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Avoiding Seeking Help in the Classroom: Who and Why?

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Why do some students avoid seeking help in the classroom when they need it? When students do not seek the help they need, they put themselves at a disadvantage for learning. We discuss how students' personal motivational characteristics relate to their avoidance of help seeking. In particular, we discuss our work regarding perceived academic and social competence and achievement- and social-goal orientations. We also discuss how various dimensions of the classroom context relate to help avoidance. Specifically, we discuss rules and norms of classrooms as well as our work examining the achievement goal structure and social climate of classrooms. We conclude by discussing how new developments in achievement goal theory distinguishing between approach- and avoidance-goal orientations might add to psychologists' understanding of help avoidance. We also consider how students' strivings for autonomy and different aspects of the social climate might be incorporated into theories of students' help avoidance behavior.

KEY WORDS: help seeking; motivation; achievement goals; autonomy; classroom context.

INTRODUCTION

Help seeking is an important self-regulatory strategy that contributes to student learning (Karabenick and Sharma, 1994; Newman, 1994; Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons, 1988). Inevitably, students encounter ambiguity or difficulty in their schoolwork and need assistance. In such a situation, it is adaptive for students to use others as a resource to secure the

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necessary help and to continue the learning process (McCaslin and Good, 1996). As children develop into adolescents, their metacognitive skills improve (Keating, 1990), and they are better able to monitor and reflect on their performance and to determine their need for help in academic situations (Myers and Paris, 1978; Nelson Le-Gall, 1981, 1985; Newman, 1991, 1994; Paris and Newman, 1990). However, many adolescents do not seek help with their academic work when needed (Good *et al.*, 1987; Newman, 1990; Newman and Goldin, 1990; Ryan *et al.*, 1998; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997). In fact, help avoidance has been found to increase during early adolescence (Ryan and Midgley, 1998).

This apparent contradiction between young adolescents' increasing cognitive capabilities and their help-seeking behavior highlights the importance of considering the motivational and social factors that influence help seeking in the classroom (Newman, 1994, 1998; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997). In our work, we have investigated how students' motivational characteristics, as well as classroom contextual characteristics, relate to adolescents' decision to avoid seeking help with their academic work. We use the term "avoidance of help seeking" to refer to instances when students know that they need help but do not seek it. For example, a student might skip a problem altogether or put down any answer rather than ask for help. The decision by students to not get help represents an intentional goal-directed act to cease or avoid engagement. We are interested in this avoidance behavior because when students don't garner help when it is needed they put themselves at a disadvantage for learning and performance.

In this article, we review research concerning students' avoidance of help seeking in the classroom. After describing the avoidance of help seeking, we discuss how students' personal motivational characteristics relate to the avoidance of help seeking. Specifically, we discuss our work regarding perceptions of academic and social competence and achievement and social-goal orientations. Next, we discuss how various dimensions of the classroom context relate to students' avoidance of help seeking. Specifically, we discuss rules and norms of classrooms as well as our work examining the achievement goal structure and social climate of classrooms. We conclude with some ideas for future research on the avoidance of help seeking. We discuss how new developments in achievement goal theory distinguishing between approach and avoidance-goal orientations might add to our understanding of help avoidance. We also consider how students' strivings for autonomy and different aspects of the social climate might be further analyzed and incorporated into current theories of students' help avoidance behavior.

THE AVOIDANCE OF HELP SEEKING

The help-seeking process begins with the awareness of the need for help. Van der Meij (1994) and Dillon (1988, 1990) have described this stage as perplexity. Perplexity refers to a state of puzzlement or uncertainty that arises when there is a discrepancy between personal knowledge and new information or expectations. For example, students may solve a math problem only to find that the solution in the back of the book is different. Or, students may think of an example that contradicts a statement that the teacher presents in class. These two examples highlight that awareness of the need for help may be externally or internally generated. External cues are abundant in the classroom. For example, verbal responses by the teacher and graded assignments are external indications to students of how well they understand a given concept. Students' ability to internally monitor their comprehension and determine their need for help increases as they age (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981, 1985; Newman, 1991, 1994).

When students become aware that they need help, they must decide whether to actually seek help. Considerable research has identified this stage as a critical juncture in the overall help-seeking process. Dillon (1988, p. 20) wrote, "95 percent of the questions that we have in mind to ask we never go on to utter . . . we may think the better of it and follow one of the numerous other paths available. These include keeping quiet and giving off that we know and understand." It is at this juncture in the help-seeking process that our research has focused: the decision to avoid asking for help when students know they need help.

