

Contextualizing Academic Help-Seeking and Help-Giving within a System View of Culture

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Abstract: In this qualitative study, we used a thematic narrative approach to explore how culture impacts undergraduate students' motivations to seek and give academic help. Adopting Kitayama's (2002) system view of culture, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with two participants to understand how their willingness to seek and give academic help can be situated in a cultural context. Both students' narratives revealed how cultural influences from their upbringing—particularly those related to a fear of failure, academic excellence, collaboration, and familial responsibilities—have evolved to shape their willingness to seek and give academic help. Our findings emphasize the dynamic and multifaceted nature of culture in influencing help-seeking and help-giving, calling for a more culturally sensitive approach to researching and fostering self-regulated learning behaviors across various environments.

Introduction

Learning is an inherently interactive process whereby individuals draw on the expertise of others to gain knowledge, achieve their academic goals, and overcome obstacles related to learning (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003). For this reason, academic help-seeking and help-giving—defined as the acts of requesting and providing support related to learning, respectively—are behaviors that are essential to success in educational settings (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003). Students who seek and receive academic support have been shown to have more positive learning outcomes (e.g., higher grades, greater engagement) than those who do not across various age groups (Chen, 2005; Fong et al., 2023; Karabenick & Knapp, 1991; Marchand & Skinner, 2007). Additionally, students who give academic help to others benefit greatly as well by having the opportunity to solidify their own learning (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003).

With the knowledge that help-seeking and help-giving are important for learning, it is crucial that researchers and educators understand how students of diverse backgrounds engage in these behaviors. Here, we focus on culture as a motivational force because students' cultural contexts have been shown to play influential roles in shaping how they interact with their instructors and peers in educational settings (Li, 2012). We employ a thematic narrative approach to qualitative research to highlight how two students' experiences with academic help-seeking and help-giving can be situated within their local cultural context. This approach explores how individuals remember and make sense of their stories by focusing on the content of their narratives (Esin, 2011). By using this approach, we hope to extend existing conceptualizations of these behaviors and ultimately support educators' efforts to foster helping interactions in a culturally sensitive manner.

In the following sections, we outline our theoretical approach to studying culture and summarize the importance of scholarship that places academic help-seeking and help-giving in a cultural context.

Theoretical framework

We adopt Kitayama's (2002) system view of culture as our guiding theoretical framework. Within this framework, culture is conceptualized as a system encompassing two reciprocally linked components: a) shared beliefs and practices of social groups that are transmitted through interaction across generations, and b) individual mentalities and behaviors that are coordinated with these shared worldviews and practices. In other words, culture is a dynamic process by which shared and individual ways of interacting with the social world influence one another over time (Zusho & Pintrich, 2003). In contrast to a conventional entity view of culture, which sees culture as a fixed set of characteristics that are uniform across all individuals within a particular group, a system view acknowledges the inherent complexity of culture and thus rejects oversimplified accounts of individuals' cultural experiences (Kitayama, 2002).

Within this framework, students' motivations for engaging in various learning behaviors (e.g., help-seeking, help-giving) emerge from this dynamic interplay between culture's shared and individual components (Zusho & Pintrich, 2003). Therefore, our research seeks to investigate cultural influences on learning while taking into account that: a) culture is both a shared and personal experience for all individuals; b) culture is a process of

mutual constitution that evolves over time; and c) cultural beliefs and practices can manifest at multiple levels of society, including one's nation, ethnic group, college campus, and family (Erez & Gati, 2004).

Literature review

Help-seeking and help-giving as self-regulated learning behaviors

Existing scholarship typically positions the individual student as the primary driver in one's decision to seek or give academic help. For instance, in prior work (e.g., Newman, 1994; Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003), researchers have frequently characterized academic help-seeking and help-giving as self-regulated learning (SRL) behaviors, or personally initiated processes where students exercise control over their own learning (Zimmerman, 1990). Students who seek academic help regulate their learning by monitoring their learning, demonstrating an awareness of their need for help, and using others as a resource to achieve their academic goals (Newman, 1994). Similarly, students who give academic help regulate their learning by monitoring their environment and contributing to a setting where students support each other academically (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003).

