

**WHEN HELPING HURTS HELPERS: ANTICIPATORY VERSUS REACTIVE
HELPING, HELPER'S RELATIVE STATUS, AND RECIPIENT SELF-THREAT**

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Abstract

Research on workplace helping suggests that helpers receive positive outcomes in return for their help. We argue that this predominantly positive view of recipient reactions to helpers is because the literature has not adequately distinguished the outcomes of reactive helping (i.e., assistance provided in response to a request) from those of anticipatory helping (i.e., assistance offered or provided in advance of being asked). We propose that anticipatory helping, especially from helpers with higher status than the recipient, is more self-threatening to recipients than reactive helping; hence, recipients are less likely to accept this help and more likely to lower their evaluations of both the helper's performance and their relationship with the helper. We find support for these hypotheses with four studies and one supplemental study that use experimental and field methodologies across a range of work contexts and social exchange relationships. Because our findings imply that both peer and higher status employees should withhold anticipatory help, which is impractical and potentially detrimental, we identify how these helpers can instead mitigate the negative effects of anticipatory helping by signaling a more balanced social exchange relationship with the recipient. We discuss how our findings expand research on helping, social exchange, and status.

Keywords: helping, status, self-threat, social exchange, employee outcomes

Workplace helping has been conceptualized as an affiliative and supportive behavior that results in the helper receiving benefits from others at work. Based on the principles of social exchange, when one employee helps another, this positive action is reciprocated by the recipient with various positive responses (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017; Lyons & Scott, 2012). Indeed, many organizational studies suggest that when employees help (e.g., by providing information or training team members), recipients not only welcome the assistance, but also rate helpers as higher performers and more likeable colleagues (Johnson, Erez, Kiker, & Motowidlo, 2002; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Fetter, 1991; Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009; Van Dyne & Lepine, 1998; Whiting, Podsakoff, & Pierce, 2008).

Yet, this prevailing view of recipients reacting positively to helpers at work is somewhat surprising in light of the broader literatures on social support and advice, which suggest that individuals often do not welcome support or advice from others (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997; Nadler & Fisher, 1986; Nadler, Fisher, & Itzhak, 1983; Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). Rather, receiving aid from others can make recipients feel inferior or incompetent and threaten their sense of adequacy and self-worth, potentially leading to more negative reactions directed at helpers. Given these conflicting perspectives, it is critical to understand why studies on workplace helping primarily suggest that helpers receive positive responses from recipients, and crucially, when this may not be the case.

We contend that past research has not adequately differentiated between the outcomes of *reactive helping*—that is, assistance provided in response to a request—and *anticipatory helping*—that is, anticipating the needs of others and offering or providing task assistance in advance of being asked (for an exception, see Lee, Bradburn, Johnson, Lin, & Chang, 2019). Driven largely by a narrative that maintains that “the majority of helping is done reactively” at

work (Bolino & Grant, 2016: 622; see also Bamberger, 2009: 50; Fisher, Pillemer, & Amabile, 2018: 1526), scholars often explicitly or implicitly assume that workplace helping is reactive or fail to distinguish it from anticipatory helping in their theory and empirics. This assumption is problematic, as emerging evidence suggests that anticipatory helping may be far more common at work than currently depicted (e.g., Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009; Lee et al., 2019).

Moreover, as we detail below, it is highly unlikely that anticipatory helping leads to the same positive social exchange outcomes as reactive helping due to its perceived threatening nature.

Therefore, we address these problems by differentiating the effects of anticipatory helping from reactive helping. We integrate social exchange theory and self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) to propose that anticipatory helping is more *self-threatening*—i.e., when an individual feels that their central view of the self is challenged, contradicted, or put in jeopardy (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Marr & Thau, 2014)—to recipients than reactive helping. Unlike reactive helping, which directly supports recipients, anticipatory helping is self-threatening because recipients are likely to interpret it as negative feedback on their competence or as a signal of their inferior status. We posit that this increased self-threat from anticipatory helping in turn triggers defensive reactions found in exchange encounters: namely, reducing recipients' *willingness to accept help* and undermining the recipient's ratings of the helper's *performance* (i.e., extent to which an employee meets the expectations and requirements of his or her role or job Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007) and *relational evaluations* (i.e., degree of likeability, friendliness, or pleasantness; Gibson, Harari, & Marr, 2018; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). Further, we argue that these effects of anticipatory helping will depend on the helper's status relative to the recipient. Recipients will care more deeply about, and thus be more threatened by, potential challenges to their competence and status from *higher-status helpers* (i.e., those higher

in rank based on the respect, prominence, and prestige conferred to them by others; Djurdjevic et al., 2017). By contrast, recipients will be less concerned, and thus less self-threatened, by anticipatory helping from lower-status helpers (Figure 1 illustrates these hypotheses).

Finally, we examine *balanced social exchange* as a factor that can mitigate the negative effects of anticipatory helping for higher-status helpers. Because employees often fail to recognize their need for help (Fisher et al., 2018), let alone seek or ask for it (Bamberger, 2009), it is not practical for higher-status employees—who often have the most expertise—to simply avoid anticipatory helping altogether. Accordingly, we suggest that higher-status helpers can minimize the effects of anticipatory helping on recipients' self-threat and negative responses by signaling a more balanced social exchange relationship with the recipient.

We make three main contributions in this research. First, we contribute to the literature on helping by demonstrating the importance of distinguishing between reactive and anticipatory helping at work (cf., Spitzmuller & Van Dyne, 2013), as these two types of helping correspond to significant differences in how recipients respond to helpers. In doing so, we offer an explanation for why past findings have almost uniformly suggested that helping is an effective strategy for individuals to enhance others' perceptions of their value or contribution to the group (e.g., Flynn, 2003a; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Podsakoff et al., 2009; Willer, 2009): in other words, these findings may apply more so to reactive helping but not anticipatory helping. Furthermore, our model extends several research streams examining anticipatory or unsolicited forms of help, support, and advice (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997; Grant et al., 2009; Landis, Fisher, & Menges, 2021; Lee et al., 2019; Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009) by identifying how anticipatory helping is more threatening and harmful when the helper has relatively higher status than, or a lower level of balance in the social exchange relationship, with the recipient. The implications of

these insights are important: without knowing why or when anticipatory helping may adversely influence recipient reactions, employees may assume it is effective and appreciated in situations where the exact opposite is true.

Second, our findings contribute to social exchange research. A main tenet of social exchange is that positively (negatively) valenced actions will be met with positive (negative) responses (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Gouldner, 1960; Lyons & Scott, 2012). By integrating self-affirmation theory with social exchange theory, we challenge this principle and explain why and when a positive behavior (anticipatory helping) is more likely to be met with a negative (vs. a positive) response. Third, we advance research on status by highlighting an exception to the common belief that higher-status actors are afforded greater leeway and benefits in their behaviors, generally (Hollander, 1958; Merton, 1968), and in their helping interactions, specifically. For example, past work suggests that people view help from higher-status helpers as more valuable (Flynn, 2006), and also view help-seeking from higher-status individuals as a sign of motivation and strength rather than inability (Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014). However, by accounting for the possibility of self-threat in anticipatory helping interactions, we predict and find that recipients actually respond more negatively to anticipatory helping from *higher-status* helpers, while *lower-status* helpers are less likely to provoke these negative reactions.