Research has identified several reasons why students avoid asking for help in the classroom. First, it may not be practical or feasible to ask for help in a given situation. There may be explicit rules or norms against help seeking and, thus, students may refrain from asking for help because they do not want to get in trouble. Or students may judge that asking for help is not going to be effective because (a) there is not a competent, willing helper who can provide assistance or (b) it will take too long to get help. In addition to such practical and expedient concerns, research has identified two psychosocial concerns that underlie the avoidance of help seeking: desire for autonomy and threat to competence (Butler, 1998; Newman, 1990; Van der Meij, 1988).

Our own research has focused on students' reluctance to seek help because of competence concerns, but we discuss the role of the desire for autonomy in the last section of this article. The need for help may be perceived by individuals as evidence that they lack ability and is likely to engender negative reactions of judgments from others (Butler and Neuman, 1995; Butler, 1998; Karabenick and Knapp, 1991; Newman, 1990; Ryan, Hicks, and

Midgley, 1997; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997). For example, Ryan and Pintrich (1997) found that many students worried about negative judgments from both their teacher and classmates regarding their abilities (e.g., "I think the teacher/other kids might think I am dumb when I ask a question in math class"). These competence concerns are positively related to the avoidance of help seeking. Thus, the need for help is often construed as an indicator that one lacks competence and, in that way, it explains the avoidance of help seeking. An important question is what personal and contextual factors are related to competence concerns about help seeking and to avoidant help-seeking behavior? In the next section, we consider how students' personal academic and social characteristics relate to competence concerns and to the avoidance of help seeking.

STUDENTS' PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND THE AVOIDANCE OF HELP SEEKING

Perceptions of Cognitive Competence

Personal characteristics of students such as performance level, self-esteem, and perceptions of competence have been linked with the decision to avoid seeking help. In academic settings, research has shown that the need for help is most threatening to low-achieving students. This is in line with findings that the need for help is most threatening to students with low self-esteem or perceptions of cognitive competence (Karabenick and Knapp, 1991; Newman, 1990; Newman and Goldin, 1990; Ryan *et al.*, 1997; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997). Students who are low achievers or who perceive that they are not especially competent are concerned that others will think that their need for help indicates that they are incapable and, therefore, they will be less likely to seek help. In contrast, when students who are high achievers or who have perceptions of high cognitive competence encounter difficulty, they are less likely to worry that others will attribute it to their lack of ability, and they are more likely to secure the necessary help (Butler and Neuman, 1995; Karabenick and Knapp, 1991; Newman, 1990; Newman and Goldin, 1990; Ryan *et al.*, 1997; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997).

Perceptions of Social Competence

A similar relation exists between perceptions of social competence and help-seeking behavior (Ryan and Pintrich, 1997). Feeling comfortable and skillful in relating to others lessens the perception that there will be negative fallout (e.g., negative reaction or judgment from the helper) from help

seeking. Ryan and Pintrich (1997) found that adolescents who perceived themselves as socially competent were less likely to feel threatened by help seeking and were more likely to ask for help. This relation was independent of the relation between perceived cognitive competence and help seeking, suggesting an independent role of perceptions of social competence. It appears that if individuals feel comfortable and skillful in relating to others socially, then they feel more confident in their ability to ask for help without incurring a negative reaction from the helper. Accordingly, it is not just perceptions of cognitive competence that can influence the help-seeking process, but also perceptions of social competence. This pattern of results highlights the importance of (a) considering help seeking, not just as an academic self-regulatory strategy, but also as a social interaction with others, and (b) recognizing that social competence can play a role in the dynamics of help seeking.

Achievement-Goal Orientations[4]

In addition to perceptions of competence, students' achievement-goal orientations are also related to the avoidance of help seeking. Theory and research on goal orientations indicates that two general goal orientations are important precursors to various motivational, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes (see Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Harackiewicz *et al.*, 1998; Maehr and Midgley, 1991; Nicholls, 1990; Pintrich, 2000b). Although there are a number of different labels attached to these two goal orientations, in this article we use the terms mastery- and performance-goal orientations. When oriented to mastery goals, students are focused on learning, self-improvement, progress, and mastery of the task. In contrast, when oriented to performance goals, students are focused on trying to better others, receiving public recognition for superior performance, and trying to attain positive judgments of their ability. These two achievement-goal orientations represent disparate reasons for involvement and different conceptions of success regarding academic tasks, and they have been linked to different help-seeking beliefs and behaviors.

A mastery-goal orientation focuses students on the task at hand, and effort is seen as a way to master the task. As such, it decreases competence concerns regarding help seeking and decreases the avoidance of help seeking (Butler and Neuman, 1995; Newman 1991, 1994; Ryan *et al.*, 1997; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997). In contrast, a performance-goal orientation focuses students

[4]Researchers have now distinguished between approach and avoidance achievement-goal orientations. The contribution of this distinction to research on help avoidance will be discussed later in this paper. The discussion here focuses on the approach component of goal orientations.

on themselves and their competency relative to others. A sense of accomplishment is derived from demonstrating that one is smart, regardless of the learning involved. When students are oriented to performance goals, they are concerned about how others will evaluate them because external evaluation will determine whether they are smart. This goal orientation increases competence concerns regarding help seeking and increases the avoidance of help seeking (Butler and Neuman, 1995; Newman 1991, 1994; Ryan *et al.*, 1997; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997).