When help-seeking and help-giving are seen mainly as SRL behaviors driven primarily by the individual student, efforts to foster these behaviors tend to de-emphasize the role of culture. This perspective instead tends to focus on individual students' personal abilities, which often leads to an emphasis on teaching students to develop these skills as tools for exercising individual control over their classroom environment (e.g., Callan et al., 2021). As Markus (2016) explained, "When theorists and practitioners assume that action is driven primarily by entities inside people—motives, personal interests, mindsets, attitudes, values, needs and goals, measurement, as well as efforts to incentivize or change behavior will focus on these entities" (p. 163).

Help-seeking and help-giving in a cultural context

We believe that efforts to understand academic helping behaviors within a SRL framework have contributed valuable insights into how students can monitor their own learning, set academic goals, and contribute to both their and others' learning in a productive manner. However, at the same time, these approaches may paint a limited picture of students' experiences with academic help-seeking and help-giving. Specifically, existing scholarship often overlooks how academic help-seeking and help-giving can be situated within cultural factors that relate to but extend beyond the individual self.

Existing research shows that students' help-seeking and help-giving behaviors in non-academic settings are deeply shaped by one's culture. For instance, studies have shown that among the Asian American population, culturally internalized stigma against emotional vulnerability and mental health concerns can lead students to refrain from seeking help for psychological problems (Han & Pong, 2015). Additionally, research demonstrates that within predominantly collectivist cultures (which tend to emphasize a view of one's self as linked to others), individuals may be particularly inclined to offer help to others, out of a concern for the welfare of individuals within one's ingroup (Lampridis & Papastyliaou, 2017).

However, it remains unclear how culture is related to help-seeking and help-giving motivation in academic settings. Although some existing scholarship has attempted to account for the role of culture in students' academic help-seeking and help-giving behaviors, these studies often rely on survey methods that reduce students' cultural background to their nationality (e.g., Crystal et al., 2008) or a single survey score (e.g., Petrella & Gore, 2013). We believe such studies are useful for researchers seeking to understand how helping behaviors can be related to social factors, but they ultimately do not capture the nuanced ways in which culture involves individual mentalities and behaviors that evolve and adapt over time in response to a variety of shared beliefs and practices.

The present study

We employed a thematic narrative approach to examine college students' experiences with academic help-seeking and help-giving through a cultural lens. We have chosen this approach because it: a) is aligned with our conceptualization of culture as dynamic and thus evolving over time (Kitayama, 2002), and b) allows us to highlight both participants' stories and the cultural context within which these stories are told (Esin, 2011).

We deliberately focus on the stories of just two students to facilitate a rich and nuanced exploration of our research topic. In this study, we do not aim to arrive at an exhaustive or generalizable understanding of how culture shapes help-seeking and help-giving behaviors. Rather, our goal is to privilege the voices and draw from the lived experiences of two students to provide a nuanced and contextual picture of their experiences of, understanding of, and emotional reactions to academic help-seeking and help-giving, from within their own cultural perspectives. In doing so, we hope to encourage researchers and educators to deepen their understanding of these behaviors to account for the complex role of culture, ultimately to support their students' intellectual and

personal growth. Our research question is: How do students make sense of their experiences with academic help-seeking and help-giving in a cultural context?

Methods

Participants and procedure

Participants were two undergraduate students—Violet and Laura (pseudonyms, selected by the participants)—enrolled in an introductory statistics course at a large public flagship university in the midwestern United States, characterized as a predominantly White institution (PWI). The course enrolls approximately 1,000 students per semester and fulfills a quantitative reasoning requirement for a variety of majors.

Violet is a 19-year-old White female who immigrated with her family from a Southeastern European country to the midwestern United States when she was 12 years old. She is majoring in Human Development & Family Studies and minoring in Psychology and Spanish. Laura is an 18-year-old Chinese female who grew up in a large city in the midwestern United States. She is majoring in Business. At the time of data collection, Violet and Laura had both recently completed their first year of college.

