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The Effects of Gender and Type of Helping on
Perceptions of Helping Behavior.

Abstract

Many researchers have studied the ways which men and women differ in giving and receiving help (e.g., Eagly & Crowley, 1986). Although researchers have looked at many aspects of helping, little has been done to examine perceptions of the helper and helpee in a helping situation. The current study investigated perceptions of masculinity and femininity of helpers and helpees using characters presented in short stories involving a non-emergency, everyday helping situations (McGuire, 1994). The effect of type of helping, participant empathy level, and the gender of the helper/helpee dyad was examined. Results suggested that type of helping and gender dyad have a significant impact on perceptions of helping. Furthermore, future research into the perceptions of helpees is warranted.

Introduction

The ways men and women differ in giving and receiving help has been studied by many researchers. In their meta-analysis of the gender literature, Eagly and Crowley (1986) reported that women are expected to put the needs of others first and are generally more empathetic than men. The type of help women typically give involves caring for the personal and emotional needs of others, delivering routine forms of personal service, and generally facilitating the progress of others toward their goals. The male gender role, however, encourages other forms of helping, such as heroic behavior and chivalry. Heroic acts typically occur only in extreme and unusual circumstances. Because heroic acts happen less often and are not characteristic of the average helping experiences of people, this study examines non-emergency, everyday helping situations.

McGuire (1994) examined everyday helping behaviors and compiled a list of 72 helping behaviors that participants had actually experienced, then categorized them into casual helping, substantial personal helping, emotional helping, and emergency helping. This study focuses on two of these variables, casual and emotional helping. Casual helping is defined as helping that has a low cost to the helper, does not require a close bond between helper and helpee, and if withheld would not cause harm to the helpee. Emotional helping is defined as helping that involves a close bond between helper and helpee and provides intangible emotional benefits to the helper and helpee.

Batson and Shaw (1991) suggested that empathy evokes an altruistic motivation for helping. They note that a prerequisite for feeling empathy is perspective taking, or adopting the needy person's point of view. Davis (1980) created a scale to measure empathy. This scale will be used to determine the empathy score of participants and the effect it has on their beliefs about helping behavior.

Although researchers have looked at many aspects of helping, little has been done to examine perceptions of helping behavior from third parties. Barnett, et al (2000) studied perceptions of self-oriented and other-oriented everyday helpers. The current study continues this line of research and examines the perceptions of helping behavior from a gender perspective, specifically the perceptions of the masculinity and femininity of helpers. In addition, participants will be asked their perceptions of helpees. The effect of type of helping, emotional and casual, and its relationship to gender will also be examined.

Hypothesis

Consistent with previous research, we hypothesized that emotional helping will be rated as more feminine than casual helping for helpers and helpees. We also hypothesized that women will be rated as feminine when helping both men and women. Men who help women will be rated as masculine, while men who help men will be rated as more feminine.

Method

Participants

Fifty-five undergraduate students (35 women and 20 men) from a small, private university in the Midwest volunteered to participate. The mean age was 19.7 years. Participants were enrolled in one of 10 courses in several different areas of study. Twenty-four students were in their first or second year of college, while 31 were in their third year or later

Procedures

Surveys were distributed in blank envelopes to students during class time. Participants either completed the survey in class or took the surveys home and returned them at the next class meeting. The survey consists of two sections. In the first section, participants completed an Interpersonal Reactivity Index that measured empathy (Davis, 1980). In the second section, participants read a series of 8 short stories in which one person, either male or female, helped another male or female. The type of help given was either causal or emotional. The situations in the stories were non-emergency, everyday situations where strangers helped another stranger without being asked. For example, in one scenario a woman holds the door open in a shopping mall for a man with several packages. After reading each story, participants were instructed to complete the short version of the Bem Sex–Role Inventory (BSRI) for the helper and the helpee in each story.

Results

A 4 (gender dyad) X 2 (type of helping) X 2 (participant gender) repeated measures ANOVA was performed on participants' gender ascriptions of helpers and helpees. Gender role ascriptions were obtained using the t-score scale based on national standard rates of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory. This scale is a gender continuum, with scores over 50 representing femininity and below 50 representing masculinity.