Ultimately, in combining and contributing to these diverse literatures, we develop and test a theoretical model intended to aid researchers and practitioners alike in determining what type of help to use, and when to use it, to enhance helping's benefits at work.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Helping is conceptualized as giving assistance to another person on a task or organizationally-relevant problem at work (Dalal & Sheng, 2019). Helping is often considered a

prototypical form of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; Organ, Podsakoff, & Mackenzie, 2006) such that it represents affiliative OCBs (Van Dyne & Lepine, 1998) that are directed toward individuals (i.e., “OCB-I”; Carpenter, Berry, & Houston, 2014; Williams & Anderson, 1991). Because employees can provide help in multiple ways at work—from orienting new employees to providing manual labor or information like advice or feedback—helping is a broader construct that can manifest as more specific forms of assistance. For instance, advice is a form of help that involves providing information about a particular decision that needs to be made by the recipient of the advice (Blunden, Logg, Brooks, John, & Gino, 2019; Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006). In addition, helping is distinct from social support (i.e., “information leading one to believe that he/she is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations”; Cobb, 1976: 300). While social support encompasses multiple types of supportive actions, such as resource support (e.g., financial), emotional support, and instrumental support (Bavik, Shaw, & Wang, 2020; Deelstra et al., 2003), helping is organizationally relevant and task-focused and is thus commonly classified as instrumental support.

As noted, the common view that helping leads to positive reciprocal treatment toward the helper is based on the notion that “norms of reciprocity motivate individuals to respond to positive treatment with positive treatment” (Lyons & Scott, 2012: 67). Recipients of help tend to reciprocate positively by accepting the help and by having more favorable attitudes toward helpers, including seeing helpers as higher performers (e.g., Van Dyne & Lepine, 1998; Whiting et al., 2008) and more likeable colleagues (e.g., Johnson et al., 2002). This theoretical premise has been supported in multiple types of social exchange contexts, including one-off encounters between strangers (e.g., Flynn, 2003b; Whiting et al., 2008), one-off encounters between colleagues (e.g., Flynn, 2003b), and in longer-term relationships that encompass multiple

instances of helping over time (Flynn, 2003a; Podsakoff et al., 2009; Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). While there are some studies that consider negative outcomes for helpers, these have focused primarily on explanations that involve helpers over-extending themselves to the point that they become exhausted, stressed, and/or neglect their own tasks (for a review, see Bolino & Grant, 2016: 627–628; see also Bergeron, 2007; Koopman, Lanaj, & Scott, 2016); but this work does not typically suggest that helpers may experience negative reactions or evaluations in direct response to their help.

Although the dominant narrative suggests that helping leads to beneficial outcomes for helpers, it has largely not accounted for anticipatory helping, and instead tends to depict most workplace helping as reactive (e.g., Bolino & Grant, 2016: 623; Fisher et al., 2018: 1526). By contrast, nascent work on proactive¹ or anticipatory helping (Grant et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2019) and studies on related constructs (e.g., unsolicited support and advice; Deelstra et al., 2003; Landis et al., 2021), suggest not only that anticipatory helping may be more common than is currently assumed, but also that recipients may not always respond positively to it. For example, helpers who engage in anticipatory helping may receive less gratitude from recipients, which impacts their well-being (Lee et al., 2019), and recipients of unsolicited advice tend to view that advice as more self-serving and intrusive (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997; Landis et al., 2021). Accordingly, to integrate these literatures and provide a theoretical framework for the differential responses to reactive and anticipatory helping, we develop a model to further identify exactly *why* and *when* anticipatory helping may lead to less positive (more negative) exchange outcomes.

¹ Previous research has also used the label “proactive helping” (Lee et al., 2019; Spitzmuller & Van Dyne, 2013). We use the term “anticipatory helping” because anticipatory helping can be, but is not necessarily limited to, proactive behavior. Proactive behaviors are those that are (1) self-starting, (2) change oriented, and (3) future focused (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010). Although anticipatory helping is self-starting, it is not necessarily change-oriented and future focused (e.g., a helper may notice a coworker working on a routine task, such as a weekly financial report, and send them information for the report without being asked).

Self-Threat and Defensive Responses to Anticipatory Helping

According to self-affirmation theory, people are motivated to maintain and protect their positive self-view. As such, when people experience events that challenge their “sense of themselves as good, virtuous, successful” (p. 3), they experience self-threat (Steele, 1988). Conversely, events that affirm their adequacy or worth prevent or eliminate self-threat (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Threats to the self commonly involve real or perceived failures to meet socially significant standards (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). At work, such standards often pertain to employees’ competence and status (De Dreu, Nijstad, & van Knippenberg, 2008; Nadler & Fisher, 1986; Pettit, Yong, & Spataro, 2010). Hence, employees are vigilant to events that could challenge their competence or status, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Anticipatory helping can challenge the recipient’s competence because it conveys negative feedback regarding their ability to complete their work. It can communicate that the helper believes the recipient could or should improve their work and/or cannot accomplish their work without the helper’s assistance. This negative feedback may be threatening enough on its own because it elicits feelings of inadequacy (Ilgen & Davis, 2000; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), but such a threatening effect can be stronger when the feedback is unexpected or unanticipated (Ashford, Blatt, & Walle, 2003)—as is the case in anticipatory helping.

Anticipatory helping can also challenge the status of the recipient, raising questions about whether the recipient is worthy of their current level of respect or prestige. If task assistance is offered or provided when it was not requested, it can imply or trigger a feeling of inferiority in the recipient (Nadler & Fisher, 1986), which the recipient may not have otherwise considered. Moreover, with anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping, the recipient is less likely to perceive that the helper’s assistance is required or needed (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997; Lee et al., 2019). As a result,

anticipatory helping is unlikely to be seen as supportive; instead, it is more likely to be seen as a challenging behavior where the helper is attempting to gain or establish their relative superiority over the recipient (Landis et al., 2021). Such challenges to recipients' status make salient the possibility of status loss, and are thus self-threatening (Marr & Thau, 2014; Pettit et al., 2010).

Contrastingly, reactive helping is unlikely to signal a competence or status challenge from the helper because the recipient has explicitly solicited or requested their assistance. Indeed, when an employee receives help they requested, it demonstrates that the recipient is worthy of the helper's assistance (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009), which can affirm their positive self-view and reduce self-threat (Nadler, 2015; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Therefore, compared to anticipatory helping, reactive helping is less likely to produce experiences of self-threat.

Hypothesis 1: Anticipatory helping will be more self-threatening to recipients than reactive helping.

When people experience self-threat, they respond in ways that aim to protect or restore their self-worth, which includes defensive responding such as dismissing, denying, or avoiding the threat (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Because anticipatory helping (vs. reactive helping) generates greater self-threat, we propose that such increase of self-threat results in defensive reactions from the recipient which are typical of less positive (or more negative) responses in social exchange interactions (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Nadler et al., 1983): reduced willingness to accept help and reduced performance and relational evaluations of the helper.