Both participants had previously participated in a survey study investigating students' academic helping behaviors and expressed their interest in participating in a follow-up interview. We selected these two participants for the present study due to their distinct cultural backgrounds and the complex ways in which they have navigated multiple cultural influences throughout their lives. The first author performed individual, hour-long, semi-structured interviews with both participants via Zoom. Violet's interview was conducted on June 22, 2023, and Laura's interview was conducted on July 10, 2023. We audio-recorded and transcribed each interview prior to analysis. The university's Institutional Review Board approved all aspects of the study protocol, and both participants provided informed consent before the interview.

Our interview items addressed participants' background (e.g., "Tell me about where you grew up"), culture (e.g., "Based on your own beliefs and experiences, how would you define culture?," "How would you describe your culture?"), values (e.g., "Tell me about some values that are most important to you, personally"), motivations for seeking and giving help (e.g., "Tell me about factors that motivate you to seek/give help") and experiences with help-seeking and help-giving in connection to their upbringing, values, and culture (e.g., "How much do you feel like your culture influences your willingness to seek/give academic help, if at all?").

Analysis

We coded each transcript to identify narrative content (i.e., phrases, sentences, or paragraphs in participants' transcripts) that corresponded to five pre-defined thematic categories: a) the participants' upbringing and/or cultural background; b) the participants' experiences with academic help-seeking; c) the participants' experiences with academic help-giving; d) how the participants' willingness to seek academic help is connected to their culture; and e) how the participants' willingness to give academic help is connected to their culture. We developed these thematic categories by appealing to existing literature, our research question, and our theoretical framework. During analysis, we also remained open to additional relevant themes that may have emerged from the data.

To enhance the dependability of our findings, the first and second authors independently coded each interview transcript and met to come to a consensus about themes and illustrative examples in the data. To enhance the credibility of our findings, we reflected on our positionality as researchers and recognized how our own identities, experiences, and biases have influenced how we approach this work. For example, the first author is a Taiwanese American man whose own experiences with help-seeking and help-giving have been shaped by cultural influences spanning his ethnicity, religion, gender, and more. Additionally, we presented our themes and illustrative examples to our participants to verify that we accurately captured their experiences; both participants confirmed the credibility of our findings. To enhance the transferability of our findings, we provide thick descriptions of our participants' upbringing and cultural context when describing our results (Anney, 2014).

Findings

In the following sections, we bring together illustrative quotations that shed light on Violet and Laura's experiences with help-seeking and help-giving in the context of their culture. To maintain narrative coherence, we present Violet and Laura's stories individually. For each participant, we describe: a) aspects of their upbringing and cultural background that provide context for understanding their help-seeking and help-giving experiences; b) their experiences with academic help-seeking, both generally and in a cultural context; and c) their experiences with academic help-giving, both generally and in a cultural context.

Violet

Upbringing and cultural background

Growing up in her home country, Violet's family experienced financial struggles. Her family's experiences with poverty shaped her early attitudes toward and performance in school:

It was a really poor environment, meaning the financial status of my family wasn't good. So we were kind of in poverty. And I remember going to school ... but to me ... it was not really of importance, I would say, because specifically to me, I wasn't good in school at all, because I also had my family that was struggling with money. So I think that was kind of a stressor on me also ... And it was really not strict parenting. People were kind of fending for themselves. It was not strict. It was like, you do whatever, you do whatever, no one really cares.

Despite the challenges she faced, Violet's cultural upbringing instilled in her values such as hard work, love, and helping others. Her father emphasized the importance of building connections with others:

I will say [I value] hard work, being respect or love, definitely love and helping others, having good relationships with others, also, good connections. I know my father was really big on connections because he had a lot of connections, and ... he wanted to teach us how to make connections because that's how you rely on people, and that's how you keep going in life, through connections.

Academic help-seeking

Violet described regularly experiencing a fear of failure and feelings of inadequacy when faced with academic challenges. For example, she explained that in the face of difficulty, "I put myself down because I think that the others get this material and I'm the only one that doesn't get it ... I could also have a mental breakdown in severe cases. Definitely in severe cases." This fear of failure currently motivates her to seek academic help; she elaborated, "I'll always imagine myself that if I don't get this problem or this issue, this challenge addressed, it might come at the end of the semester in my grade and I might fail the course. So that will be my motivation."