Social-Goal Orientations

Goal orientations are salient regarding social achievement as well as academic achievement in the classroom (Dweck, 1996; Hicks, 1997; Urdan and Maehr, 1995; Wentzel, 1989). A social-goal orientation concerns the purpose and meaning that students ascribe to their social behavior in the classroom. Drawing on a large body of literature that demonstrates that young adolescents value both the opinions and the companionship of their peers (e.g., Berndt, 1982; Brown, 1990; Hartup, 1989; Parker and Asher, 1987), Hicks postulated two social-goal orientations: a social intimacy-goal orientation and a social status-goal orientation (Hicks, 1997). These goal orientations concern two types of alliances adolescents have with their peers. An intimacy-goal orientation concerns the desire for both general acceptance and for closer and more interpersonal relationships. In contrast, a social status-goal orientation concerns the desire for social visibility and prestige within the larger peer group. A social status-goal orientation is related to the emergence of an elite social crowd in early adolescence, typically labeled "popular," which various researchers have documented (e.g., Brown *et al.*, 1994; Eder, 1985; Kinney, 1993). Group membership, in these terms, does not necessarily equate with students' friendship selections or with their actual interaction patterns, but is related more to their status within the larger peer group (Brown, 1990; Eder, 1985).

Social status- and intimacy-goal orientations also have been related to the avoidance of help seeking. A status-goal orientation is similar to a performance-goal orientation in that both concern maintaining a certain image: A performance-goal orientation concerns a student's image of academic ability, whereas a status-goal orientation concerns a student's social image or reputation. In both cases, there is a heightened awareness of the self relative to others and a potential need to protect self-worth. Because help seeking is a public behavior that has the potential to garner attention and evaluation from one's peers, students who have a status-goal orientation perceive help seeking as threatening to their self-worth and are more likely to avoid seeking help when they need it (Ryan *et al.*, 1997). In contrast,

an intimacy-goal orientation represents the desire to interact with and form relationships with peers. Seeking help within the classroom provides an opportunity for legitimate peer interaction. The goal to form and maintain positive peer relationships is negatively related to avoidance of help seeking (Ryan *et al.*, 1997). These findings parallel the findings for perceptions of social competence and reinforce the proposition that social motivational constructs are linked to help seeking and that help seeking needs to be considered both a self-regulatory strategy and a social interaction.

Achievement Level and Goal Orientations

The discussion to this point has focused on main effects of goal orientations, but research suggests that it is important to consider interactive effects of goal orientations and achievement level on avoidance of help seeking. Ryan *et al.* (1997) found that the relation between adolescents' performance-goal orientation and their help-seeking behavior depended in part on their actual level of achievement. As grade point average decreased, the endorsement of a performance-goal orientation was related to increased competence concerns regarding help seeking and increased avoidance of help seeking. Thus, when students adopt a goal to outperform others but receive information that they are not achieving that goal, they are particularly vulnerable to negative perceptions about help seeking and are more likely to avoid it. These findings are in line with the results of an experimental study by Butler and Neuman (1995), which found a similar interaction between a performance-goal orientation and initial competence at solving puzzles. These findings are troubling but provide insight as to which students in the classroom do not seek help when they need it. First, lower achieving students feel more threatened and report more avoidance of help seeking when needed than do higher achieving students. Furthermore, when students who are lower achievers endorse a performance-goal orientation, the discrepancies become even greater. The very children who need help the most, seek it the least, and a performance-goal orientation exacerbates the situation.

The finding that actual academic achievement moderates the impact of performance-goal orientation on help-seeking attitudes and behaviors suggests that a student's social situation might moderate the impact of a social status-goal orientation on help seeking. The desire to be popular might impact help-seeking attitudes and behavior differently, depending on whether students actually are liked and respected by their peers. An interesting question for future research is whether students' sociometric status would moderate the impact of a social status-goal orientation on competence concerns regarding help seeking and the avoidance of help seeking.

CLASSROOM CONTEXT, STUDENT MOTIVATION, AND AVOIDANCE OF HELP SEEKING

It is also important to consider how the classroom context may influence help seeking (Nelson-Le Gall, 1985; Newman, 1994, 1998; Ryan *et al.*, 1998). Teachers may set up environments that vary greatly in regards to fostering or discouraging students' help seeking. We discuss three dimensions of classrooms that are likely to affect the avoidance of help seeking: (1) classroom rules and norms, (2) classroom goal structure, and (3) social/interpersonal climate of the classroom.

