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## RECEIVING HELP: MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF THE HANDICAPPED

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### ABSTRACT

The social act of helping is presented from the recipient's viewpoint. Interview material from handicapped adults and contributions from the literature on helping provide insight to the helped person's management and interpretation of being helped. Techniques employed in the management of help are described. Alternative strategies and interpretations are available to the helped person; receiving help is not necessarily demeaning as social norms suggest. The interaction between helper and helped person is the central concern.

As more people with disabilities become active in their communities more occasions are likely to arise which will require able-bodied strangers to give assistance to those with handicaps. How can the handicapped manage these helping situations without being demeaned?

Most studies of helping situations have emphasized the perspective of the helper rather than of the recipient. Factors such as sex, social class, and power of helpers have been studied (Berkowitz and Friedman, 1967; Schopler, 1967; Bryan and Test, 1967; and Schopler and Bateson, 1965), but the assumption has generally been that persons receiving help are passive recipients of whatever help might come their way.

An exception to this view of the recipient has been contributed by Davis (1961). He has examined the methods by which handicapped persons cope with stigmatization and found that they attempt to direct social interaction with the able-bodied in ways which will encourage equal relationships. However, in helping situations the limitations of the handicapped are likely to be emphasized. Resolving the conflicting needs of acquiring help while maintaining equality calls for management of the situation.

In order to explore the elements of helping situations from the handicapped person's viewpoint the literature on helping was reviewed and in-depth interviews with handicapped individuals were conducted. As informants they described how they manage the

situation of receiving bodily assistance from strangers in public places and how they interpret that help. A purposive sample of ten informants was used, each informant having a different handicapping condition.<sup>1</sup> Six males and four females were interviewed. The informants ranged in age from 16 to 75, their educational achievement ranged from a few years of schooling to a Master's degree, and their duration of handicaps ranged from eleven to 58 years. Only two informants were married.

#### THE RECIPIENT'S PERSPECTIVE OF THE HELPING SITUATION

A prevailing theme was heard throughout the interviews; these handicapped people place great value on their independence and often exercise it through control of the helping situation. One man expressed this attitude by saying, "Generally, I don't like being a helped person, but if I can be helped on an equal basis, that's fine." The informants define the helping situation as one in which they participate. They do not always see themselves as passive recipients, nor do they see receiving help as a necessarily demeaning social behavior.

The informants openly admitted their needs for help. Some admitted to having had a period of resentment about being helped if they had been disabled in adulthood, but at the time of the interview, all accepted the necessity of being helped as a fact of their lives.

#### Obtaining Help

The person needing help is capable of transmitting social cues through speech, mannerisms, facial expressions, or, in the case of the handicapped, by utilizing the handicap in such a way as to elicit empathy toward his or her distress. Of course, the recognition of these cues by the potential helper depends upon the likelihood that such cues transmit shared meanings (Cardwell, 1971).

All respondents stated that they knew how to obtain help and often did so. Those having visible handicaps revealed an awareness of the legitimization process (Haber and Smith, 1971), when

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<sup>1</sup>These conditions were: deafness, polio paralysis, mental retardation, blindness, speech impairment, brain damage, multiple sclerosis, emotional disturbance, cerebral palsy, and spinal injury.

they reported that the cane of a blind person, a wheelchair, or other equipment, would be useful signals for eliciting help. One woman commented that, "You get to depending on the wheelchair to bring people--to get to people--to help you...." A man observed that, "People feel sorrier for you if you have a cane or wheelchair." Although these objects make eliciting help easier since they eliminate the need for explanation, all informants felt very capable of making direct requests for help ("I just ask"), and they often do provide explanations with their requests.

#### Perceiving Helpers' Motives

People with handicaps are sensitive to their helpers' motivations and attempt to comprehend them. As one person explained:

"We handicapped people are always wanting other people to understand us. I often wonder if we understand them.... I often read in the literature that they get the feeling at first that it might happen to them, and that makes them feel bad.... I like people, and I don't like the idea that I make some people nervous and upset, but that's the way it is."

