The effects of norms and self-monitoring on helping behavior

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ABSTRACT

A scenario-based experiment was used to test five hypotheses concerning group and individual predictors of individual intentions to perform helping behavior in a group. The results of an ANCOVA indicated that descriptive helping norms, personal helping norms, and self-monitoring perceptions were positively associated with individual intentions to perform helping behavior. The findings underscore the value of considering the group context in which helping behavior operates. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: norms, helping, self-monitoring, scenario, organizational behavior

INTRODUCTION

The subject of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) in the workplace has received increasing amounts of attention in recent years. OCB has been defined as those behaviors that enhance and maintain the social and psychological environment that supports task performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Organ, 1997). Whereas early OCB research focused on the individual level of analysis, research on OCB at the group level of analysis is beginning to accumulate (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). The most commonly examined dimension of OCB in this research is helping behavior (Podsakoff et al., 2000). The purpose of the current study is to examine the influence of a group-level construct, descriptive group norms, and two individual-level constructs, personal helping norms and self-monitoring perceptions, on individual intentions to perform helping behavior.

Descriptive Helping Norms and Individual Helping Behavior

Ehrhart and Naumann (2004) expanded the conceptualization of OCB at the group level by proposing a theoretical framework that described how group norms might affect individual helping behavior. One type of group norms, descriptive norms, offers insight into typical behavior. Descriptive norms show what most people do in a specific situation (Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993). It has been suggested that individuals use descriptive norms to ascertain appropriate behavior by using the heuristic "If most people are doing this it must be the appropriate thing to do" (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991). This "social proof" heuristic saves individuals time and energy and identifies a behavior with a high probability of being appropriate (Cialdini & Trost, 1998).

Bommer, Miles, and Grover (2003) identified two theories to explain the mechanism through which group norms influence individuals' decision to exhibit helping behavior: social learning theory and social information-processing theory. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) asserts that people learn acceptable behavior by observing others' behavior. Social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) proposes that people seek information and social cues in their social context to help them know which behavior is appropriate. Thus, both theories imply that if group members observe others performing helping behaviors they are likely to view such behaviors as typical and appropriate and should, in turn, exhibit such behaviors. Although they did not explicitly examine group norms, Bommer et al. (2003) found that the mean level of OCB for other members of one's work group explained significant variance in individual levels of OCB.

There is some empirical evidence from which to examine how descriptive norms affect cooperative behavior. In a lab study involving exchanging information through a shared database, Cress and Kimmerle (2007) found that individuals used information about others' behavior to adjust their own behavior and conform to the behavior of their group members. Specifically they found that individuals who were exposed to a positive descriptive norm of highly cooperative group members demonstrated higher levels of their own cooperative behavior than those exposed to a negative descriptive norm.

> *Hypothesis 1*: Positive descriptive helping norms will be associated with individual intentions to perform helping behavior to a greater extent than negative descriptive helping norms.

Self-Monitoring

Although individual group members will generally be influenced by the descriptive helping norms in their groups, some group members should be more influenced by these group norms than others. In a conceptual article, Ehrhart and Naumann (2004) proposed that individuals high in self-monitoring should be more influenced by descriptive helping norms than individuals low in self-monitoring. Individuals high in self-monitoring pay more attention to their social context and are more responsive to social cues of situational appropriateness. They attend closely to the behavior of others in their immediate environment and are sensitive to a group's behavioral norms. They are more aware of the thoughts and feelings of their fellow group members than low self-monitors (O'Cass, 2000; Flynn et al., 2006). One would expect that individuals sensitive to social cues would be more likely to conform their behavior to norms. Consistent with this idea, some researchers have found that individuals high in self-awareness are more likely to be influenced by social norms (Krebs & Miller, 1985).