Classroom Rules and Norms

The rules and norms teachers establish in the classroom are likely to influence the opportunity structure for student help seeking. For example, Karabenick and Sharma (1994) found that college students' perceptions of the amount of support the instructor provided in the class were linked to students' asking of questions, even when controlling for the students' level of confusion. In their model, teacher support included providing opportunities for question asking, specific instructions to the students on how to ask questions, and reward–punishment contingencies (aspects of rules), as well as teachers' informational or procedural responses to questions, emotional responses to questions, and the value placed on questions by the teacher (aspects of norms).

In interviews, we conducted with seventh- and eighth-grade students, they often referred to such rules and norms when asked about help seeking in the classroom (Ryan, 1996). For example, students told us "Like if the teacher is giving a lecture she doesn't want you to raise your hand and start talking"; "Usually there is a time (for questions) when, after she gives instructions"; "Most of the time at the end of class if you really don't understand something you can go up and ask the teacher." Such procedures may or may not be explicitly stated, but students' perceptions of such rules and norms are likely to influence the timing and manner in which help is sought, as Karabenick and Sharma (1994) showed for the college classroom.

In addition to rules and norms specific to help seeking, rules and norms for completing tasks, participating in class, and interacting with students are also likely to impact help seeking (Karabenick and Sharma, 1994; McCaslin and Good, 1996). Students' might be aware that they need help, but the rules and norms of the environment will be important determinants of how the student responds to this awareness. For example, some teachers allow students to talk to others during seatwork to receive help. In such a classroom, help seeking should be facilitated. In other classrooms, talking to other

students during seatwork may be prohibited by the classroom rules because it is construed as cheating or as not doing your own work, and should constrain help-seeking behavior. Thus, help avoidance must be considered in the context of such rules and norms. Classroom rules and norms interact with students' personal motivational characteristics to influence help seeking. Rules and norms can be conceptualized in their own right and taken at face value (i.e., "No talking during seatwork" means no talking during seatwork and influences help seeking in an obvious way). However, the norms and rules of classrooms also reflect other characteristics or dimensions of classrooms that have been found to be important influences on students' help-seeking beliefs and behaviors: the achievement goal structure and the social/interpersonal climate.

Achievement Goal Structure in the Classroom

The classroom goal structure is communicated to students in many ways, including the types of academic tasks they are given, how they are recognized and evaluated, and how they are encouraged to do their work (Ames, 1992; Midgley, 1993). A mastery-goal structure communicates to students that understanding, improvement, and the intrinsic value of learning are the primary reasons for involvement in schoolwork. A performance-goal structure communicates to students that demonstrating their ability relative to others is of primary importance in the classroom.

In a recent study (Ryan *et al.*, 1998), we used multilevel analyses to investigate how the classroom goal structure related to avoidance of help seeking. We examined differential patterns of help avoidance across 63 seventh-grade math classrooms. First, students' reported levels of avoidance of help seeking did vary across classrooms. Thus, in some classrooms students reported avoiding seeking help significantly more than in other classrooms. We then explored whether this variablility in levels of help avoidance could be explained by the classroom goal structure. Students' perception of a mastery classroom goal structure was associated with a lower level of help avoidance, whereas their perception of a performance classroom goal structure was associated with a higher level of help avoidance. In classrooms where students perceived that the focus was on understanding, mastery, and the intrinsic value of learning—compared to classrooms where the focus was on competition and proving one's ability—students were less likely to avoid seeking help with their work when they needed it. This finding was in line with previous studies that have found that students' personal goal orientations are related to their help-seeking behavior (e.g., Ryan and Pintrich, 1997). However, this study provided evidence for contextual effects on the avoidance of help seeking, which previous studies had not addressed.

Although the study did not examine help seeking in the classroom context, Newman (1998) designed a microgenetic experimental study that manipulated mastery and performance goals to investigate how these manipulated contextual goals interacted with elementary students' personal mastery and performance goals to predict help seeking and performance over time. He found that there was an interaction between the contextual goals and personal goals that related to help seeking. When personal and contextual goals were in congruence and focused on performance concerns, students were more likely to avoid seeking help. When the goals were incongruent, in particular, when students who were personally more performance oriented were placed in a mastery context, the context moderated their tendency to avoid help seeking, and they sought more help. This study provides insights about how personal goals and contextual-goal stresses can interact to influence help seeking. In addition, it highlights the need for more research that examines how different contextual factors, including goal structures and classroom rules and climate, might interact with personal characteristics of students to influence help-seeking behavior.