Willingness to accept help. One of the most direct ways to address or cope with a self-threat is to remove the source of the threat (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). In terms of the greater self-threat experienced from anticipatory helping (compared to reactive helping), a recipient can remove the threat and protect their sense of self by not accepting the help offer or by dismissing

the help altogether. For instance, a threatened recipient may think they do not need the help (“I’m capable of this myself”) and thus refuse the help, ignore the help, or accept only a limited part of the help. Because such actions can protect the threatened recipient from a drop in self-worth by deflecting challenges to their competence and status (Alicke & Sedikides, 2011), we propose that recipients are less willing to accept anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping.

Performance evaluations of the helper. When people feel threatened, another way they can protect their self-worth is by derogating the source of the threat (Nadler & Fisher, 1986). In this way, a recipient feeling greater self-threat from anticipatory helping (vs. reactive helping) is more likely to respond by discrediting the validity of the source of the threat such as by evaluating the helper as a worse performer. By negatively evaluating the helper’s performance, the recipient makes the potential harm from the helper less relevant to their self-worth, thereby protecting their positive self-view (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

Relational evaluations of the helper. Being threatened triggers an immediate aversive reaction toward the source of the threat (Swann, 1990). A typical response when one feels threatened is to increase the distance from the person who caused the threat (Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008; Xiao, Wohl, & Van Bavel, 2016), either by increasing physical distance (i.e., avoiding interactions) or by increasing psychological distance (i.e., reducing the likability or pleasantness of the person) (Blader & Chen, 2011; Nadler et al., 1983). Accordingly, because anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping is more self-threatening to the recipient, it will have a greater negative influence on the recipient’s relational evaluations of the helper. In sum, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping will have a negative indirect effect through recipient self-threat on (a) the recipient’s acceptance of help from the helper, (b) the recipient’s performance evaluation of the helper, and (c) the recipient’s relational

evaluation of the helper.

The Moderating Role of the Helper's Relative Status

We further propose that recipients' reactions to anticipatory helping will depend on the relative status of the helper. An individual's relative status is defined as their relative rank in a formal or informal hierarchy based on the respect, prominence, and prestige that they have in the eyes of others (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Djurdjevic et al., 2017; Kakkar, Sivanathan, & Pettit, 2019). Relative status is a fundamental component of helping exchanges: it can influence whom people request or seek help from, perceptions of how valuable the help is, and critically, how employees interpret and evaluate helping and related behaviors (Bamberger, 2009; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Flynn, 2006; Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014). As such, we suggest that the helper's status relative to the recipient will determine the extent to which the recipient views the competence and status challenges provoked by anticipatory helping as *relevant to their self-worth* and *legitimate*, and therefore, self-threatening.

Given that people tend to give greater attention and weight to the opinions of higher-status others (Anderson et al., 2001; Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001), a recipient is more likely to consider potential questions about their competence as highly relevant to their self-worth if those questions come from a helper with relatively higher status; hence, anticipatory helping from a higher- (lower-) status helper is more (less) likely to trigger greater self-threat. Additionally, higher-status group members are motivated to maintain their high status (Anderson, Hildreth, & Sharps, 2020), and they are permitted and even expected to engage in status-maintaining behaviors (e.g., being dominant or assertive and giving explicit commands; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986); by contrast, lower-status group members are expected to support and affirm higher-status individuals and avoid overt status-striving or challenging

behaviors (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). Consequently, anticipatory helping from a higher-status helper is more likely to be viewed by the recipient as a legitimate challenge to their status, further increasing their sense of self-threat. Conversely, recipients would likely not be concerned that the lower-status helper's anticipatory help would undermine their status, and instead, may even see it as an attempt to provide support.

In sum, we predict that when the helper has higher (lower) status than the recipient, anticipatory helping is more (less) likely to result in greater self-threat for the recipient compared to reactive helping, and thus is more (less) likely to indirectly lead to reductions in the recipient's help acceptance and performance and relational evaluations of the helper (see also Figure 1).

Hypothesis 3: The negative indirect effects of anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping through recipients' self-threat on (a) the recipient's acceptance of help from the helper, (b) the recipient's performance evaluation of the helper, and (c) the recipient's relational evaluation of the helper will be stronger (weaker) when the helper has higher (lower) status than the recipient.

Mitigating the Threat from Anticipatory Helping: Balanced Social Exchange

Our hypotheses so far imply that helpers, especially those with relatively higher status, should engage in reactive helping but refrain from anticipatory helping to avoid more negative social exchange outcomes. However, because employees are often reluctant to request help (Bamberger, 2009), and because higher-quality help usually comes from higher-status team members with greater expertise or knowledge (e.g., Fisher et al., 2018; Grodal, Nelson, & Siino, 2015; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001), anticipatory helping from relatively higher-status helpers is arguably necessary for successful team and organizational functioning. In light of these conflicting logics, how can higher-status members engage in anticipatory helping such that

recipients are less threatened and more likely to respond positively?

We answer this question by, again, integrating social exchange theory with self-affirmation theory to examine *balanced social exchange* as a key factor that can mitigate the negative effects of anticipatory helping from higher-status helpers. Social exchange theory highlights how recipients in an exchange interpret the interaction based on what is being given or offered (e.g., the type of help), the characteristics of the giver or helper (e.g., relative status), and the qualities of the dyadic relationship between the giver and receiver (Mitchell, Cropanzano, & Quisenberry, 2012). In particular, the balance of a social exchange relationship (also referred to as a “mutual” or “reciprocal” relationship; e.g., Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993) is a fundamental aspect of the relationship that represents the extent to which one party views the relationship with the other party as mutually beneficial or equivalent in terms of giving and receiving (Colquitt, Baer, Long, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2014; Flynn, 2003a). In more balanced social exchanges, there is also an understanding and expectation that each party will reciprocate the treatment or help they receive (Clark, Gotay, & Mills, 1974; Mitchell et al., 2012).

Thus, we propose that when recipients perceive their social exchange relationships with higher-status helpers as more balanced, they will be less threatened by anticipatory helping. Specifically, when a recipient receives help (or an offer of help) from a relatively higher-status helper with whom they maintain a more balanced exchange relationship, they will have past experiences (“I was able to help them in the past”) or future expectations (“I will be able to help them in the future”) of giving assistance to that helper. These experiences or expectations enable recipients to recall or visualize demonstrations of their competence and status, which affirms their positive sense of self and reduces the self-threatening feelings of inadequacy (from competence challenges) and inferiority (from status challenges) (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009: 30)

that are triggered by anticipatory helping from helpers with relatively higher status. In addition, the mutual reciprocation that occurs in a balanced exchange relationship promotes more supportive interactions (Cropanzano et al., 2017), further decreasing the likelihood that the recipient will view the anticipatory help as challenging. Therefore, when recipients perceive their exchange relationship with a higher-status helper as more balanced, it is likely to mitigate their experience of self-threat from anticipatory helping, and ultimately makes them more willing to accept help and value the helper as a higher performer and a more likeable colleague.

Hypothesis 4: The positive effect of the higher-status helper's anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping on the recipient's self-threat will be weaker (stronger) the more the social exchange relationship is balanced (unbalanced).

Hypothesis 5: The negative indirect effects of the higher-status helper's anticipatory (versus reactive) helping through the recipient's self-threat on (a) the recipient's acceptance of help from the helper, (b) the recipient's performance evaluation of the helper, and (c) the recipient's relational evaluation of the helper, will be weaker (stronger) the more the social exchange relationship is balanced (unbalanced).