Although the idea that high self-monitors would be more influenced by helping norms in the performance of individual helping behaviors has not been investigated empirically, there is some evidence of a relationship between self-monitoring and helping behavior independent of group norms. Flynn et al. (2006) found that high self monitors gained status as perceived by their peers by maintaining a generous reputation. One dimension of the generous reputation was assessed by an item completed by peers concerning whether the individual helped others. Whereas the Flynn et al. (2006) study detected a link between self-monitoring and impressions of generosity, it did not examine actual helping behavior. There is some initial empirical evidence of a relationship between self-monitoring and helping behaviors. Toegel, Anand, and Kilduff (2007) found individuals who provided higher levels of emotional help to others in the workplace tended to have a combination of managerial responsibility and a high self monitoring or a high positive affectivity disposition.

In a related longitudinal study, Blakely, Andrews, and Fuller (2003) found that individuals high in self-monitoring were more likely to perform other-directed OCBs. The authors posited that such individuals tend to be more sensitive to others' need for help, one of the dimensions of OCB, and may be better at changing their behavior to respond to the need for help. It also may be that individuals high in self-monitoring have a higher level of interpersonal and communication skills and more easily exhibit OCBs. The authors suggested that future research should examine the effect of group norms on the relationship between self-monitoring and OCBs.

> *Hypothesis 2:* Individuals' self-monitoring will be positively associated with individual intentions to perform helping behavior.
> *Hypothesis 3:* The relationship between descriptive helping norms and individual intentions to perform helping behavior will be moderated by the individual's self-monitoring, such that the relationship between norms and individual helping behavior will be stronger for those higher in self-monitoring.

Personal Helping Norms

Another variable expected to influence the relationship between descriptive helping norms and individual helping behavior is an individual's level of personal helping norms. Individuals vary in the degree to which they are affected by internal beliefs or norms as opposed to situational circumstances (Gorsuch & Ortberg, 1983; Snyder, 1974). Unlike descriptive group norms, which operate externally, personal norms are self-based guidelines for behavior originating from individuals' internalized values (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Schwartz, 1977). For example, an individual who believes it is important to help others would be expected to exhibit behavior reflecting a personal norm to act in an altruistic manner. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) explained this inclination of individuals to act in ways that are in agreement with their values as being related to maintaining one's self-esteem. It follows that when descriptive group norms are consistent with personal norms, conforming to these norms should increase self-esteem perceptions (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Thus, the relationship between descriptive helping norms and individual helping behavior should be stronger when an individual's personal helping norms are high.

> *Hypothesis 4:* Individuals' personal helping norms will be positively associated with individual intentions to perform helping behavior.
> *Hypothesis 5:* The relationship between descriptive helping norms and individual intentions to perform helping behavior will be moderated by the individual's personal helping norms, such that the relationship between descriptive helping norms and individual helping behavior will be stronger for those having stronger personal helping norms.

METHOD

Study Design

To test the hypotheses, a scenario-based design was employed. This type of experiment is especially suitable for the present study because the descriptive group helping norm variable is likely to be familiar and highly involving to the participants who regularly partake in class group projects. In addition, previous helping norms researchers (e.g., Ehrhart & Naumann, 2004) have called for using scenario-based designs to supplement existing survey research on helping norms. The experiment manipulated one independent variable: descriptive group helping norms (positive versus negative). The other independent variables, self-monitoring and personal helping norms, were measured through surveys given to participants. The dependent variable was individual helping behavior intentions.

Sample

One hundred sixty-six undergraduate junior business students at a small private university in the Western United States participated in the scenario experiment. They participated in the study voluntarily and without remuneration. Fifty-one percent were female; the average age was 21. Forty-two percent were white. There were no statistically significant differences in any of the variables across demographic groups.

Measures

Experimental manipulation: descriptive group helping norms.

All participants read the following statement before being randomly assigned to read a positive or negative descriptive group helping norm scenario: "The scenario depicts a true work situation within an organization. Please read the description carefully and place yourself in the situation and imagine what this would be like for you." Participants in the positive descriptive group helping norm scenario then read the following:

After graduation you accept an entry-level position with a medium-sized firm. You have noticed that the members of your work group frequently help each other out. When one group member, Alex, had been absent several group members offered to help him with his heavy workload when he returned. The two newest group members, Jane and Scott, received help from the rest of the group in learning how things work in the group and in managing difficult projects.