Social/Interpersonal Climate of the Classroom

Help seeking combines aspects of social and cognitive engagement, in that it is both a learning strategy and a social interaction with others (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981, 1985). Previously, we discussed how various social constructs, such as perceptions of social competence and social-goal orientations, are related to help avoidance in the classroom. Familiarity as well as positive relations increase the likelihood that a student will ask another person for help (Nelson-Le Gall and Gumerman, 1984; Newman and Schwager, 1993; Wintre *et al.*, 1988). Specifically, Nelson-Le Gall and Gumerman (1984) found that when children were presented with vignettes of problems they reported that friendship was an important consideration when deciding whom they would ask for help. Newman and Schwager (1993) found that students' perceptions that that the teacher likes the student and that she likes the teacher was related to students' reports of help seeking in the classroom. Additionally, when students perceive themselves as comfortable and skillful in relating to others, they are more likely to seek help (Ryan and Pintrich, 1997). When they are concerned with their social image or status among their peers, they are less likely to ask for help (Ryan *et al.*, 1997).

Given the social nature of help seeking, it is likely that the social climate of the classroom influences students' help-seeking behavior. Classrooms characterized as caring, supportive, and friendly are likely to make students feel more comfortable interacting with the teacher and other students. In an environment in which students feel that others know and relate

to them beyond their academic abilities, they may be less likely to feel that asking for help will incur negative judgments. In a study investigating one dimension of the social climate in students' help avoidance, Ryan *et al.* (1998) found that the teacher's concern about the social and emotional well-being of their students was related to less help avoidance, particularly for students who doubted their ability to successfully do their academic work. As we discussed previously, prior research has found that students who have low self-efficacy for their academic work are more likely to feel threatened by their need for help and to avoid help seeking than are students who have high self-efficacy for their academic work. However, Ryan *et al.* (1998) found that this relation between academic self-efficacy and help avoidance varied across classrooms. In some classrooms, there was a more equitable distribution of help seeking by students with varying levels of efficacy. Importantly, the teacher's concern about social–emotional nurturing lessened the relation between efficacy and help avoidance. Thus, the troubling situation where low-efficacy adolescents avoid seeking help more than do their high efficacy peers was ameliorated when teachers were concerned with their students' social–emotional needs.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research has explored help avoidance among young adolescent students. Developmental characteristics of young adolescent students include increased self-consciousness and sensitivity to social comparison, increased desire for autonomy, and increased need for positive and supportive relationships with both peers and teachers (Eccles *et al.*, 1993; Eccles and Midgley, 1989; Nicholls, 1990). Our findings are in line with a consideration of young adolescents' developmental needs. Regarding sensitivity to social comparison, we discussed how a goal orientation toward performing the best and demonstrating ability, both at the individual and the classroom level, exacerbates competence concerns and help avoidance. Regarding increased need for positive social relationships, we discussed how students' social status-goal orientations as well as the perception that one lacks social competence increase competence concerns and help avoidance. Further, the social climate of the classroom is important for understanding students' help avoidance.

However, consideration of the developmental needs of young adolescents also suggests important avenues for future research. In this section, we discuss three potentially fruitful areas for future research into young adolescents' avoidance of help seeking. First, regarding young adolescents' increased sensitivity regarding social comparison, new developments in achievement goal theory that distinguishes between approach and avoidance-goal orientations might add to our understanding of goal

orientations and help avoidance. Second, regarding young adolescents' increased desire for autonomy, further exploration of autonomy concerns that adolescents have about asking for help might further our understanding of their avoidance of help seeking. Third, regarding young adolescents' increased need for positive relationships with peers and teachers, further analysis of the social climate of classrooms might build on our finding that teachers' concern with the social–emotional well-being of their students relates to help avoidance in the classroom.

The Role of Avoidance-Goal Orientations

Research investigating help avoidance has predominantly examined the role of approach-goal orientations. However, as described in this special issue, recently there has been theory and research to suggest that mastery- and performance-goal orientations are not sufficient to explain the diversity of findings in the goal orientation literature. Elliot and his colleagues (Elliot, 1997; Elliot and Church, 1997; Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996; Harackiewicz *et al.*, 1997; Harackiewicz *et al.*, 1998) as well as others (Middleton and Midgley, 1997; Skaalvik, 1997) suggested that a distinction between approach and avoidance performance-goal orientations is important. With an approach performance-goal orientation, students are concerned about demonstrating their ability, looking smart, or outperforming others. In contrast, with an avoidance performance-goal orientation, students are concerned with avoiding negative judgments of their ability or competence, in effect, trying to avoid looking dumb or stupid. This work has suggested that although an approach performance orientation is sometimes associated with maladaptive patterns of learning, it may also be associated with some positive outcomes. In contrast, an avoidance performance orientation is associated with maladaptive outcomes with no evidence of positive effects (Midgley *et al.*, in press; Pintrich, 2000b).