Overview of Studies

We designed four main studies (and one supplementary study) to test our hypotheses across a range of participants, contexts, and social exchange relationships. In alignment with prior work on helping and social exchange, we examined our hypotheses in one-off encounters among individuals without a preexisting relationship (Study 1a, Supplemental Study 1b, and Study 4), in one-off encounters among coworkers with an existing relationship (Study 3), and across multiple instances of helping that occur more generally in a longer-term relationship (Study 2). Study 1a and Supplemental Study 1b are experiments that provide a causal test of how

anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping differentially influences recipients' self-threat, willingness to accept help, and evaluations of the helper, depending on the helper's relative status. In Study 2, we developed new scales for anticipatory and reactive helping and test their unique effects in a field setting to provide an ecologically valid test of our predictions. Finally, Studies 3 and 4 extend the prior studies' findings by examining whether having (Study 3: critical incident study) or signaling (Study 4: online experiment) a more balanced social exchange mitigates the negative consequences of anticipatory helping from helpers with relatively higher status. Data and syntax for all studies, as well as supplemental materials, are available in our online supplement at the link: https://osf.io/v6mgd/?view_only=d9514b22ea1c475293f25f269e370fe2. We also note that we conducted three original studies as part of this research program that are no longer included in this paper, but the methods and results of these studies are available in the online supplement.

STUDY 1A METHOD

We conducted an online experiment using a vignette design where we manipulated the type of helping (anticipatory vs. reactive) and the relative status of the helper (lower vs. peer vs. higher status). Participants read about a familiar helping interaction, allowing them to reflect on how they would feel and behave in that situation (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

Participants

We aimed to collect at least 150 responses per cell after excluding participants for low-effort responding. Using Prolific Academic (Palan & Schitter, 2018), we recruited 1,334 working adults from the United States to participate in “a work scenario study.” This approach allowed us to access employees from a variety of jobs and occupations who were working full- or part-time. Prior to analysis, we excluded 252 participants who exhibited low-effort responding (Huang, Liu, & Bowling, 2015) by failing attention or comprehension checks and 30 participants who

were not currently working. Our final sample consisted of 1,052 participants (47.7% female, 51.1% male, 1.2% non-binary; $M_{age} = 33.70$ years, $SD_{age} = 9.06$; 72.81% Caucasian, 9.41% African American, 7.03% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.52% Hispanic, 4.09% mixed race, and 3.14% other). Participants had an average of 4.11 years of experience in their current position ($SD = 4.42$) and 80.5% had an associate's degree or higher. The participants worked in a range of industries (e.g., entertainment, education, finance, marketing and sales).

Study Design and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions in a 2 (helping: anticipatory vs. reactive) \times 3 (relative status of helper: lower vs. peer vs. higher) between-subjects design. We included a peer-status helper condition as another comparison point as recipients may react differently to a peer-status helper than to a lower- or higher-status helper. A coworker with peer status represents a “close other” whose behavior is often highly relevant to one's self-concept (Collins, 1996; Locke, 2003), and attempts to jockey for status are common among peers (Bendersky & Hays, 2012). Thus, as with higher-status helpers, the competence and status challenges from anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping are likely relevant and legitimate—and thus, self-threatening—when the helper has relatively equal (i.e., peer) status.

Participants read a scenario about working at a marketing services firm, “Finch & Baker” (adapted from Ames, Flynn, & Weber, 2004; Bendersky & Shah, 2013). They were asked to adopt a specific work role depending on their relative status condition. All participants then read the same background information, including that their job involved analyzing data and drafting marketing strategies, their team had started a project for a client, and their manager had asked the participant to work on some ideas for the marketing strategy and prepare a report to present at the next project meeting. Next, participants read about a helping interaction that occurs when one

of their team members, Alex (a gender-neutral name), walks by their desk.

Helper's relative status manipulation. We adapted Hays and Blader's (2017) approach to manipulate the relative status of Alex (the helper) compared to the participant (the recipient). In their background information, participants read that they were either an Idea Producer or an Idea Worker. Then, participants read the following about Alex's status (i.e., their standing in terms of respect, prestige, and prominence; Djurdjevic et al., 2017), relative to their own:

Lower-status helper: One of your lower status team members, Alex, is an Idea Worker on your team. Other employees tend to view Idea Workers like Alex as lower in status, i.e., less respected, prestigious, and prominent in the organization than Idea Producers, like you.

Peer-status helper: One of your peer status team members, Alex, is also an Idea Worker on your team. Other employees tend to view Idea Workers like Alex and you as equal in status, i.e., similarly respected, prestigious, and prominent in the organization.

Higher-status helper: One of your higher status team members, Alex, is an Idea Producer on your team. Other employees tend to view Idea Producers like Alex as higher in status, i.e., more respected, prestigious, and prominent in the organization than Idea Workers, like you.

Helping manipulation. After learning about Alex's relative status, participants received either the reactive or anticipatory helping manipulation:

Reactive helping: You stop Alex and say, "Can you help me with coming up with ideas for the investment strategy? If I send you the data, you can also work on some ideas for the next project meeting?" Alex responds: "Yes, I'd be happy to help you."

Anticipatory helping: Alex stops and says, "I'd be happy to help you with coming up with ideas for the investment strategy. If you send me the data, I can also work on some ideas for the next project meeting."

Importantly, to ensure that these helping manipulations would not be construed differently in terms of negative aspects of the helping interaction, we conducted a test on an independent sample (109 participants; 43.12% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 33.93$ years; for a detailed discussion of this test, see [Supplemental Material A](#)). This test verified that the reactive and anticipatory helping manipulations did not significantly alter participants' perceptions of Alex's behavior as *rude* ($p = .93$), *negative* ($p = .56$), *offensive* ($p = .32$), or *aggressive* ($p = .89$).

Measures

After reading the scenario, participants answered questions about the helping interaction and the helper (i.e., Alex). Unless otherwise indicated, all items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 (“*very much disagree*”) and 7 (“*very much agree*”).

Self-threat. We measured self-threat using a scale adapted from Burris (2012). Participants were asked to think about their interaction with Alex and indicate the extent to which they felt (1 = “*not at all*” to 7 = “*very much*”) each of the following: “My competence was being questioned”; “My ability was being challenged”; “My status was being challenged”; “I may lose status”; “Alex was trying to get my manager to question my ability”; and “It is likely that I would lose status in the eyes of my team members by using help from Alex” ($\alpha = .93$).

Willingness to accept help. We used four items to assess the extent to which participants would accept help from Alex: “I would allow Alex to help me”; “I would use Alex’s help”; “I would accept Alex’s help”; and “I would implement Alex’s help” ($\alpha = .97$).

Performance evaluation of the helper. We assessed participants’ performance evaluation in two ways. First, we measured *team member performance evaluations*, or the extent to which the helper was appraised as meeting “the expectations and requirements of [their] role as a member of the team” (Griffin et al., 2007: 331). We used two items from the Griffin et al. (2007) scale, adapted to the scenario: “Alex coordinated effectively with me” and “Alex communicated effectively with me” ($\alpha = .89$).² Second, we also included a more behavioral manifestation of the helper’s performance by examining the amount of *bonus* that participants would allocate to Alex. Participants read that their company allows employees to award coworkers an optional bonus of

² The original Griffin et al. (2007) scale had a third item (“Provided help to coworkers when asked, or needed”). However, we excluded this item from our performance evaluation measure because it overlapped with our independent variable and only reflected reactive helping.