Participants in the negative descriptive group helping norm scenario read this variation of the same scenario:

After graduation you accept an entry-level position with a medium-sized firm. You have noticed that your fellow group members do not help each other out. When one group member, Alex, had been absent no one offered to help him with his heavy workload when he returned. Even the two newest group members, Jane and Scott, did not receive any help in learning how things work in the group and have experienced difficulty with projects that could have benefitted from the help of the more experienced group members.

Self-monitoring.

Twelve items (α = .80) from Lennox and Wolfe's (1984) scale were used to assess individuals' self-monitoring. A sample item includes the following: "I have found that I can adjust my behavior to meet the requirements of any situation in which I find myself." Responses were on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Personal helping norms.

Seven items (α = .70) were developed to assess personal helping norms. Participants were asked to think about groups they have participated in either at school or work. A sample item includes the following: "It is personally important for me to help out my fellow group members." Responses were on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Individual helping behavior intentions.

All participants read the following follow-up scenario adapted from one used in Andersson and Bateman's (1997) study and responded using a five-point scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely):

A project you have been working on has just been completed. You will be somewhat idle in the office until your new assignment begins in 3 days, and you are secretly looking forward to some time to catch up on bills and personal business that you have been neglecting. While in the coffee room you overhear several of your fellow group members complaining about an extensive proposal that must be completed by the end of the week. They anticipate working until midnight for the next three nights. Please circle

the number corresponding to how likely would you be to volunteer your assistance in the preparation of the proposal.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

Participants were asked whether the scenario they read described a high or low level of helping behaviors in the group. All participants answered this question correctly.

Hypothesis Tests

Descriptive statistics and correlations appear in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Self-Monitoring	3.71	.50	*		
2. Personal Helping Norms	3.64	.53	.224**	*	
3. Helping Behavior Intentions	3.61	.90	.165*	.219**	*

 *p < .05
**p < .01
n= 163 – 166

First, a univariate ANOVA was conducted that specified interactions between the factor (descriptive group helping norms) and covariates (self-monitoring and personal helping norms) so that the homogeneity of the covariate parameter estimates across levels of the factor could be tested.   The interactions involved hypotheses 3 and 5. Hypothesis 3, which predicted that the relationship between descriptive helping norms and individual intentions to perform helping behavior will be moderated by the individual's self-monitoring, such that the relationship between norms and individual helping behavior will be stronger for those higher in self-monitoring, was not supported, although it was marginally significant, $F(1,162) = 2.75$, $p < .10$. Hypothesis 5, which predicted that the relationship between descriptive helping norms and individual intentions to perform helping behavior will be moderated by the individual's personal helping norms, was not supported, $F(1,162) = .46$, $p = .50$.

Since the interaction terms were not significant, indicating the covariate parameter estimates are homogenous, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted. An assumption of ANCOVA is that there are no significant interactions between the covariates and factor.   Hypothesis 1, which predicted that positive descriptive helping norms will be associated with individual intentions to perform helping behavior to a greater extent than negative descriptive norms, was supported, $F(1,162) = 9.14$, $p < .01$). Means and standard deviations of

helping behavior intentions as a function of descriptive group helping norms appear in Table 2. Hypothesis 2, which predicted that individuals' self-monitoring will be positively associated with individual intentions to perform helping behavior, was supported, $F(1,162) = 4.79$, ($p < .05$). Hypothesis 4, which predicted that individuals' personal helping norms will be positively associated with individuals' intentions to perform helping behavior, was supported, $F(1,162) = 6.24$, ($p < .05$).

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Helping Behavior Intentions as a Function of Descriptive Group Helping Norms

Descriptive Group Helping Norms	Mean	SD	N
Negative Scenario	3.44	.94	80
Positive Scenario	3.77	.83	83
Total	3.61	.90	163

DISCUSSION

The results of the current study showed that individuals make a decision to help a member of their group for different reasons. These findings have implications for the growing body of research examining helping behavior as a group-level phenomenon. The study responds to calls for more research on how the group context in which helping behaviors are performed affects individual's decision to perform these behaviors:

> Organizational spontaneity, by definition, occurs in organizations and the nature of those organizations, the groups nested in them, and the people nested in the groups may serve to constrain or encourage organizational members to go above and beyond the call of duty (George & Jones, 1997, p. 168).