In terms of help seeking, an avoidance performance-goal orientation is likely to be important to avoidant behaviors like the avoidance of help seeking (Middleton and Midgley, 1997). Indeed, the goal to avoid negative judgments about ability resonates with competence concerns about help seeking (i.e., "I worry about asking for help because others will think I am dumb"). However, students who are concerned about avoiding looking dumb may be willing to seek "covert" help, that is help from others (such as a teacher) as long as other students are not able to see the help seeking and giving. In contrast, students who are focused on approach performance goals and who are trying to be the best students in the class may not seek any kind of help at all, covert or other, given that they do not want anyone to think they are less able. Middleton and Midgley (1997) included both the

approach and the avoidance components of performance goal orientations in a study examining several student outcomes, including avoiding help seeking. The avoidance component of performance-goal orientations emerged as a predictor of avoiding help seeking, whereas the approach component did not, when both were included in the same model. Additional research on approach and avoidance performance-goal orientations and different help-seeking behaviors and attitudes would add to our understanding.

There have been proposals to extend the approach–avoidance distinction to mastery goals (cf., Elliot, 1999; Pintrich, 2000a,b). In an approach mastery-goal orientation, students are focused on mastery, self-improvement, and progress; in effect, approaching or going toward mastery. Pintrich (2000a,b) has suggested that there may be an avoid mastery-goal orientation where students are trying to avoid not mastering the task or to avoid misunderstanding the task. There is no empirical support for an avoid mastery goal yet, but it seems reasonable that students could be focused on avoiding misunderstanding or on not mastering the task, without concern for how others are doing. For example, there may be "perfectionistic" students who are not concerned with how others are doing or with looking stupid or dumb, but who are only concerned with not doing the task incorrectly.

This distinction might be useful in predicting differential help avoidance behaviors. Whereas an approach mastery-goal orientation ameliorates concerns about competence and decreases avoidance of help seeking, a focus on avoiding misunderstanding—and a determination to not get something wrong because of high standards for oneself—might engender concerns about competence that would lead students to avoid help seeking. On the other hand, because an avoidance mastery goal does not reflect a concern about others, these students might be willing to ask for "dependent" help to avoid doing the task or work improperly or incorrectly. Again, future research needs to examine the potential existence of an avoid mastery goal as well as the possibility of differential relations between approach and avoidance mastery goal orientations and the avoidance of help seeking.

The approach–avoidance distinction between achievement-goal orientations might also be interesting to explore with social-goal orientations. We have found that students who are concerned with garnering social prestige and a "popular" reputation are more threatened by help seeking and are more likely to avoid help seeking. However, there might very well be students who are most concerned with avoiding any damage to their social reputation (e.g., those who don't want to be seen with unpopular students). In more colloquial terms, this is the distinction between the desire to be socially successful (i.e., "cool" or "popular") and the dread of being socially awkward (i.e., "dork" or "geek"). During adolescence, a time characterized by increased self-consciousness and egocentrism that leads individuals

to believe their behavior is the focus of everyone else's attention, such an avoidance-goal orientation might foster avoidant behaviors in the classroom. Future research should address these potential relations with help seeking that might be fostered by different approach and avoidance orientations to social goals.

The Role of Autonomy Concerns

Predominantly, our research has focused on students' reluctance to seek help because of competence concerns, that is, the perception that help seeking conveys to others that one lacks ability. This approach has been fruitful in understanding help avoidance. Some young adolescent students worry about "looking dumb" when asking for help, and this is a strong predictor of reported help avoidance (Ryan and Pintrich, 1997). However, in addition to competence concerns, autonomy concerns underlie the decision to avoid seeking help (Butler, 1998). The perception of help seeking as a dependent behavior competes with the desire for autonomy and impedes students' asking for help when they need it. In a sample of young adolescents, Butler (1998) found that autonomy reasons for help avoidance were more strongly endorsed than competence concerns did.

In addition to investigating different reasons for help avoidance, Butler (1998) also put students into experimental situations and observed their help-seeking behavior. Interestingly, students who had endorsed autonomy reasons for avoiding help seeking were more likely to request adaptive type help when solving problems. This suggests that if help avoidance is born out of a desire to be autonomous, then when students ultimately do seek help, they are going to ask for the type of help that will support their own autonomy in the future. In contrast, students who had endorsed competence reasons for avoiding help seeking were more likely to avoid help seeking in solving problems (Butler, 1998).