\$0-\$100 for exceptional work or for being an outstanding team player.

Relational evaluation of the helper. In line with our conceptualization and following past work that operationalized relational evaluations of others as *likeability* or *friendliness* (Gibson et al., 2018; Leach et al., 2007; Nadler et al., 1983), we asked participants to what extent they agreed that the helper, Alex, was “likable,” friendly,” and “warm” ($\alpha = .95$).

Helper’s relative status manipulation check. We adapted Djurdjevic et al.’s (2017) 5-item scale to reflect relative status. Specifically, participants rated how much status Alex (the helper) had compared to themselves (the recipient) (1 = “*much lower*,” 4 = “*equal or about the same*” and 7 = “*much higher*”) by completing these statements: “...Alex has _____ prestige in this organization”; “Alex possesses _____ status in this organization”; “Alex occupies a _____ respected position in this organization”; “Alex has a _____ position of prestige in this organization”; and “Alex possesses a _____ level of prominence in this organization” ($\alpha = .99$).

Helping manipulation checks. We used 3 items to assess the *reactive helping* manipulation (“Alex helped me because I made it clear I wanted their help”; “Alex agreed to do things for me when I asked”; “Alex helped me when I asked them to do so”; $\alpha = .97$) and 3 items to assess the *anticipatory helping* manipulation (“Alex demonstrated initiative in helping me in advance of being asked”; “Alex assisted me with my work without me asking for help”; “Alex anticipated my needs and offered to help”; $\alpha = .91$). We randomized the order of these scales.

STUDY 1A RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables are provided in Table 1. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated that the four-factor model (self-threat, willingness to accept help, performance, and relational evaluation) demonstrated good fit to the data ($\chi^2 (84) = 748.33$; TLI = .95; CFI = .96; SRMR = .05; RMSEA = .09). We examined our

theorized model to alternative models where we set different pairs of factors to correlate at [1.0], and all such models resulted in worse fit. For example, setting the correlation between self-threat and acceptance of help to -1.0 resulted in worse fit ($\chi^2(85) = 4414.63$; TLI = .70; CFI = .76; SRMR = .14; RMSEA = .22) as did setting the correlation between performance and relational evaluations at 1.0 ($\chi^2(85) = 1268.21$; TLI = .92; CFI = .93; SRMR = .07; RMSEA = .12).

Manipulation checks. Confirming the effectiveness of the *helper's relative status manipulation*, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that participants in the higher-status condition were significantly more likely to perceive Alex as relatively higher in status ($M = 5.94$, $SD = .64$) compared to participants in the lower-status ($M = 2.15$, $SD = .86$), $t(1049) = 75.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .844$) or peer-status conditions ($M = 4.05$, $SD = .43$), $t(1049) = 36.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .562$) conditions. Further, participants in the lower-status condition were more likely to perceive Alex as relatively lower in status than participants in the peer-status condition, $t(1049) = 37.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .574$. Verifying the effectiveness of the *helping manipulation*, participants in the anticipatory helping condition reported that Alex engaged in more anticipatory helping ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.07$) than participants in the reactive helping condition ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.66$), $F(1, 1050) = 678.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .393$. Also, participants in the reactive helping condition rated Alex as engaging in more reactive helping ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.03$) than participants in the anticipatory helping condition ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.36$), $F(1, 1050) = 1968.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .652$.

Hypothesis tests. To test our hypotheses, we ran an unconditional and conditional path model in Mplus 8.3 using a maximum likelihood estimator. In the unconditional model (i.e., without the interaction terms), we found support for Hypothesis 1 as anticipatory helping increased self-threat compared to reactive helping ($B = .79$ [SE = .08], $p < .001$). We also found that self-threat negatively related to willingness to accept help ($B = -.54$ [SE = .03], $p < .001$),

performance evaluation ($B = -.38$ [$SE = .02$], $p < .001$), bonus ($B = -5.08$ [$SE = .70$], $p < .001$), and relational evaluation ($B = -.30$ [$SE = .02$], $p < .001$). Next, we used a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 data draws and maximum likelihood estimator (Edwards & Lambert, 2007) to examine the indirect effect of anticipatory helping on the outcome variables through self-threat (Hypothesis 2). Supporting Hypothesis 2, anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping had a negative indirect effect via self-threat on willingness to accept help ($-.43$; 95% CI $[-.53, -.34]$), performance evaluation ($-.30$; 95% CI $[-.38, -.23]$), bonus (-4.01 ; 95% CI $[-5.55, -2.75]$), and relational evaluation ($-.24$; 95% CI $[-.30, -.18]$).

To examine the extent to which these effects were moderated by relative status, we used indicator coding to code the three relative status categories into two dummy variables—higher-status helper and peer-status helper (the referent category is lower-status helper)—and we created two interaction terms: helping \times higher-status dummy and helping \times peer-status dummy (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Table 2 displays the conditional path model results with the interaction terms. We found a significant interaction between anticipatory helping and the higher-status helper dummy variable ($B = .75$ [$SE = .19$]; $p < .001$) on self-threat. Probing the interactions (see also Figure 2), we found that, consistent with our predictions, when the helper had relatively higher status, anticipatory helping ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.40$) was significantly more threatening than reactive helping ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.18$), difference = 1.17, $t(1046) = 8.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .068$. By contrast, when the helper had lower relative status, the positive effect of anticipatory helping on self-threat ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.25$), compared to reactive helping ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.07$), was significantly weaker: difference = .41, $t(1046) = 3.19$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .010$. We also found a significant interaction between anticipatory helping and the peer-status helper dummy variable ($B = .41$ [$SE = .19$]; $p < .05$, Table 2). When the helper was a peer (vs. lower in

status), anticipatory helping ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.43$) was significantly more self-threatening than reactive helping ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.04$), difference = .82, $t(1046) = 6.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .034$.

Finally, when peer status was the referent, the effect of anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping on self-threat was stronger for a higher- compared to a peer-status helper ($B = .34$ [$SE = .19$]; $p = .073$), though this difference did not reach conventional standards of significance.

Next, we tested the conditional indirect effects outlined in Hypothesis 3. We found that when the helper had higher status, anticipatory helping had strong negative indirect effects on willingness to accept help (-.63; 95% CI [-.80, -.47]), performance evaluation (-.44; 95% CI [-.58, -.32]), bonus (-5.92; 95% CI [-8.36, -3.97]), and relational evaluation (-.35; 95% CI [-.46, -.25]). By contrast, when the helper had lower status, anticipatory helping had weaker indirect effects on willingness to accept help (-.22; 95% CI [-.35, -.09]), performance evaluation (-.16; 95% CI [-.25, -.07]), bonus (-2.09; 95% CI [-3.65, -.90]), and relational evaluation (-.12; 95% CI [-.20, -.05]). Indeed, differences in indirect effects showed that anticipatory helping had stronger negative indirect effects when the helper had higher status compared to lower status on willingness to accept help (difference = -.41; 95% CI [-.61, -.21]), performance evaluation (difference = -.29; 95% CI [-.44, -.15]), bonus (difference = -3.83; 95% CI [-6.27, -1.96]), and relational evaluation (difference = -.22; 95% CI [-.35, -.11]). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported. We also examined the differences in indirect effects of anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping on outcomes via self-threat for peer- (vs. lower-) status helpers. The indirect effects of anticipatory helping on outcomes were significantly more negative for peer- (vs. lower-) status helpers.

