsequent work could investigate our proposed mechanisms by manipulating them experimentally. This would better test causality and address concerns of omitted variable bias that accompany nonexperimental mediation analysis (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010).

For many of us, the thought of asking for help is fraught with unease. We avoid imposing on others, in part, because we worry that our requests for help will not be met, and being rejected can feel embarrassing. We may be particularly reluctant to approach someone who has recently refused to help us because we assume that person has already indicated an unwillingness to provide help. The current data, however, suggest that our reluctance to ask for help from those who have said “no” to us before may often be unfounded.

The potential ramifications of these results are significant. Everyone will reject our requests at some point, and if we believe that every person who has rejected us in the past is unwilling to help us in the future, we will quickly run out of people we feel we can count on for help. In short, if help-seekers incorrectly assume that their requests for help will go unmet, they may fail to initiate help requests that would provide them with much needed support.

Appendix

Study 1 Scenario

Not long ago, you asked someone [someone asked you] for a reasonable favor and he or she [you] said no. Think about what it would be like to ask [be asked] for this favor and to be rejected [then reject the request]. What would you think? How would you feel? Now, imagine you asked this same person [this same person asked you] for a different favor of similar size. Taking into account this person’s [your] previous refusal, please answer the following questions.

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Note

1. The accuracy of help-seekers' predictions for the initial request seems to contradict Flynn and Lake (Bohns) (2008), in which help-seekers underestimated compliance with a single request. However, one difference between the two studies is that in the present article, help-seekers estimated compliance with the initial request knowing there would be a subsequent request. Knowing that a second request is looming may make the first of the two requests seem less burdensome than a single request.

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