



# Halfway to the help is not halfway to the heart: Underestimating appreciation for partial help

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## Abstract

It is normally assumed that helping behavior will lead to ideal outcomes. However, people frequently encounter real-life situations where they are only able to give partial help, through which the recipient's goal is made closer yet not fully achieved. In five studies, we demonstrate that helpers underestimate the extent to which recipients feel grateful for partial help. The asymmetry arises from different focus in evaluation: Helpers attend to the incomplete outcome (vs. wholehearted intention) more than recipients do, leading helpers to expect that partial help is less appreciated.

## Introduction



To what extent do you appreciate Jerry's help?



To what extent would Tom appreciate your help?

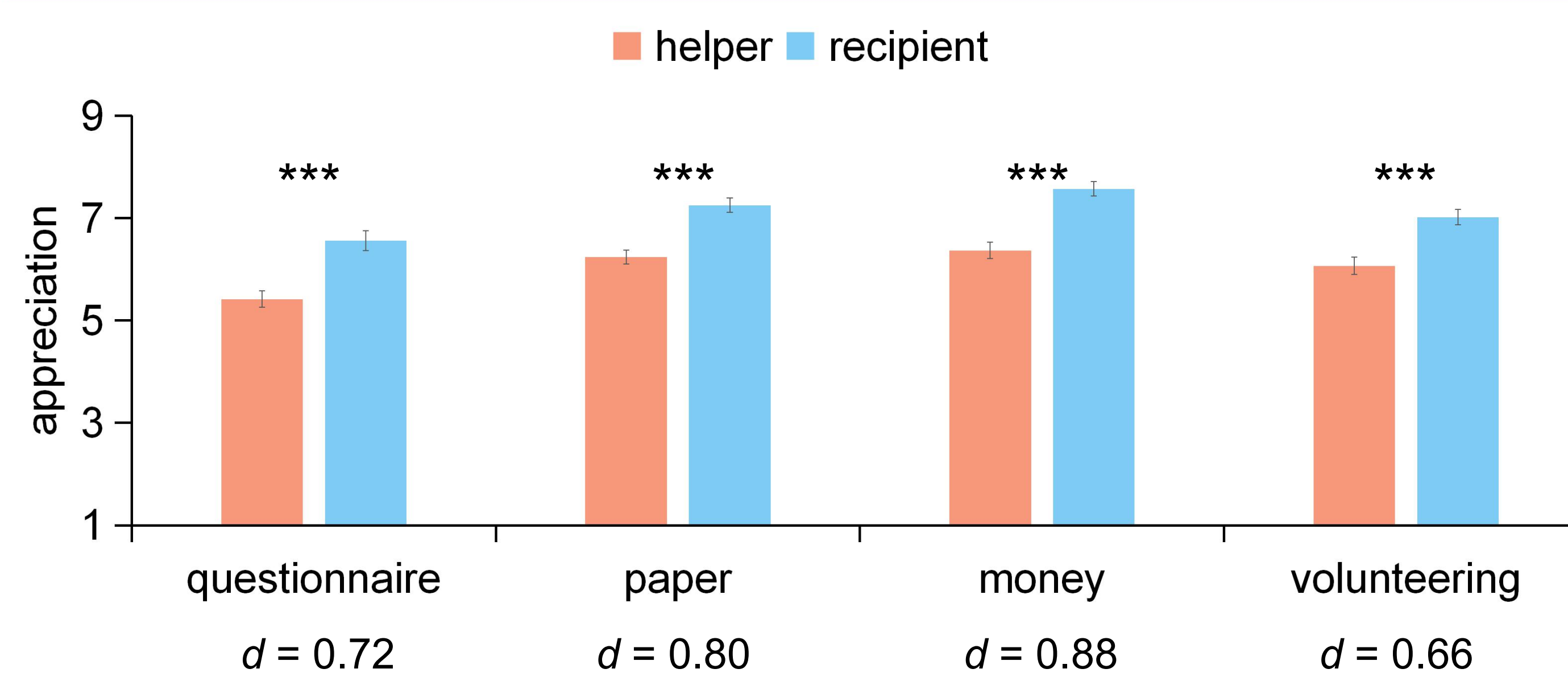
- Actors tend to evaluate their own behavior in terms of competence, whereas observers tend to interpret the actor's behavior in terms of warmth<sup>1-3</sup>.
- In a helping context, helpers may attend more to the outcome, which reflects how capable they are in helping recipients realize the goal, whereas recipients may place greater value on the helpers' intention to give a hand, which conveys interpersonal warmth.
- When wholehearted intention meets an incomplete outcome in the case of partial help, helpers are likely to undervalue it.
- Helpers may mistakenly assume that recipients share their concern<sup>4-7</sup> and are likely to mispredict how much recipients treasure partial help.