When asked about the connection between her upbringing and willingness to seek academic help, Violet revealed that she was raised in an environment where her parents often labeled her as lazy and criticized her for not doing her best. This upbringing left her with a fear of being viewed as lazy or not putting in enough effort, which currently motivates her to seek help for even minor academic challenges:

Because I was struggling with school when I was little, my parents would always call me lazy or that I'm not doing my best. So I guess now ... I will seek help a lot more than I need to. Because if I'm faced with a challenge, even if it's small and probably won't do any difference, I still seek help. Or if I misunderstood something, misread something, I will still email my professor because I'm scared of being called lazy or not doing what I need to do in order to succeed. So I think I have this stressor behind my back of my parents calling me lazy or not doing what I'm supposed to do. So I think I overdo it.

Violet emphasized that her parents' focus on her not doing enough has become an integral part of her cultural identity:

That keeps coming to my mind, my parents are telling me that I'm not doing enough. So I think that kind of has become part of my culture ... I think because they have been emphasizing that in my growing up years in my childhood, I think that has become part of me. So I think that's the biggest thing that has almost become part of my identity. So I think that's kind of motivating me to seek help. And that's kind of part of who I am, aka my culture.

Academic help-giving

When asked about her experiences with giving academic help to others, Violet stated that she finds herself able to empathize with those who face academic difficulties, given her own past struggles in school. She explained, "I almost always see myself when I see others struggle ... I can understand them. If they're stressed over something that they don't understand, I'm like, I understand that because I've been through it ... it feels familiar." Violet described this empathy towards others as a primary motivator for her to offer help to others. For example, in one

instance, her own experiences seeking academic help from a teaching assistant (TA) during office hours equipped her to help out a struggling peer, as Violet was able to “pass the help to her and kind of tell her all the TA said.”

Violet noted that her views on help-giving are linked to her cultural values, which stress the importance of people working together and building connections to achieve common goals:

I see a connection [between help-giving and how I was raised] because my parents were big on having relationship with others. So I think now, why I think it’s important for peers to give each other help: I think it’s to establish a connection and relationships. So I think by helping, we actually, by going through the same struggle, we actually start establishing more strong relationships with each other, than let’s say, going out and having fun. I think struggling through something has a more beneficial outcome.

For Violet, this cultural emphasis on collaboration has only grown in importance over time, given the importance of working together in college settings:

I guess I’ve been taught for people to work together ... And even now, this value ... that’s even more developed in my college career or school career in general, because we’re all one in this planet, and we should all work together towards a common goal ... Yeah, so the emphasis on working together, that has influenced me to give help because I would work together with people towards a common goal, like solving an equation or solving a problem or whatever it is, working together and establishing good relationships.

Laura

Upbringing and cultural background

Laura was born into a Chinese family and spent her middle school years in a private Chinese Catholic school, where the students were mostly of Asian descent. Growing up in this environment, she described feeling a pressure to excel academically:

I think having a whole bunch of Asians around, just growing up in a really Asian community, having all these aunts and uncles around you ... that pressure, of course, that everyone talks about, and especially since how my middle school was basically all Asian. It was like, oh, not really pitted against each other. But ... some parts of the school we liked and some we didn’t, like, how they had an honor roll, and they posted on the wall for everyone in each class to see who made on the honor roll, and who was first or second honors, and then how, you know, you would either be really happy or really sad.

For Laura and her peers, the pressure to succeed academically stemmed from parental expectations, as well as the stereotype that Asian students are skilled in subjects like math and science.

I do just think that [pressure] comes from the fact that my whole middle school, we were all Asian, and then there’s the whole stereotype of how, you know, Asians are really good at math or science ... [Our parents] would always say, “Oh, you need to study or you need to do better on your next test.” I feel like there could have been more ... “Oh, I see that you’re doing your best, and that’s good, but I, you know, I still love you.” ... In math class, we would always be comparing our test scores ... So I think always hearing people talk about scores, it definitely kind of put a pressure on you to be like, “Oh, I need to do well on this test or this test” ’cause I know that people are gonna ask me, “What scores do you have?”