Additional analyses. Because status and power often co-exist in the real world (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015) and are moderately correlated (Yu, Hays, & Zhao, 2019), we measured perceptions of the helper's power using an adapted version of 6 items from Yu, Hays,

and Zhao's (2019) scale (e.g., “Alex supervises a large number of subordinates”; 1 = “*very much disagree*”; 7 = “*very much agree*”; $\alpha = .94$). Although our status manipulation created differences in perceptions of power, the effect sizes for power were smaller than for relative status (e.g., η_p^2 between the higher- and lower- status conditions was .84 for relative status and .45 for power). Moreover, we re-ran all hypotheses tests controlling for power, and the results remain substantially unchanged (for full details of these analyses, see [Supplemental Material B](#)).

Study 1a Discussion

The results of Study 1a and Supplemental Study 1b³ provided initial support for our hypotheses that anticipatory helping is more threatening to recipients than reactive helping, which then negatively affects recipients' inclination to accept help, and diminishes their performance and relational evaluations of the helper. Results also indicated that these detrimental effects of anticipatory helping are stronger (weaker) as the status of the helper, relative to the recipient, increases (decreases), such that more negative effects resulted from higher- and peer status- helpers and were weakest from lower-status helpers. Our robustness checks controlling for power, and results from Supplemental Study 1b, also rule out confounds and alternative explanations. The design of Study 1 strengthens the internal validity of our findings, but as a scenario-based experiment that focused on one specific helping interaction, its generalizability is limited. Study 2 aimed to address this limitation.

STUDY 2 METHOD

The purpose of Study 2 was to investigate whether our proposed relationships between

³ We ran another version of Study 1a (see “Supplemental Study 1b” in [Supplemental Material C](#)) with a separate sample (1,094 participants; 51.5% female; $M_{age} = 36.93$ years, $SD_{age} = 10.32$) where we (1) manipulated status using status characteristics (e.g., tenure, job title) and (2) tested alternative mechanisms of embarrassment (Bohns & Flynn, 2010) and social worth (Grant & Gino, 2010). Results of Study 1b also supported Hypotheses 1-3, even when accounting for embarrassment and perceived social worth in the model as parallel mediators. These findings help extend generalizability of our model and provide additional support for self-threat as an important mechanism.

anticipatory and reactive helping on self-threat and subsequent exchange outcomes would hold when examining these types of helping more generally—across time and multiple occurrences—in real working relationships in a field setting.

Study Sample and Procedure

We worked with a consulting division of a multinational professional services firm located in the United Kingdom to recruit participants for this field study. Because employees worked collaboratively across multiple projects with different individuals within their division, this sample was likely to have sufficient variance in reactive and anticipatory helping interactions. The division's leadership advertised this study to employees as a way to help improve their collaborative culture. As an extra incentive to participate, we raffled off 15 Amazon gift cards (value of £100 each). We randomly assigned respondents to be either (a) *helpers* who answered questions about their anticipatory helping, reactive helping, the status of the recipient, and how much they interact with the recipient (control variable) or (b) *recipients* who answered questions about their self-threat, the helper's status, help accepted, and performance and relational evaluations of the helper. The final matched sample consisted of 64 unique observations (63 observations for self-threat due to missing data) where our independent variables came from a separate source than our mediator and outcome variables. Average age was 35.33 ($SD = 9.86$), 59% were female (41% male), 92.3% had an undergraduate or post-graduate degree, and 94% were white, 3% Black, 2% Asian, and 1% other.

Measures

We kept most measures short (2-3 items) to eliminate redundancy and motivate participation as respondents had strong time constraints. Unless otherwise indicated, measures referred to the preceding three months and pertained to either the helper or the recipient.

Helping measures. Prior to our main data collection, we sought to develop new and valid measures of reactive and anticipatory helping. Following existing guidelines (Hinkin, 1998), we collected data from three separate samples to validate our scales. We briefly summarize the validation procedures below, and their full details can be found in [Supplemental Material D](#).

To develop our scales, we first we generated 8 reactive helping items and 9 anticipatory helping items and conducted a test of content validation ($N = 394$) to ensure that the items we developed reflected their conceptualizations (Colquitt, Sabey, Rodell & Hill, 2019). We retained 7 reactive and 8 anticipatory helping items that achieved very strong content validity (reactive helping: $Psa .96 - .98$, $Csv .92 - .97$; anticipatory helping: $Psa .94 - .97$, $Csv .89 - .95$). Second, we collected a separate sample ($N = 192$) to examine the factor structure of the items. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) indicated that the results were consistent with the expected two-factor solution (Factor 1: Eigenvalue = 7.93, Factor 2: Eigenvalue = 3.20, vs. Factor 3: Eigenvalue = .65), and the factor loadings were sufficient (reactive items: .77 to .89; anticipatory items: .81 to .86). However, given the preference for shorter scales in survey research, we dropped two reactive and three anticipatory helping items with the lowest factor loadings to create five-item scales for both reactive ($\alpha = .92$) and anticipatory helping ($\alpha = .92$). Finally, we collected a third independent sample ($N = 198$) to confirm the factor structures of reactive and anticipatory helping and examine their convergent and divergent validity. Results of a CFA indicated that a two-factor measurement model fit the data well ($\chi^2 (34) = 49.41$, $CFI = .99$, $SRMR = .02$). Furthermore, correlations indicated that reactive helping (RH) and anticipatory helping (AH), were (1) positively related to each other ($r = .41$), (2) related similarly to other variables with which they overlap conceptually (e.g., general helping behavior: $rRH = .49$; $rAH = .64$), and (3) diverged from constructs from which they are conceptually dissimilar (e.g.,

extraversion: $r_{RH} = -.04$; $r_{AH} = .22$). Together, this scale validation procedure supported the validity of our reactive and anticipatory helping scales.

In our main data collection, we used the final reactive and anticipatory helping scales we developed (see Appendix A for items). Helpers indicated the frequency (1 = “*never*”; 7 = “*constantly*”) of reactive helping ($\alpha = .99$) and anticipatory helping ($\alpha = .97$) to the recipient.

Helper’s relative status. The status of each person in the dyad was assessed with two items adapted from the Djurdjevic et al.’s (2017) workplace status scale (“My co-worker has a great deal of prestige in the business unit” and “My co-worker possesses high status in the business unit”; 1 = “*very much disagree*”; 7 = “*very much agree*”) in which the recipient rated the helper’s status ($\alpha = .84$), and the helper rated the recipient’s status ($\alpha = .96$). Then, because our theory focuses on relative status, and as is consistent with other research (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013; Doyle, Lount, Wilk, & Pettit, 2016; Liu et al., 2015), the helper’s status relative to the recipient was operationalized by calculating the difference between the helper’s (H) status minus the recipient’s (R) status ($H - R$). The reliability of this measure of helper’s relative status (using the formula from Tisak & Smith, 1994: 677) was .92.