## Study 1a: Scenarios

Participants ( $N = 159$ ) imagined giving/seeking help in four scenarios.

- fill out 2 of 4 questionnaires for a strange student
- lend 400 yuan to a friend who wants to borrow 800
- proofread 10 pages of a 20-page paper for a schoolmate
- participate in 2 weeks of a 4-week volunteer program

## Results



## Study 1b: Online helping

Incentivized by getting a free exquisite album, PKU students asked friends for a favor to click like for a repost on WeChat Moments. Relative to the 120-like goal, each like is deemed partial help.



Participants ( $N = 125$ ) recalled the fifth like they gave or received.

## Results

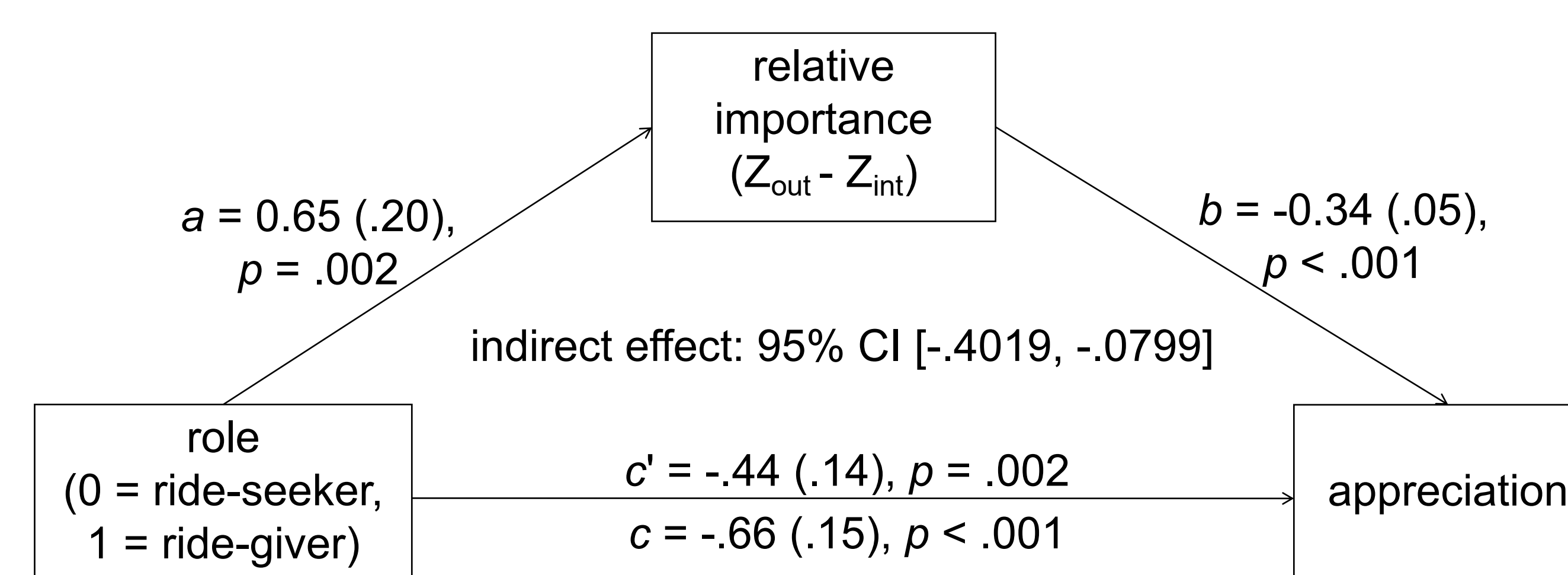
- Participants underestimated how much a 1/120 like was appreciated when they thought from a helper perspective ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ) than from a recipient perspective ( $M = 4.87$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ),  $t(123) = 2.24$ ,  $p = .027$ ,  $d = 0.42$ . The bias held when controlling for number of likes given and completion of 120-like goal.