Academic help-seeking

Growing up in an environment where academic excellence was perceived to be the norm and expectation, Laura felt that seeking academic help was a sign of weakness or inadequacy. She felt she had to complete her work independently to make her parents proud and meet the academic standards she had set for herself:

In middle school, I felt like I didn’t really need to ask for help ’cause I had understood what was happening ... and my parents were like, “Oh, we’re so proud of you. You ... do well on your tests, blah, blah, blah.” And then going into high school, I feel like they have that same

expectation for me ... I felt like I couldn't stop doing well on my tests. I felt like I had to, you know, ace everything and do it all by myself. So ... part of me was like, I can't ask for help. I need to do this by myself, and I need to make sure, you know, I can make my parents proud and be like, "Oh ... you're still doing so well."

However, Laura's views on help-seeking shifted during high school, when she found herself "struggling a lot in physics." At first, Laura felt she could not seek academic help, explaining, "I felt like everyone else isn't struggling, like no one else is asking for help. So I felt like I also did not want to ask for help ... 'cause I felt like asking for help was kind of outing yourself." Despite this initial reluctance, Laura eventually had a conversation with her mother that allowed her to view help-seeking in a new light:

After the physics thing, I remember talking with my parents and being like, "Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I did so bad in physics. I didn't understand it." I felt so bad ... But then my mom was like ... "Oh, it doesn't matter if you need to ask for help. I want you to ask for help if you don't understand something. Because that's how you learn, asking your teacher to maybe explain a certain thing." So I do think after that talk I had with my mom, I was more inclined to reach out for help.

This conversation reframed how Laura viewed academic help-seeking and its relationship to her parents' expectations and her upbringing:

Before I had talked to my mom ... I had thought ... asking for help was not a good thing ... I was just supposed to know everything, and everything was supposed to just come ... but I didn't realize it's just what I thought. But then afterwards in high school, I think my mom talked to me, it was more like her saying ... it's not wrong to ask for help. So I think growing up, I just didn't know ... that it wasn't not right.

Laura described herself as someone who now will attempt to solve problems on her own but is willing to seek academic help when needed: "First ... I do really try to see if I could figure out something by myself ... if that didn't work, I would go to ... office hours, or I would ask my friends if they knew how to do it."

Academic help-giving

On the topic of academic help-giving, Laura explained that she offers academic help out of a desire to see others succeed: "I guess it's kind of just you want the person to succeed, like you don't want to just stand by and watch them struggle with something when you know that you could help them with that." For example, when a friend struggled with catching up on statistics lectures, Laura suggested a more effective study approach where they would "do the notebook first 'cause then she would actually physically be seeing the problems, kind of like ... how it would be on a test."

Laura noted that her willingness to give help is linked to her familial upbringing. As the older sister in her family, she was given the responsibility of helping her younger brother and cousins. These early experiences of helping her family members have translated to a willingness to help others in academic settings:

Growing up, my parents ... would always be like, "You have to help your younger brother." And then we have two younger cousins that are around the same age, like, "You have to make sure they're okay, watch over them after school, give them food, help them with their homework." So I think that was part of it, just always helping my brother and my two younger cousins growing up. So that was always something I would do, and I feel like that's, like, if they need anything, why I would help my friends too because ... I guess I'm instilled.

Discussion

Prior research has demonstrated that contextual factors (e.g., classroom structure) can play an important role in shaping students' motivation to engage in SRL behaviors, including help-seeking and help-giving (Marchand & Skinner, 2007; Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003). Nevertheless, the influence of culture on these behaviors has remained a relatively unexplored research area. Thus, our findings expand on existing work by contributing to a rich portrayal of how academic help-seeking and help-giving motivation can be deeply embedded within the cultural contexts of students' lives. Altogether, we believe this work: a) shows how students' own narratives can

be a valuable source of data for understanding the complexities of one's cultural experience, and b) provides a novel perspective by applying a cultural lens to the context of academic help-seeking and help-giving.