Although the two proposed interactions were not statistically significant, several interesting main effects were found. First, positive descriptive helping norms were associated with individual intentions to perform helping behavior to a greater extent than negative descriptive helping norms. This finding is consistent with both social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) and social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) which would suggest that if group members observe others performing helping behaviors they are likely to view such behaviors as typical and appropriate and should, in turn, exhibit such behaviors.

Second, individuals' levels of self-monitoring and personal helping norms were positively associated with intentions to perform helping behavior. High self-monitors may be more sensitive to others' need for help since they pay more attention to their social context. It is interesting to note that the fact that self-monitoring was significantly associated with individuals' intentions to help may not demonstrate an altruistic motive. Flynn et al. (2006) suggested that high self-monitors may perform more helping behaviors because they expect something in return (e.g., a position of higher status among their group members). Conversely, those individuals with strong positive personal helping norms may exhibit high levels of helping behavior in order to maintain their self-esteem (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

The study also has implications for practice. Given their positive relationship with organizational performance (e.g., Ehrhart, Bliese, & Thomas, 2006), helping behaviors are a variable of interest to managers. The results of the current study indicate that, in addition to

individual-level variables such as self-monitoring and personal norms, managers should recognize that the norms established within groups are associated with individuals' intentions to perform helping behavior. New employees may be more likely to exhibit helping behaviors themselves if they are socialized into a group that already exhibits a high level of helping behaviors.

Limitations

The present study is not without limitations. First, the study measured intentions to help rather than actual helping behavior. In addition, a scenario research design was used to manipulate descriptive helping norms. Such designs sacrifice external validity for internal validity. Because scenario designs can only be used to tap perceptions of situations influenced by limited factors, it is possible that additional dynamics encountered in organizational contexts might qualify the results. It remains an important task for future research to demonstrate the degree to which the present findings are generalizable to organizational contexts.

Despite these caveats, several aspects of the current study allow more confidence to be placed in the internal validity of the findings. First, the current design allowed tight controls over the independent variables and manipulation checks. Second, it has been argued that in certain instances, scenario studies are most appropriate precisely because of their hypothetical nature. For example, scenario studies are thought to be most fitting for topics related to subjective reactions (Lind & Tyler, 1988). In the current study care was taken to increase the realism of the scenarios used. It has been suggested that scenario researchers should (1) ask participants to think about scenarios from their own perspective rather than from the perspective of a fictitious other and (2) use scenarios that are familiar to participants (Greenberg & Eskew, 1993). The present study involved asking participants to place themselves in the situation and imagine what this would be like for them. Participants were told to indicate how they would respond, as opposed to how they wish they would respond. In addition, participants were familiar with working in groups on class projects. Finally, some research has found that when the same phenomenon has been analyzed by multiple designs (e.g., correlational; scenario), stronger effects occur most often in correlational studies (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Thus, the results of the present study may be viewed as conservative estimates of the true relationships explored. Clearly, the findings of scenario studies are most meaningful when they are confirmed with subsequent studies employing other research methods.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the current study point to the importance of group descriptive helping norms, personal helping norms, and self-monitoring in predicting whether individuals will choose to help a member of their group. The fact that descriptive helping norms affected individuals' intentions to perform helping behaviors independent of the individual difference variables (personal helping norms and self-monitoring) highlights the value of considering the context in which helping behaviors occur. Helping behavior readily lends itself to a group context in that it pertains to a social phenomenon involving more than one person. Researchers have argued that to best understand organizational behavior it is important to examine the context in which the behavior occurs (Johns, 2006). The current study's results suggest that

group norms serve to constrain or encourage group members to go the extra mile by helping out their group members.

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