Helper

The main effect of gender dyad was significant, $F(3,159) = 5.07, p < .01$. The analysis revealed that men helping women were rated as most feminine ($M = 54.65$) whereas men helping men were perceived as less feminine ($M = 51.23$). Women helpers were rated as feminine, regardless of the gender of the helpee ($M = 53.30$ when helping men and $M = 53.52$ when helping women).

The main effect of type of helping reached significance, $F(1,53) = 32.28, p < .001$. Emotional helpers were rated as more feminine than casual helpers, with means of 55.20 and 51.15 respectively.

The main effect of participant gender approached significance, $F(1,53) = 3.32, p = .07$. Women tended to rate helpers as feminine whereas men rated helpers as less feminine. The mean scores for female and male participants were 54.56 and 51.79, respectively.

The interaction between participant gender and gender dyad approached significance $F(3,159) = 2.34, p = .08$ (see Figure 1). Men and women gave feminine ratings to the male or female characters that helped a female. However, men and women differed in their ratings of male and female characters that helped a male. In this situation, women gave high feminine scores to the helper, regardless whether the helper was male or female. However, men rated the male-male helper as masculine and the female-male helper as less feminine. A significant interaction was found between the type of helping and gender dyad, $F(3,159) = 6.19, p < .001$ (see Figure 2). In the opposite-sex dyads (male-female and female-male) both types of helping were rated as feminine, with emotional helping receiving higher scores. In the same-sex dyads (male-male and female-female) emotional helping was rated as feminine and casual helping was rated as masculine. No other significant interactions were found.

Helpee

The main effect for type of helping was significant, $F(1,53) = 21.65$, $p < .001$. Helpees who received emotional help were rated as feminine, and helpees who received casual help were rated as masculine, with means of 52.71 and 47.93 respectively. No other main effects were found to be significant.

A significant interaction was found between the type of helping and gender dyad, $F(3,159) = 3.46$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 3). Helpees were rated as more feminine when receiving emotional help and more masculine when receiving casual help in every dyad except male-male, where both scores were close to 50. No other significant interactions were found.

Empathy

A 4 (gender dyad) X 2 (type of helping) X 2 (participant empathy) repeated measures ANOVA was performed on the gender ascriptions of helpers and helpees. The empathy level of participants was determined by categorizing those individuals in the top third of the scores on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index as having high empathy while participants who had empathy scores in the bottom third were categorized as having low empathy. Although analyses were performed on participants' perceptions of helpers and helpees, there were no significant differences found in perceptions of helpees. Consequently, the only analyses reported below are those regarding perceptions of helpers.

The main effect for participant empathy was significant, $F(1,34) = 7.36$, $p < .01$. Participants categorized as high in empathy rated helpers as more feminine ($M = 56.12$) than did those participants low in empathy ($M = 51.58$). There were no other significant main effects.

A significant interaction was found between participant empathy and gender dyad, $F(3,102) = 2.73$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 4). High empathy participants rated helpers as feminine in every gender dyad. Low empathy participants rated helpers as most feminine in the male-female dyad, followed by the female-female dyad, but rated the male-male and female-male dyads as more masculine. No other interactions were found to be significant.

Discussion

The current study investigated perceptions of masculinity and femininity of helpers and helpees using characters presented in short stories involving a non-emergency, everyday helping situations. We hypothesized that emotional helping would be rated as more feminine than casual helping for helpers and helpees. Consistent with our hypothesis, those who gave or received emotional help were rated as feminine. The opposite pattern held true when participants were asked to judge helpers or helpees involved in casual helping.

We also hypothesized that women would be rated as feminine regardless whom they helped. In addition, men who helped women would be rated as masculine, while men who helped men will be rated as more feminine. Consistent with our hypothesis, women helpers were rated as feminine regardless of helpee gender. Men who helped men were perceived as feminine, but contrary to the original hypothesis, men who helped women were also viewed as feminine. This may be due to the fact that the scenario portrayed an everyday helping act and not a heroic act.

Analyses also revealed that men and women vary in their perceptions of helpers and helpees as a function of gender dyad. For example, female participants gave high feminine scores to the helper, regardless of helper or helpee gender. Women were also more likely to view the helpee, regardless of gender, as more feminine. However, a consistent pattern did not emerge for male participants, suggesting that gender ascriptions were more situationally specific for men than women.