Self-threat. We used 3 items from the *self-threat* scale used in Study 1. Recipients responded to a prompt “In general, when [Helper’s Name] helps you, to what extent do you feel...” “My competence is being questioned”; “My ability is being challenged”; “My status is being challenged” (1 = “*not at all*”; 7 = “*very much*”; $\alpha = .93$).

Outcome variables. To capture *help accepted*, respondents answered two questions: “How much do you accept or allow this co-worker to help you?” and “How much do you use or implement this co-worker’s help?” (1 = “*very little*”; 7 = “*very much*”; $\alpha = .90$). We used the same 2-item *performance evaluation* scale ($\alpha = .89$) and the same 3-item *relational evaluation* (α

= .87) scale from Study 1 (1 = “*very much disagree*” to 7 = “*very much agree*”).

Controls. To isolate the effect of relative status from formal rank, which often indicates power (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), we created two dummy variables to capture three *formal rank* comparisons whereby the helper had lower, peer, or higher rank to the recipient based on the six levels of formal rank in the organization that ranged from associate to partner. Lower-rank helper was the reference group, and thus, we coded peer-rank helper as “1” when the helper had the same rank as the recipient (e.g., both associates or both managers) and “0” when the helper had either higher or lower rank. We coded higher-rank helper as “1” when the helper had a higher rank than the recipient (e.g., a senior manager compared to a manager) and “0” when the helper had either peer or lower rank. We also included *interaction frequency* as a key control variable that captured how much the helper reported interacting with the recipient in the past three months (1 = “*never*”; 7 = “*every day*”). Participants varied greatly in how much they interacted with their colleagues across different projects, and the frequency of employees’ interactions could influence the quantity and quality of helping interactions as well as the recipients’ responses on the outcome variables (Flynn, 2003a; Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007).⁴

STUDY 2 RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables are provided in Table 3. We conducted a CFA on the helper-rated variables (anticipatory help, reactive help, and recipient status), and the model achieved adequate fit: $\chi^2(51) = 166.63$; TLI = .89; CFI = .92; SRMR = .035; RMSEA = .19. We also compared the theorized model to alternative models where we set

⁴As expected, the results are sensitive to the inclusion of these control variables as the main effect of anticipatory helping on self-threat, along with its unconditional indirect effects on outcomes, become insignificant without controlling for these variables. However, the results of anticipatory helping’s moderated direct and indirect effects by helper’s relative status are substantially unaffected by the inclusions or exclusion of control variables. Furthermore, including these controls makes sense conceptually, and it is also empirically supported as they have correlations above $r = .10$ with most variables in our theoretical model (Carlson & Wu, 2012: 432).

the correlation between different factors to [1.0], and all such models had worse fit. For example, setting the correlation between anticipatory and reactive helping to 1.0 led to significantly worse fit ($\chi^2(52) = 461.93$; TLI = .62; CFI = .70; SRMR = .17; RMSEA = .35). Next, a CFA on the recipient-rated variables (self-threat, help accepted, performance, relational evaluation, and helper status), indicated adequate fit: $\chi^2(44) = 83.09$; TLI = .90; CFI = .93; SRMR = .064; RMSEA = .12. Further, all alternative models that set the correlation between different factors to [1.0] achieved worse fit. For instance, setting the correlation between performance and relational evaluations to 1.0 ($\chi^2(45) = 129.79$; TLI = .79; CFI = .85; SRMR = .082; RMSEA = .17).

Hypotheses tests. To test our hypotheses, we ran an unconditional and conditional path model in Mplus 8.3 using a maximum likelihood estimator. In the unconditional path model, we found anticipatory helping had a positive main effect on recipient's self-threat ($B = .33$ [SE = .15], $p < .05$), while reactive helping had no significant effect ($B = .17$ [SE = .13], $p = .20$). We compared the effect size of each type of helping on self-threat by examining the incremental R^2 explained over and above the other and control variables, which was larger for anticipatory helping (.070) than for reactive helping (.017), providing support for Hypothesis 1⁵. Next, we found self-threat negatively predicted both performance evaluation ($B = -.30$ [SE = .10], $p < .01$) and relational evaluation ($B = -.24$ [SE = .09], $p < .01$). However, self-threat did not significantly relate to help accepted ($B = -.05$ [SE = .14], $p = .87$). Indirect effects analyses (using the same analytical approach as in Study 1a) revealed that anticipatory helping had an unconditional negative indirect effect on performance evaluation (-.10; 95% CI [-.26, -.004]) and relational

⁵ To supplement this analysis, we conducted a relative weight analysis (RWA) using the RWA-Web tool (Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2015) to examine the relative contribution of (i.e., variance explained by) anticipatory helping compared to reactive helping in recipient self-threat. Accounting for both helping variables, RWA indicated that anticipatory helping explained a larger percentage of predicted variance (63.1%) in threat than reactive helping (36.9%) (albeit the weights were not significantly different from one another).

evaluation (-.08; 95% CI [-.24, -.003]), but not on help accepted (-.02; 95% CI [-.17, .05]).

Hypotheses 2b and 2c were supported.

In the conditional path model, which included the interaction of anticipatory helping and the helper's relative status, results (see Table 4) revealed anticipatory helping significantly interacted with helper relative status to predict self-threat ($B = .12$ [$SE = .05$]; $p = .01$). We examined the simple slopes (see Figure 3); anticipatory helping positively predicted self-threat when the helper had relatively higher status (+1 SD: $B = .61$ [$SE = .18$]; $p = .001$) but did not influence self-threat when the helper had relatively lower status (-1 SD: $B = .16$ [$SE = .16$]; $p = .30$). Reactive helping did not interact with helper relative status ($B = .03$ [$SE = .07$], $p = .68$).

Conditional indirect effects indicated that anticipatory helping had a significant and negative indirect effect via self-threat on performance evaluation (-.19; 95% CI [-.46, -.03]) and relational evaluation (-.15; 95% CI [-.42, -.02]) when the helper had relatively higher status (+1 SD), but no significant indirect effects when the helper had relatively lower status (-1 SD) than the recipient. The estimated difference between these indirect effects of higher (vs. lower) status on performance evaluation (difference = -.14; 95% CI [-.39, -.01]) and relational evaluation (difference = -.11; 95% CI [-.35, -.001]) were significant. There were no significant indirect effects of anticipatory help on help accepted via self-threat. There were also no conditional indirect effects of reactive helping on outcomes. These results support Hypothesis 3b and 3c.