Although most helpers are perceived to be well-motivated and enjoying the helping interaction, the handicapped experience occasional difficulties in resolving their own desires for independence and the desires of able-bodied people to help. Management strategies used by the handicapped often proceed from a recognition of such disparate definitions of the helping situation. Rather than relinquish their independence, they attempt to control the help given them. When the handicapped perceive that helpers sincerely wish to give assistance, they may attempt to accommodate their helpers' wishes. One man offered this insight:

"We should put on the other guy's shoes and look at it [sic] from his angle. Here's a guy who wants to help and he doesn't know too much about my handicap. I've got to be careful how I handle the situation. I think the main thing to remember is we need to treat people as we want to be treated."

The informants also expressed an awareness of helpers who were helping out of pity or obligation, and such help was not willingly accepted. Another perceived motive for giving help was that, "It's their way of saying I'm glad it's you and not me."

Ladieu et. al.(1947) found that the handicapped gave positive evaluations to help offered as a normal politeness or as a contribution to the recipient's independence. Help which was perceived as condescending or threatening to independence was negatively evaluated.

Before the helping act begins, the handicapped person is engaged in an interpretation of social information which will allow him or her to determine whether to continue the given interaction and how to proceed through the helping situation.

### Managing Help

Once interaction has proceeded to actual helping behavior, most informants said they often consciously contribute to the helping act. People with handicaps acquire skills which permit them to function efficiently, and these skills can be taught to helpers. Most informants concurred that helpers should be instructed how and when to help. One person stated bluntly, "None of them don't know nothing about when I need help." Other informants noted that even some professionals do not know how to help without insulting people with handicaps. Here the handicapped complained about professionals assuming that one handicap indicated the likely presence of other handicaps or treating the handicapped individual as an average case rather than as a unique person.

Informants agreed that the able-bodied generally seem happy to give assistance, but helpers often must be supervised, since they may not know how to help. Briefing helpers in the procedures necessary for overcoming social as well as physical obstacles contributes to the recipient's stature as an equal in this interaction process (Davis, 1961).

A person disabled in adulthood must learn to accommodate the role of helped person despite possibly negative evaluations he or she hold concerning that role. Being an object of aid is inconsistent with values of independence and self-reliance, and recently disabled adults perceive that they may be demeaned by helpers who also hold these values (Thomas, 1966). When the disabled person learns to manage help he or she becomes capable of asserting adult characteristics and restoring a sense of self-respect.

A strategy for managing help which minimizes the concern for others' evaluations is to avoid being helped, and this strategy is frequently utilized. Several persons stated that they would forego a desirable activity in order to avoid uncomfortable helping situations. Situations were interpreted as being uncomfortable

if helping required an unusual effort or if a relationship would be complicated by an unequal distribution of obligations. Explained one person, "It's not that I refuse to accept being handicapped, it's just that...I have control over my life style enough that I can keep myself out of most situations that require help...and I prefer it that way." Attempts to minimize help are consistent with the high value placed upon independence.

#### Acknowledging Help

After the help has been received, the informants concurred that gratitude should be shown. That appreciation should be expressed was recognized as ordinary politeness, but an appropriate acceptance was also seen as reinforcement for helping behavior in general. Several persons expressed thoughts similar to this:

"Accept help graciously. Thank them very nice [sic], and then go on. If you don't thank them, maybe somebody will come along who needs more help than you do, and this guy might not help them. He'll remember that I didn't appreciate it."

Gratitude was seen as a worthwhile investment since handicapped persons wish to continue receiving help and perceive that others might benefit as well. Acknowledging help also serves as a useful signal for ending that particular situation. By selecting a particular time to express appreciation, the recipient indicates that the helping transaction has been completed.

#### THE MEANING OF BEING HELPED

Informants to the present study contributed alternative interpretations of receiving help. These interpretations tended to emphasize the beneficial aspects of being helped. One positive effect of being helped is that helping behavior can stimulate other social interaction, e.g., "It's made me a lot closer to people. I'm more approachable. The mere fact that they want to do something for me--I've made an awful lot of friends that I probably wouldn't have if I could see." Not only does receiving help stimulate interaction, it also gives the helped person an entree to the "good" side of people, which is likely to make interaction more pleasant.