Current explanations of the links between autonomy and competence concerns regarding help seeking and goal orientations are incomplete. Specifically, competence concerns have been conceptualized as judgments about ability (relative to others) (Butler and Neuman, 1995; Butler, 1998; Ryan *et al.*, 1997; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997) and autonomy concerns have been conceptualized as (reflecting a) striving for independent mastery (Butler and Neuman, 1995; Butler, 1998; Newman, 1990). Given these conceptualizations, it is not surprising that researchers have linked a performance-goal orientation with competence concerns (Ryan *et al.*, 1997; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997) and a mastery-goal orientation with autonomy concerns (Butler and Neuman, 1995). We suggest that the reasons for help avoidance (concerns about autonomy and concerns about competence) may be conceptualized

	Autonomy Concerns	Competence Concerns
Mastery Goal Orientation	Desire independent mastery—will learn/enjoy more if persist alone *"I wouldn't ask for help because I'll learn more if I do it alone"*	Asking for help is evidence that one didn't master the task, didn't learn *"I wouldn't ask for help because it would mean that I don't understand the task"*
Performance Goal Orientation	Desire self-reliance—means more capable if do alone *"I wouldn't ask for help because I want to show that I can do it myself"*	Asking for help is evidence that one lacks ability *"I wouldn't ask for help because it would make me look stupid"*

Fig. 1. Reasons for help avoidance.

along the lines of both a mastery-goal orientation and a performance-goal orientation (see Fig. 1). That is, concerns for autonomy and competence should not be considered one dimension but rather distinguished as being driven by a mastery-goal orientation *or* driven by a performance-goal orientation.

Avoiding help seeking for reasons related to a desire for autonomy could be quite different depending on students' goal orientation. Students might desire autonomy because they believe they will learn more if they persist on the task independently. This is congruent with a mastery-goal orientation, which concerns a focus on developing competence with self-referential standards and defining success as when something new is learned (the top left cell in Fig. 1). Students might also desire autonomy because they want to be self-reliant and they believe completing a task independently means they are more capable. This is congruent with a performance approach goal orientation, which focuses on demonstrating competence and defines success as when one garners positive judgments about one's ability relative to others (the bottom left cell in Fig. 1). Thus, the difference in these cells is illustrated by a student thinking "I wouldn't ask for help because I'll learn more if I do it alone" (mastery-goal orientation/autonomy concerns) vs. "I wouldn't ask for help because I want to show that I can do it myself" (performance-goal orientation/autonomy concerns).

Similarly, avoiding help seeking for reasons related to threat to competence could be quite different in a way that relates to achievement-goal orientation. Students might construe help seeking as evidence that they didn't learn what they were supposed to, that they didn't master the task. This is

congruent with a mastery-goal orientation, when a student is focused on gaining understanding and mastery and avoiding misunderstanding or on not mastering the task (top right cell in Fig. 1). This is quite different than students who are threatened by help seeking because they see it as evidence that they lack ability and that others will think they are dumb or stupid if they ask for help. Such concerns resonate with a performance-goal orientation to demonstrate competence relative to other students (bottom right cell in Fig. 1). The difference in these cells is a student thinking "I wouldn't ask for help because it would mean that I don't understand the task" (mastery-goal orientation/competence concerns) vs. "I wouldn't ask for help because it would make me look stupid" (performance-goal orientation/competence concerns).

The proposed framework needs to be tested as extant research on reasons for help avoidance and goal orientations has either examined only one dimension of competence concerns (top right cell in Fig. 1) or grouped both of the proposed dimensions of autonomy concerns together (top and bottom cells in left column in Fig. 1) and discussed these autonomy concerns as striving for independent mastery. For example, our research indicates that students do experience competency concerns regarding seeking help (Ryan and Pintrich, 1997). However, the items in the scale only asked about concerns about relative ability (e.g., "I think other kids will think I am dumb if I ask a question in math class"), and thus our knowledge is incomplete. Further, distinctions in concerns about autonomy regarding help seeking might resolve previous inconsistent findings regarding goal orientation and autonomy concerns. In an experimental study comparing student explanations for help avoidance in mastery and performance goal conditions, Butler and Neuman (1995) found no differences in the provided reasons for help avoidance when students were asked about their own behavior after the experiment. However, when asked about another, hypothetical, student's help avoidance, students in the mastery condition were more likely to mention autonomy concerns than were students in the performance condition. The example of student statements about autonomy concerns—"I wanted to be independent"—did not distinguish whether the student wanted to be independent, to gain mastery, or to demonstrate self-reliance. Perhaps further distinction between aspects of autonomy would show clearer relations to goal orientations.