## Studies 2a & 2b: Asymmetric focus

2a MTurkers ( $N = 215$ ) imagined a scenario from the perspective of helper or recipient.

- A ride-seeker, who usually commuted by bus and transferred twice, asked a colleague for a ride home. The ride-giver agreed to drive the ride-seeker to a bus station, from which the ride-seeker only needed to transfer once to get home.
- Add focus measure: how important it is to consider intention (whether offer a ride) and outcome (how far actually drive)

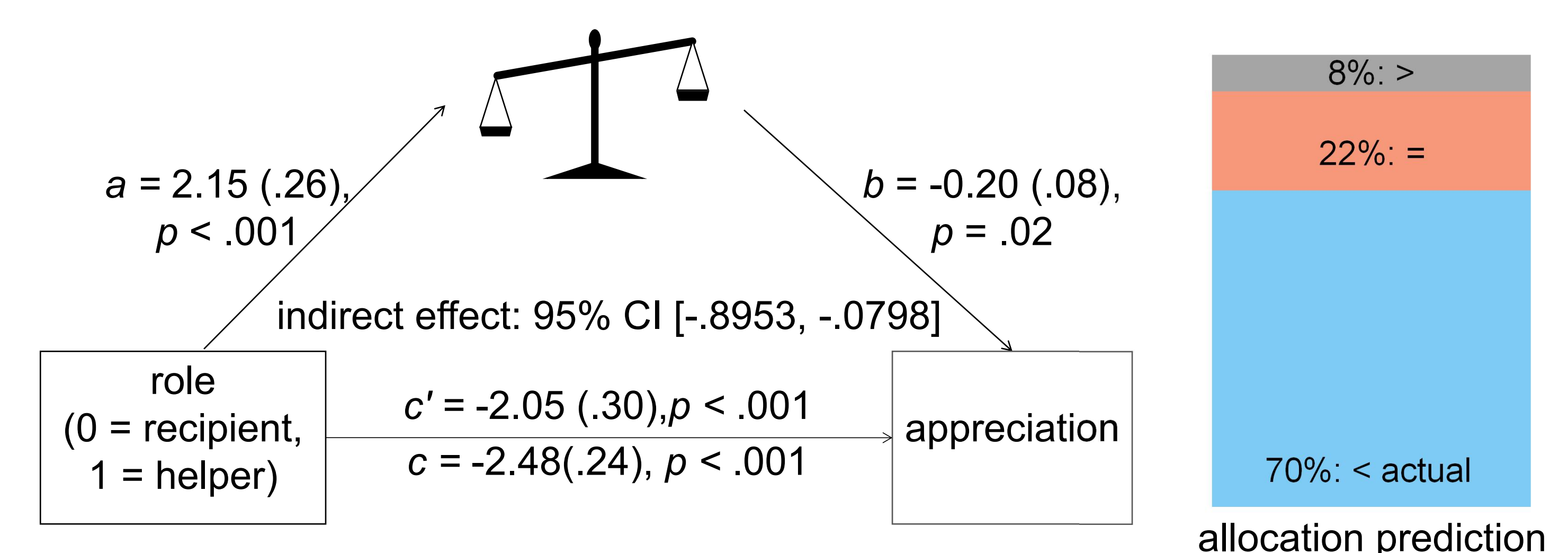
## Results



2b Sixty unacquainted pairs of participants came to the lab for purportedly separate experiments.