Fewer significant results were found for the helpees than for helpers. This is interesting because while participants were able to make judgments about helpers given little information, they had trouble making attributions about the helpees. In fact, the only variable that affected helpee ratings was type of helping, both as a main effect and as an interaction with gender dyad. Finally, people who received emotional help were viewed as feminine while those who received casual help were viewed as masculine.

The results of the study suggest that type of helping and gender dyad have significant impact on perceptions of helping. Furthermore, future research into the perceptions of helpees is warranted – particularly given the unwillingness of participants in the current study to make judgmental attributions.

Story Examples

Sarah is having dinner with a friend at a restaurant. The woman at the table next to them leaves, but forgets her cell phone on the table. Sarah picks up the phone and brings it to the woman and says, "I think you left this on your table."

Joe is walking down the street to the store and notices a man consulting a piece of paper and looking confused. Joe goes over to the man and asks him if he can help him find something. The man says he is looking for the bookstore and Joe tells him where it is.

Figure 1. Effect of Subject Gender and Gender Dyad on "Helper" T-score

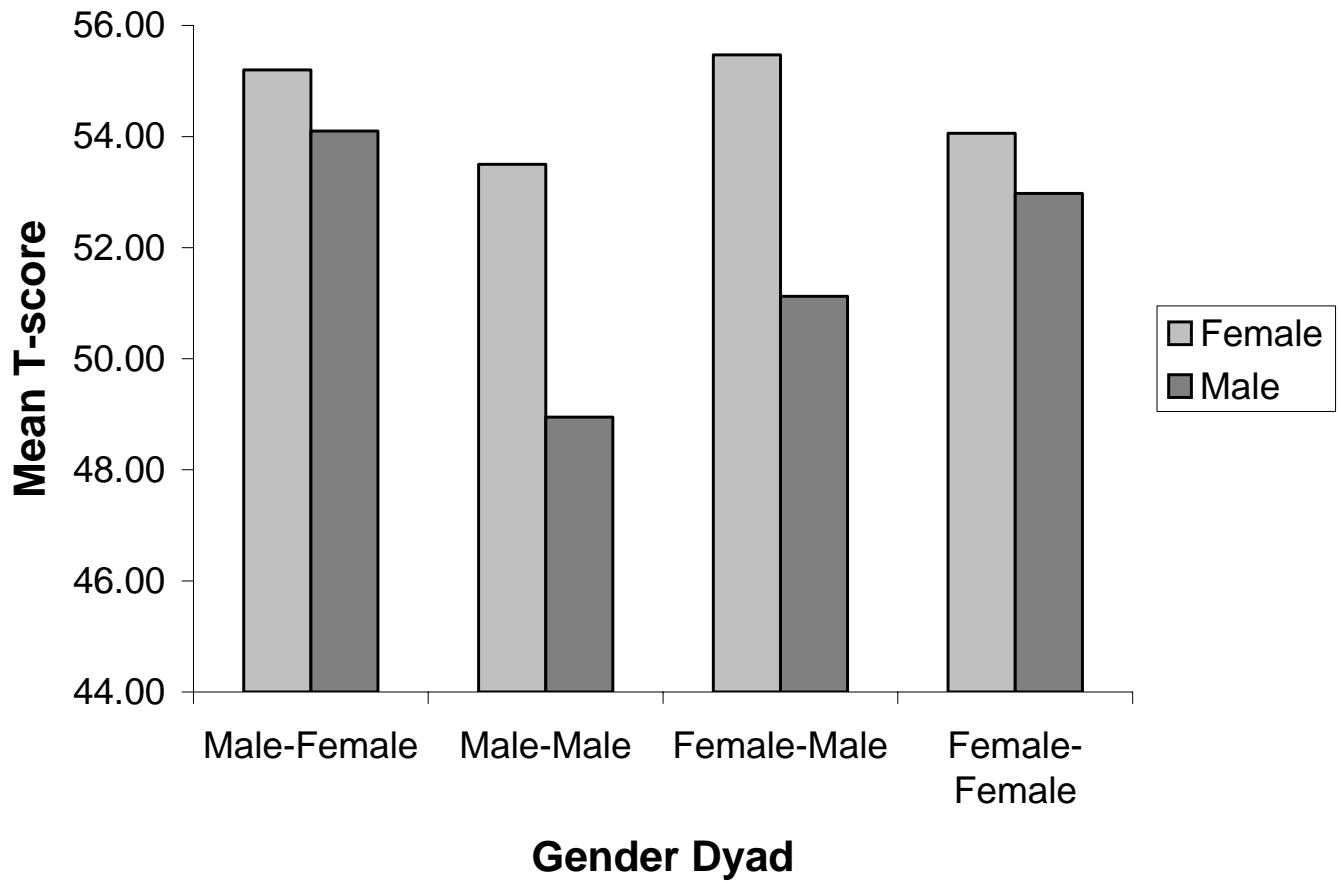


Figure 2. Effect of Type of Helping and Gender Dyad on "Helper" T-score

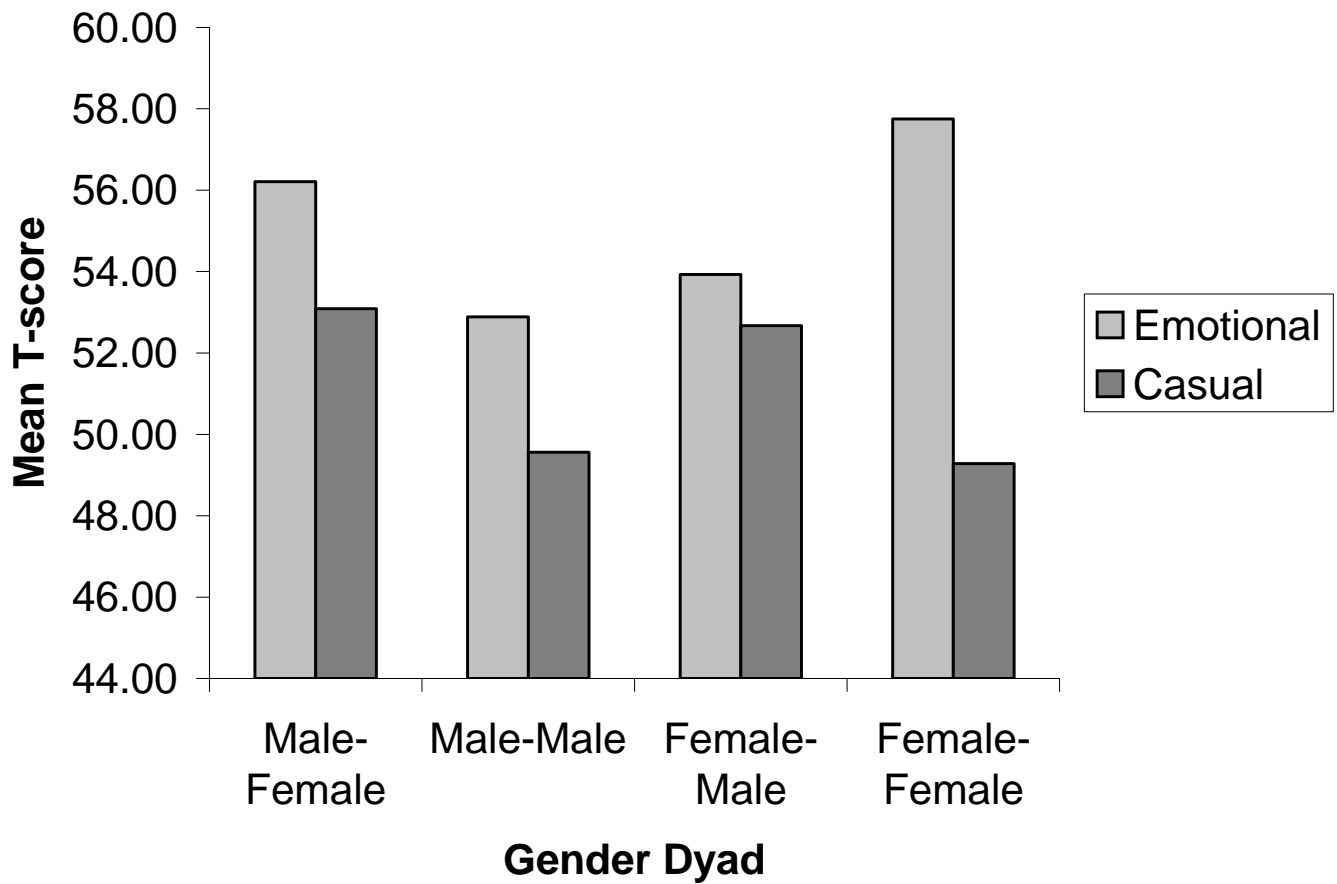


Figure 3. Effect of Type of Helping and Gender Dyad on "Helpee" T-score

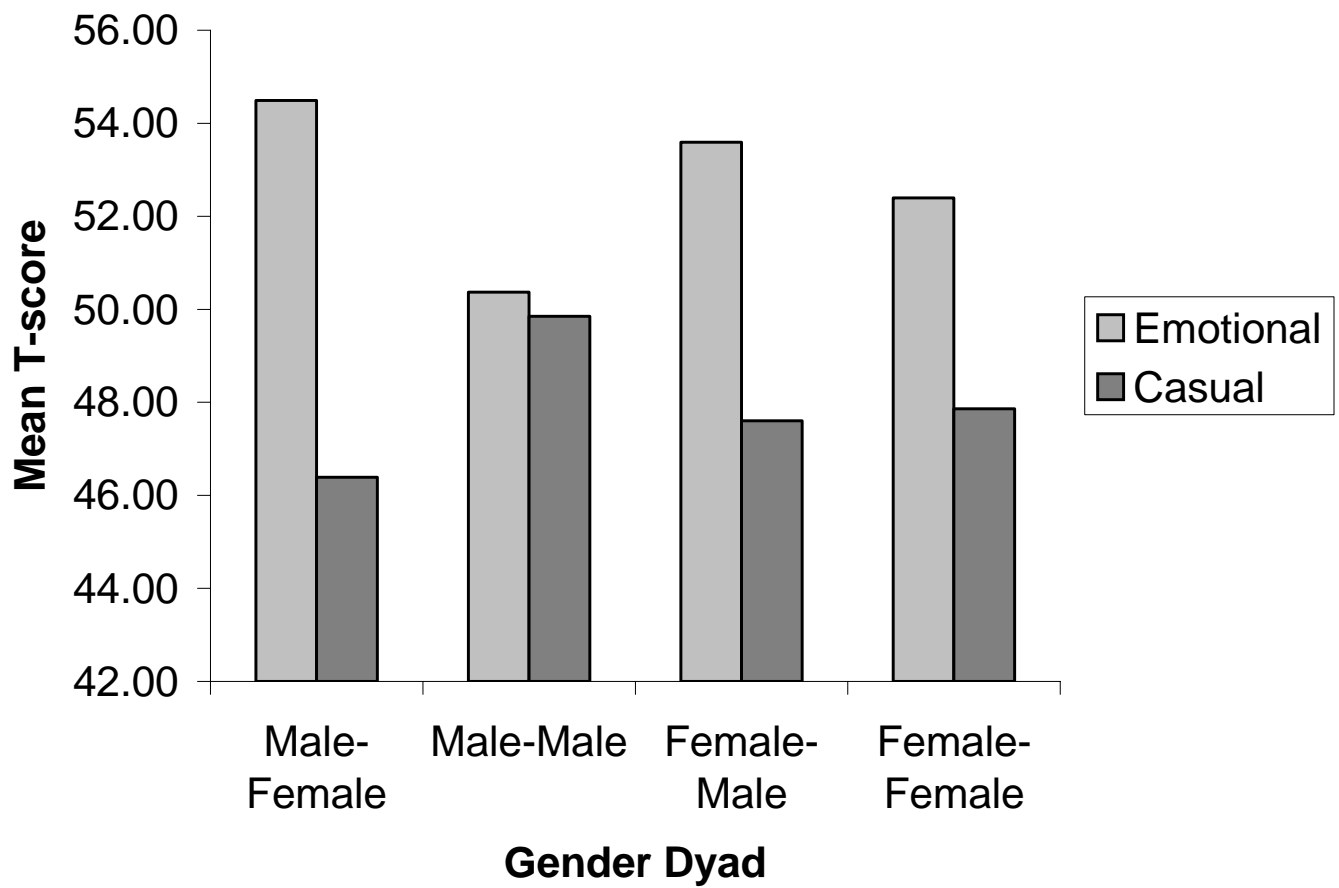


Figure 4. Effect of Subject Empathy and Gender Dyad on "Helper" T-score