The proposed framework may be useful for understanding different help-seeking behaviors in the classroom. As discussed previously, Butler's research on students' reasons for help avoidance and students' help-seeking behaviors (Butler, 1998) has indicated that autonomy concerns lead to adaptive help-seeking behavior, and competence concerns lead to avoidance of help seeking. Research on students' goal orientations and help-seeking

behaviors has indicated that a mastery-goal orientation leads to adaptive help-seeking behavior and a performance-goal orientation leads to the avoidance of help-seeking behavior. Thus, predictions stemming from Butler's work on reasons for help avoidance (Butler, 1998) and the studies on goal orientation (e.g., Ryan and Pintrich, 1997) converge regarding two of the categories. Students in the autonomous-mastery category (top left cell in Fig. 1) would be more likely to ask for adaptive type help both to achieve mastery goals and to ultimately achieve autonomy. Students in the competence-performance category (bottom right cell in Fig. 1) would be more likely to avoid help seeking both to achieve performance goals and to address competence concerns. However, extant research yields different hypotheses about what we might expect from two of the categories. Students in the competence-mastery category (top right cell in Fig. 1) may ask for adaptive type help to achieve mastery goals or avoid seeking help to address competence concerns. Would mastery goals or competence concerns prevail? Students in the autonomous-performance category (bottom left cell in Fig. 1) may ask for adaptive type help to ultimately achieve autonomy or avoid seeking help to achieve performance goals. Would performance goals or autonomy concerns prevail?

Recent developments in achievement goal theory distinguishing between approach and avoidance orientations may help clarify the differential predictions for these two categories. In particular, an approach performance-goal orientation (focus on demonstrating competence) may be particularly salient to students in the autonomy-performance category, whereas an avoidance performance-goal orientation (focus on not demonstrating incompetence) may be particularly salient to students in the competence-performance group (bottom right cell, Fig. 1).

The Role of the Social Environment

Research has clearly shown that at the individual level, students' social motivation (perceptions of competence and social-goal orientations) and relationships (familiarity and positive relationships) impact students' help-seeking behavior (Nelson-Le Gall and Gumerman, 1984; Newman and Schwager, 1993; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997; Ryan *et al.*, 1997; Wintre *et al.*, 1988). There is also some evidence that the social climate plays a role in the avoidance of help seeking (Ryan *et al.*, 1998). We need to know more about how the social aspects of the classroom environment can support or undermine students' help-seeking behavior.

Teachers vary in the values that they communicate to students about relating to and respecting peers (Ryan and Patrick, 1999). An observational study of 19 classrooms found considerable variability in interactions among

students and between the teacher and students (Anderson *et al.*, 1988). Some classrooms were characterized by positive and comfortable relationships and frequent prosocial and cooperative interactions, whereas other classrooms had an unpleasant affective tone and frequent negative student interactions such as bickering, criticism, and insults. Thus, important questions include (1) What messages does the teacher send to students about their relationships with other students in the classroom? (2) What are the norms and values regarding student relationships in the classroom? (3) How do these norms and values impact the avoidance of help seeking?

Norms and values that teachers might differentially promote concern interaction and mutual respect with peers around tasks (Ryan and Patrick, 1999). Is it acceptable and encouraged for students to interact with their classmates on academic work? Is learning something one does independently or collaboratively? What is acceptable behavior in responding to classmates' ideas and efforts? Is there an awareness and valuing of positive, respectful interactions between classmates that do not exclude some students or generate negative feelings toward any students? When students are encouraged to interact and exchange ideas with each other during academic tasks they should feel more efficacious because they have a greater array of resources on which to draw than if they were only working individually. An emphasis on mutual respect in the classroom should contribute to students' feelings of psychological safety and comfort, including low anxiety and low threat regarding making mistakes. Thus, the promotion by teachers, and perception by students, that interaction with peers is integral to learning and that mutual respect is valued are likely to decrease help avoidance.

CONCLUSION

When students do not ask for help when they need it, they run the risk of undermining their learning and achievement. In this article, we have discussed a number of reasons why students avoid help seeking in the classroom. Individual as well as contextual characteristics influence this avoidance behavior. Regarding individual characteristics, we discussed our findings regarding students' perceptions of competence and goal orientations in the academic as well as the social domain. Regarding contextual characteristics, we discussed classroom rules as well as the achievement goal structure and social or interpersonal climate of classrooms. Taken together, research has accumulated significant information about which type of students avoid help seeking and what circumstances enhance or diminish this behavior. Students who feel insecure about their abilities—academically or relating socially to other students—are more likely to avoid help seeking. Students

who are focused on their reputation—academic or social—are more likely to avoid help seeking. In classrooms where teachers emphasize personal improvement and promote positive social relationships, concerns about help seeking decrease and concerns about help avoidance decrease. In contrast, in classrooms where teachers highlight ability comparisons among students, concerns about help seeking increase and concerns about help avoidance increase. However, there is still much psychologists do not know about the avoidance of help seeking. We discussed three areas that future research might address to make knowledge more complete: avoidance-goal orientations, autonomy concerns, and the social environment. By more fully explicating and integrating avoidance-goal orientations, autonomy issues, and characteristics of the social climate of classrooms into current theories, research will further enhance the understanding of help avoidance. Such research has the potential to help teachers design classroom environments in which students who need help can seek help when they need it.

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