- One participant was instructed to play a 2-person game, and thus had to ask another participant for help. The game was claimed to contain 3 rounds, but was interrupted at the end of 2nd round. Only help-recipients could earn bonus from the game.
- Add bonus allocation measure

## Results

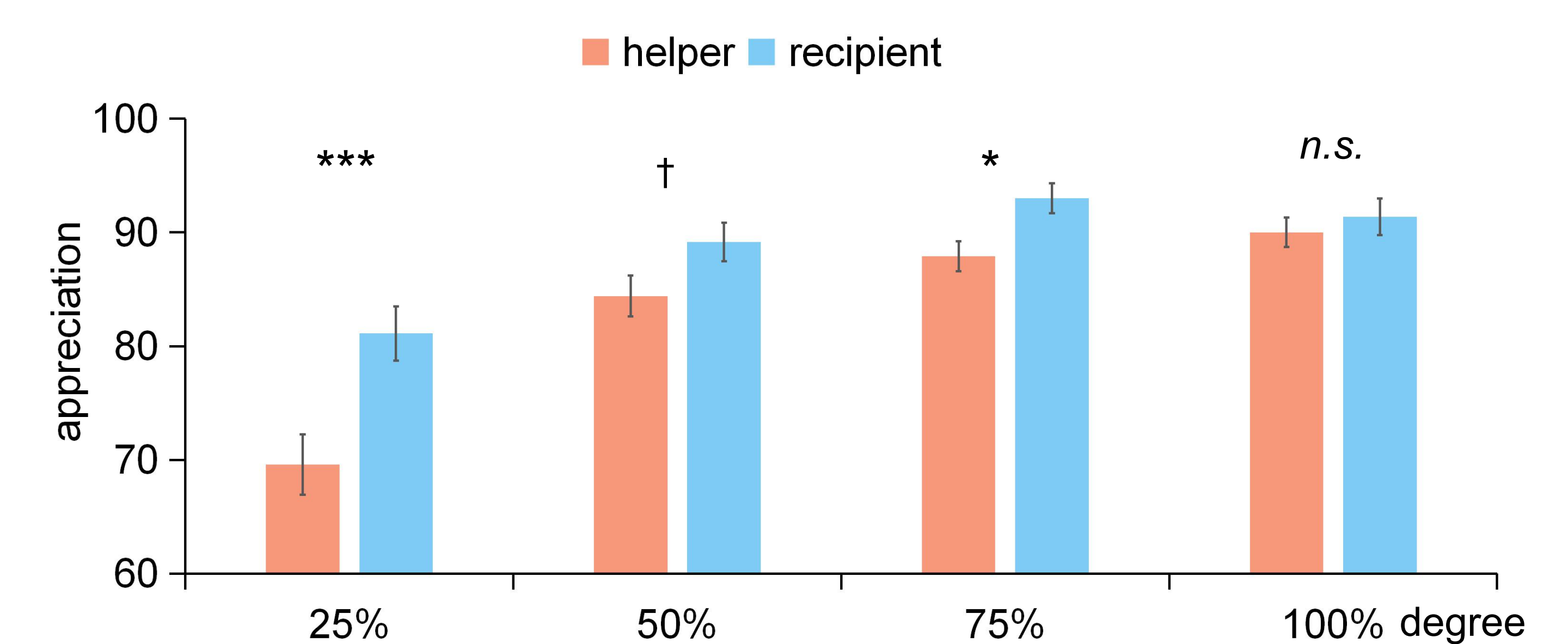


## Study 3: Partial vs. complete

MTurkers ( $N = 465$ ) imagined a scenario from the perspective of helper or recipient.

- A colleague asked another colleague to review slides for an upcoming presentation and that the other colleague agreed to help with part or all of the slides due to time constraints.

## Results



## Discussion

- Every little bit counts for people who receive help, but helpers tend to underestimate how much partial help is appreciated.
- Asymmetric focus on outcome versus intention partly explains the discrepancy between helpers' and recipients' evaluation. The bias reduces when outcome does not conflict with intention.
- The results may not hold for unsolicited help.

## References

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