Sex Differences in Recipients' Reactions to Aid

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The purpose of this study was to determine whether males and females differentially respond to the receipt of aid as a function of their similarity to the donor and their own chronic level of self-esteem. Female and male adults received either help from a fictitious partner or no aid. All subjects were given information that they had been paired with a partner who had an inferior, similar, or superior level of task-relevant experience. Females paired with a partner of equal experience reported greater decrements in situational self-esteem than did males. Furthermore, females who received help reported a higher level of satisfaction with the help, and in all but one of the similarity conditions, females expressed a greater need for help than did males. When self-esteem was considered, high self-esteem females paired with persons with similar experience exhibited greater decrements in mood than did other high self-esteem females; males did not differ across conditions. Implications of the obtained sex differences were discussed in relation to sex differences in help-seeking behavior and sex role stereotypes.

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in the topic of recipients' behavioral and affective reactions to aid (e.g., Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982, 1983). Much of this work has been based upon Fisher et al.'s (1982) threat to self-esteem model.

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According to the threat to self-esteem model, both situational characteristics (e.g., features of the aid transaction, donor qualities and behavior) and recipient characteristics (e.g., personality traits, skill deficits or assets, chronic or temporary affective states) determine whether help is construed as "threatening" or "supportive." Aid is generally defined as supportive when the aid conditions demonstrate the benefactor's caring for and interest in the recipient. In contrast, aid that is threatening is associated with conditions that emphasize the recipient's relative inferiority and dependency. Moreover, negative/defensive reactions (e.g., negative affect, lowered opinion of self, poor evaluation of the donor and aid, refusal of aid) are viewed as a consequence of threatening aid, whereas positive/nondefensive reactions are associated with supportive aid (Fisher et al., 1982, 1983).

One factor that appears to lead to negative reactions to aid is similarity of the donor to the recipient (Fisher & Nadler, 1974, 1982; Fisher, Harrison, & Nadler, 1978). Given the superior performance of a similar donor, recipients should be compelled to view themselves negatively in comparison to the donor. However, when the donor is dissimilar, there is an absence of any "social comparison stress." A reduction in this threatening characteristic of aid allows the recipient to concentrate more on the beneficial aspects of help, and can lead to a more positive/nondefensive response set (Fisher & Nadler, 1974; Fisher et al., 1978).

Level of self-esteem apparently serves as a moderator of the relation between similarity and recipients' responses to aid. Nadler, Fisher and Streufert (1976) found that high but not low self-esteem individuals reported more negative ratings of affect when they received help from a similar than from a dissimilar donor, and more positive ratings of affect when they received help from a dissimilar donor than from a similar donor. Nadler et al. (1976) suggested that the receipt of aid from a similar donor leads to more negative reactions for high self-esteem individuals because their usual cognitions of competency are disrupted by the evidence of their own failure and dependency of a similar other. Such a pattern of findings should be expected, however, only when assistance is for a task associated with one's self-esteem (e.g., tests of intelligence or creativity; cf. Fisher & Nadler, 1982).

Although considerable support has been obtained for the Fisher et al. (1982) model, most of the research concerning the model has solely involved male subjects. Nonetheless, it is likely that sex is an important variable to consider in predicting reactions to aid. Support for this position is derived from research findings in a related area—help seeking. Sex repeatedly has been shown to influence individuals' perception of themselves as having a problem and whether they will attempt to seek aid once they have acknowledged their need (McMullen & Gross, 1983). For example, with regard to medical and mental health, women perceive more symptoms as