

THE HELP-GIVER'S DILEMMA: HOW TO DECLINE REQUESTS FOR HELP AT WORK WITHOUT HURTING ONE'S IMAGE

Abstract

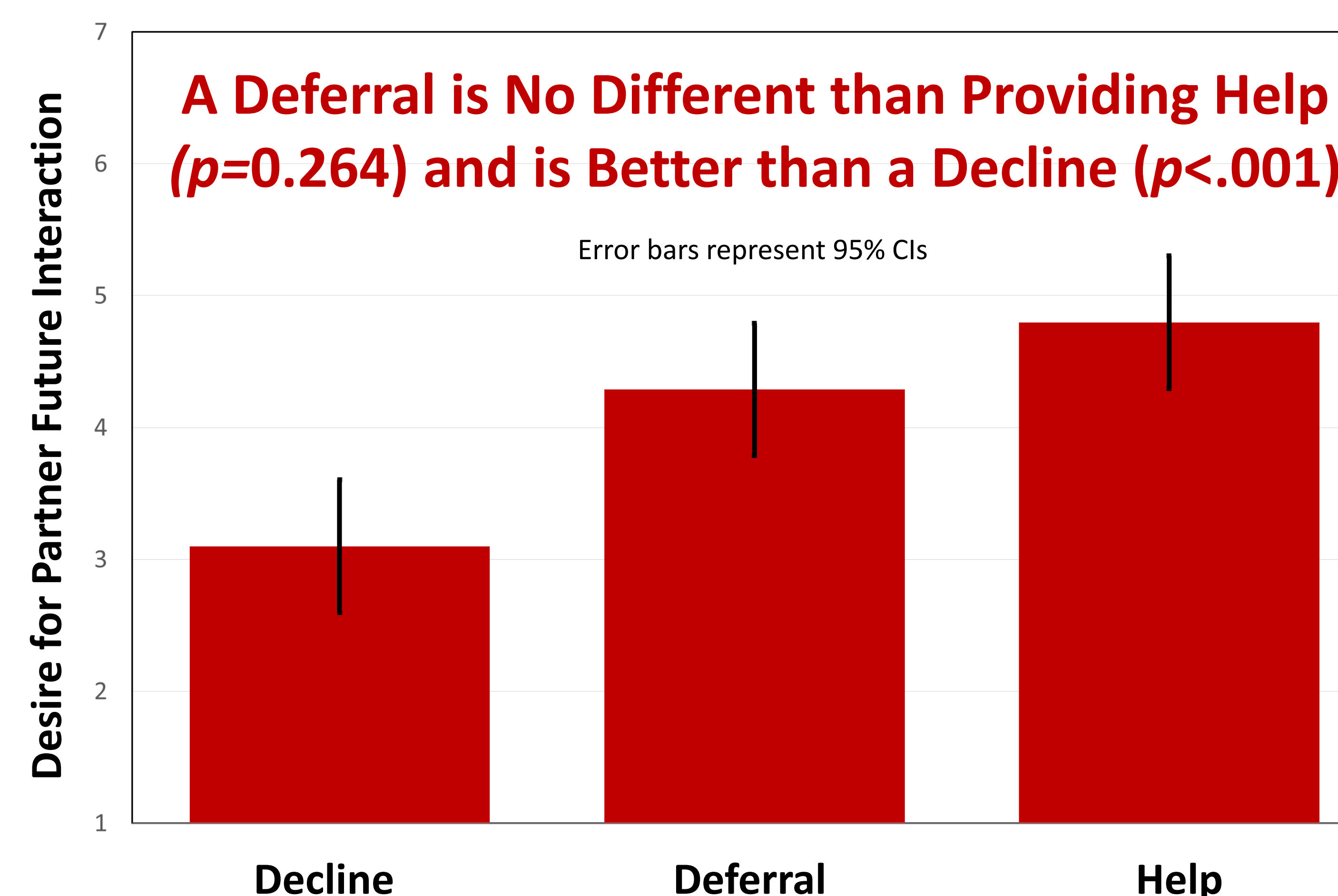
- Help-giving, defined as engaging in proactive behavior that benefits others, often enhances the impression others have of oneself at work (e.g., Bolino, 1999; Eastman, 1994; Fandt & Ferris, 1990; Ferris et al., 1994).
- Yet, agreeing to too many requests can result in overload, decreased psychological well-being, and decreased task performance because people have limited time (Bergeron, 2007; DePaulo & Fisher, 1980; Flynn, 2003, 2006).
- Therefore, employees often face a **help-giving dilemma**: they are damned if they don't accept requests to give help, but also damned if they do.
- **RQ: How can employees decline a request for help without hurting their image?**
- **Answer:** Use a deferral ("Let me do some thinking and get back to you").

Theory / Hypotheses

- **To explore this dilemma, we integrate person-perception theories with theories of speech** (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Lee & Pinker, 2010).
- **H1:** Declining a request to provide help diminishes the requester's desire to interact with the decliner in the future.
- **H2:** The negative relationship between declining a request and the requester's desire to interact with the decliner in the future is mediated by decreased perceptions of the decliner's warmth and competence.
- **H3:** A deferral buffers against the negative effect of a decline on the desire to interact with the decliner in the future.

Results

- **(H1) Does declining a request diminish the requester's desire to interact with the decliner in the future? Yes!**
- $F(1,154) = 48.04, p < .001$ ($M_{Decline} = 3.05, SD_{Decline} = 1.39$ vs. $M_{Accept} = 4.63, SD_{Accept} = 1.45$)
- **(H2) Do decreased perceptions of warmth and competence explain H1? Yes!**
- Warmth Indirect Effect = $-.67, SE = .16, CI_{95\%} [-1.02, -.40]$ and Competence Indirect Effect = $-.46, SE = .13, CI_{95\%} [-.76, -.24]$
- **(H3) Does a deferral buffer against the negative effect of a decline on the requester's desire to interact with the decliner in the future? Yes!**



Note: Participants in the "deferral" condition reported that they received the same level of help as those in the "decline" condition ($p = .597$) but less than those in the "help" condition ($p < .001$).

Method: Two Studies

- **Participants:** (Study 1) 156 undergraduates (66% female; $M = 20.02$ years, $SD = 1.75$); (Study 2) 181 U.S. full-time employees (62% female; $M = 33.98$ years, $SD = 9.28$)
- **Design:** A between-subjects design in which participants working on an anagram task did or did not receive help from a virtual confederate
- **Manipulations:** In the "help" condition, the confederate said, "Thank you for your question. I can help you. A lot of the time, the fourth and fifth letters of the anagrams become the first and second letters of the new word. After you move them to the beginning, it is usually easier to see what the new word is. Good luck."
- "Decline" condition: "Thank you for your question, but I cannot help you at the moment. Good luck."
- (Only in Study 2) "Deferral" condition: "Thank you for your question, but I cannot help you at the moment. Let me do some thinking, and I'll get back to you. Good luck."
- **DV:** Future desire to interact with confederate (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013)
- **Mediators:** Confederate warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002)

Conclusions / Contributions

- Previous scholarship has focused on the challenges help-seekers, but not help-givers, face (Lee, 1997; Nadler, 1991, 1997).
- We remedy this omission by departing from the oft-employed assumption that the incidence of employee helping should be increased.
- **We find that the best way to decline a request for help may be by employing a deferral ("Let me do some thinking and get back to you").**
- **Additional Ongoing Research:** (1) Gender and repeated use as boundary conditions; (2) External validity of deferrals