Secondly, these handicapped people believed that they could take the upper hand in helping situations because they can choose to be helped and direct how they are helped. The informants did not support Goffman's proposition that the able-bodied have sold the

handicapped a "line" which designates well-adjusted handicapped persons as those who receive help passively and in so doing relinquish control of the helping situation (Goffman, 1963). An alternative to this interpretation of receiving help is that the recipient allows helpers to receive the gratification of helping another person.

A further meaning applied to receiving help concerned the possibility of acquiring secondary gains. People with disabilities may utilize their special circumstances to acquire advantages. Requesting help which is not needed, asking for lowered standards of responsibility, and demanding disproportionate allotments of attention are practices utilized by handicapped persons who seek to manipulate helping situations.

Helpers may rightly become indignant with anyone who manipulates their good intentions. But in the context of this paper, the achievement of secondary gains underscores the capability of recipients to redefine the helping situation. That is one of several alternative strategies available to people who receive help. If they do not adopt the passive recipient role, they allow themselves choices in defining the helping situation according to the circumstances, such as:

1. They may use the helping situation as an opening for further interaction.
2. They may assert that they are the benefactors, by giving helpers the opportunity to help.
3. They may attempt to manage when, how, and by whom they are helped.
4. They may develop secondary gains.

#### DISCUSSION

Gouldner discusses a generalized moral norm of reciprocity which is germane to the topic of helping behavior (Gouldner, 1960). This norm stipulates that: 1) people should help those who have helped them, and 2) people should not injure those who have helped them. Furthermore, the norm requires that those people one has helped should help in return, and that if one wishes to receive help from others, one must help them.

Fulfilling these obligations may not be possible for some. For example, people with handicaps may not be able to reciprocate a benefit. Gouldner has recognized that likelihood and suggests another standard for helping which he calls the norm of beneficence (Gouldner, 1973). Under this norm, some are allowed to get

something for nothing. Those who receive help get no reward and remain dependent on the decisions of others to help.

Darley and Latané (1970) argue that norms are insufficient explanatory factors for helping behavior. They propose that participants in a helping situation construct their roles within a rather wide set of guidelines. This possibility leaves the helping situation open to negotiation during which the helper and recipient transmit social cues to one another and helping proceeds from the negotiated relationship. It is this view of helping as a complete social transaction which introduces the helped person as a participant capable of eliciting, accepting or rejecting, managing, and acknowledging help.

This view also redefines the meaning of being helped. Although handicapped recipients of help may not be able to fulfill the norm of reciprocity, they may avoid dependency upon the norm of beneficence by taking an active role in helping situations. Of course, utilizing alternative definitions of the helping situation could be seen as rationalization which explains away the strain of receiving help. But having alternative definitions does provide choice in role-taking. If recipients of help do not perceive themselves as being demeaned, they may select other responses to the situation.

What is important here is that the introduction of the recipient's perspective has transformed helping into a complete social act. Handicapped persons in need of help are party to a social transaction which requires awareness of the helper's motives and an ability to obtain and manage the desired interaction, namely, help. The techniques for deriving satisfactory help are social skills; experienced handicapped people could teach their techniques to the recently disabled.

Furthermore, this perspective of helping as a social act does not permit handicapped people to escape from the responsibility of participation. Although they will encounter difficulties in perceiving others' motives and in developing their own repertoires of management techniques and interpretations, these obstacles are surmountable.

Helpers of handicapped people should note that this perspective de-emphasizes the handicap and the mechanics of help. The interaction between helper and helped person is the central concern.

Professionals should be aware of the process through which the helped person contributes to or hinders attempts to help. They can encourage clients to participate in the helping process and

teach them skills for managing help. A mutual awareness of the negotiation process in which the motives, behaviors, and benefits of both parties are being constructed should facilitate a more effective helping relationship.

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