When interpreted through the lens of our theoretical framework, Violet and Laura's narratives provided valuable portrayals of how help-seeking and help-giving behaviors can be situated within a system view of culture (Kitayama, 2002). In their narratives, Violet and Laura both described themselves as negotiating multiple cultural influences, including national background, ethnicity, familial upbringing, school environment, and more. Together, their experiences demonstrated the rich and dynamic nature of culture, including reinterpretations of cultural presses at different points in their lives, underscoring that culture cannot be reduced to a single trait.

Violet's experiences with academic help-seeking in particular highlighted the multifaceted nature of culture, i.e., the notion that culture consists of both shared and individual elements. For example, in her interview, Violet described familial practices that were pivotal in shaping her views on help-seeking: her parents often labeled her as lazy academically and criticized her for putting insufficient effort into school. Furthermore, she explained that she has internalized these familial practices, thus making them "part of who I am." Because of this aspect of her culture, she believes that she seeks help more frequently than she probably should. Hence, Violet's narrative illustrated how her individual beliefs were coordinated with shared familial practices to shape her motivation to seek academic help.

On the other hand, Laura's journey with academic help-seeking highlighted the dynamic and evolving nature of culture. For instance, Laura's experiences in middle school, which were characterized by intense academic pressure and a desire to meet parental expectations, led her to believe she should not seek help for academic problems. However, Laura's conversation with her parents over her struggles in high school physics reshaped her understanding of her parents' expectations for her, as well as the role of help-seeking within these expectations. In other words, Laura's cultural perspective evolved when she recognized that her parents wanted her to seek help when needed. Thus, within Laura's narrative, the relationship between culture and help-seeking motivation transformed over time as she gained new experiences and insights.

Both Violet and Laura's narratives further showed how their experiences with help-giving can also be placed within a system view of culture. In her interview, Violet explained that through her familial upbringing in her home country, she developed an individual desire to build strong connections and help others. For Violet, this desire has only grown over the years, given the importance of working collectively towards a common goal in college settings. Relatedly, Laura explained that she sees helping her friends academically as an extension of her familial role as the older sister. Therefore, in both their narratives, Violet and Laura described a process by which shared cultural values from childhood have become individualized beliefs that in turn adapt continuously to new contexts and environments (e.g., the college setting).

Limitations and future directions

This research faces limitations that offer valuable directions for future research on the intersection of culture and helping behaviors. First, our reliance on interviews may have yielded a limited picture of how culture shapes Violet and Laura's help-seeking and help-giving practices, given that culture can influence individuals' behaviors in ways that are spontaneous or inaccessible to conscious reflection (Kitayama, 2002). Thus, future work may benefit from employing a combination of interviews and observational methods to examine how students of diverse cultural perspectives engage in help-seeking and help-giving spontaneously in classroom settings. Second, other analytic lenses might yield other important insights. For example, both participants were women, and we did not take into account how this aspect of self interacted with culture and individual experiences with respect to help-seeking and help-giving. Moreover, our analyses may have been enriched through open and axial coding, which would have allowed for the identification of emergent themes cutting across or intersecting with the predefined categories. Such analyses could yield insights that are nuanced and add to theoretical framing of the interplay between culture and individual as they impact students' development and success in academic settings.

Conclusion

This investigation provided a novel perspective on academic help-seeking and help-giving, given that existing conceptualizations of these behaviors tend to either neglect or over-simplify the role of culture in these beneficial SRL strategies. Specifically, our findings underscored the importance of going beyond simplistic understandings of culture (e.g., those that reduce cultural identity to a student's national background or a single survey score) when examining how diverse students engage in learning behaviors such as help-seeking and help-giving. Additionally, our qualitative approach highlighted the effectiveness of using students' own narratives to understand help-seeking and help-giving from a cultural perspective. These narratives provided an evolving and nuanced picture of the mutually influential relation between culture and individual, and how these relations impact students' understanding of engaging in seeking and giving academic help. For this reason, we urge researchers in

the learning sciences to investigate these topics further with an attentiveness to the complex relation between culture and helping behaviors across various educational settings. Ultimately, with a greater understanding of the cultural influences underlying students' engagement in help-seeking and help-giving, educators can, in turn, foster more supportive learning environments that cater to students of diverse cultural backgrounds.

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