Additional analyses. We conducted several checks to test the robustness of our results. First, although the advantage of our operationalization of helper's relative status is that it provides a continuous measure of the difference in the helper's status relative to the recipient's status (i.e., the degree to which the helper has lower, relatively equal, or higher status compared to the recipient, which in our data had a normally distributed shape that ranged from -4.0 to 3.5),

some scholars (e.g., Edwards, 1994, 2001) have expressed concerns that difference scores can have low reliability and might not properly represent the original levels of the component measures (i.e., the difference score does not factor in the original levels of helper and recipient status). However, reassuringly, the reliability of our difference score measure of helper's relative status was high (.92). Moreover, we did two additional sets of analyses: one set that controlled for the helper's absolute status as rated by the recipient and one set that controlled for the average of the helper's and recipient's absolute status combined (we also note that because power was limited due to our small sample size that we could not use the polynomial regression approach as an alternative check). The first check is intended to further isolate the effect of helper's relative status from helper's overall level of status (e.g., see also Doyle et al., 2016). The second is a way to tease apart the effects of the difference score variable from its component measures (e.g., Tisak & Smith, 1994)⁶. Each of these sets of analyses, which the full results are included in the online supplement ([Supplemental Material E](#)), indicated that results of our hypotheses tests were substantively unchanged. This reduced concerns about our use of a difference score. Second, we employed an alternative operationalization of relative status used by past research (e.g., Liu et al., 2015) by creating a binary variable to capture whether the helper had higher or lower status than the recipient. To this end, we created a relative status variable and assigned a value of 1 if the helper had higher or equal status compared to the recipient and 0 if the helper had lower status. These results are also provided in [Supplemental Material E](#) and again show consistent findings with our main results. Overall, these robustness checks increased our confidence that anticipatory helping from helpers with higher (vs. lower) relative status is

⁶ We note that another approach is to control for the two component measures (helper and recipient status) independently (Tisak & Smith, 1994). We conducted this test; however, the model would not converge due to extreme multicollinearity among the component measures and the difference score (tolerance of the difference score with both component measures in the model was .000).

more threatening, and subsequently results in worse outcomes for helpers.

Third, how often people exchange favors or engage in social exchange interactions can influence the outcomes of helping (Flynn, 2003a). Thus, we examined whether interaction frequency moderated the effect of anticipatory helping on self-threat, which it did not ($B = .04$ [$SE = .06$]; $p = .55$). Moreover, when including this additional control, the anticipatory \times relative status interaction remained significant ($B = .12$ [$SE = .05$]; $p = .01$). Finally, relationship tenure (i.e., how long the dyad has worked together) might also influence the outcomes of helping (Flynn, 2003b). To examine this possibility, we collected estimates of the length of time in years that dyads worked together for 61 of the 64 dyads in the sample ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 3.22$) (this data was obtained after the original data was collected). We retested our hypotheses, controlling for relationship tenure, and the results we report above remain substantially unchanged, except that the difference between the conditional indirect effects for anticipatory helping's effects on performance and relational evaluations are significant at the 90% CI as opposed to the 95% CI, which is likely due to the smaller sample size (61) for the analyses involving tenure.

Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 extended Study 1 results. First, in a scale validation procedure (see [Supplemental Material D](#)), we identified anticipatory helping as a common form of helping that occurs at work independently from reactive helping. Second, using these new scales, we find that anticipatory helping, while controlling for reactive helping, positively relates to recipients' self-threat and subsequently lowers recipients' performance and relational evaluations of the helper. In addition, these direct and indirect effects were stronger when the helper had higher (compared to lower) status than the recipient, and controlling for relative formal rank and interaction frequency increased confidence that these effects were driven by relative status. By contrast, reactive

helping was not associated with negative outcomes. These results align with Study 1.

Unlike in Study 1, we find that self-threat does not relate to help accepted by the recipient. Further, anticipatory helping has a positive bivariate correlation with help accepted ($r = .43$). We believe these two results can be explained by features of the Study 2 empirical context. In particular, we learned in conversations with some participants that team members often felt the need to use help from each other because everyone was extremely busy. It seems that recipients could be threatened by anticipatory helping (and lower their performance and relational evaluations of helpers as a result), but still accept it due to their busy work schedules.

Although this field study provides ecological validity to our findings, several issues limit the inferences we can make. First, the small sample size and the unique context limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, in this study we operationalized the helper's relative status as the difference between the helper's and recipient's status. Although we ran a number of checks (see additional analyses reported above), because of concerns about using difference scores (Edwards, 1994a, 2001), and because we were limited in power (due to our small sample size) such that we could not use the polynomial regression approach as an alternative, it is important to replicate these findings using a different operationalization of relative status. Third, neither Study 1 nor Study 2 tested our hypothesis that a balanced social exchange between the helper and recipient will mitigate the self-threat caused by anticipatory help from higher-status helpers. We designed Study 3 to address these limitations.

STUDY 3 METHOD

Study 3 was intended to further strengthen the external validity of our findings and to test whether having a more balanced social exchange would mitigate the negative effects of anticipatory helping from higher-status helpers (Hypotheses 4 and 5).

Participants and Procedure

We recruited a sample of participants from different jobs and industries to participate in a recall-based study (e.g., Blader, Wiesenfeld, Fortin, & Wheeler-Smith, 2013; Lee et al., 2019; Lin, Savani, & Ilies, 2019). A primary strength of this type of study is that it provides high external validity by enabling us to examine actual, naturally occurring incidents of workplace helping among coworkers with an existing relationship from a diverse sample of employees working in a range of organizations. We recruited 674 working adults using Prolific Academic (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Prior to analysis, we excluded 45 participants: five who indicated that they had not experienced the helping interaction and 40 due to low-effort responding (Huang et al., 2015), as indicated from attention checks (32) or failure to answer open-ended responses (8). This resulted in a final sample of 629 participants: 48.8% male, 49.9% female, and 1.3% non-binary; average age of 36.70 years ($SD = 10.36$); 76.8% Caucasian, 6.4% African American, 4.8% Hispanic, 4.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and the remainder identified as mixed race (4.7%) or other (2.8%). Also, among these participants, 76.61% had an associate's degree or higher and the average work experience was 4.75 years ($SD = 4.84$).

Participants were randomly assigned to recall either a reactive or anticipatory helping interaction. The specific prompts were:

Reactive helping: “We would like you to describe an instance when you were working on a task and asked a coworker to help you and they provided you help—that is, they helped you on your task in response to your request.”

Anticipatory helping: “We would like you to describe an instance when you were working on a task and a coworker offered to help or helped you even though you had not asked for their help—that is, they helped you on your task although you did not request it.”

Participants were then asked to enter the initials of the coworker and describe the situation in detail. Examples of reactive helping (e.g., “I asked for feedback on a manuscript, and he provided good feedback and clarified what he meant about some things”) and anticipatory

helping (e.g., “I needed to fill out multiple paper forms on an individual. They helped me fill out most of the forms without me asking them to”) are provided in [Supplemental Material F](#). After writing about the interaction, respondents completed the measures described below.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 = “*very much disagree*” and 7 = “*very much agree*.”

Helper’s relative status. To provide a different assessment of the relative status of the helper, which also created distinct classifications, we asked participants:

“In general, to what extent does your coworker, [Helper’s Initials], have higher, equal, or lower status than you at work? Status refers to the amount of respect, prominence, and prestige a person has in the eyes of others in their work group.”

Participants then indicated whether the helper they identified in their helping interaction had (1) “higher” (26.1% of the sample), (2) “equal” (53.2%), or (3) “lower” (20.7%) status in relation to their own status at work. Because this is an ordinal variable, we used an ordinal probit regression in STATA (Long & Freese, 2014) to confirm that our helping manipulation did not systematically influence the relative status of helper that participants recalled, which it did not ($b = -.15$, $se = .09$, $z = -1.63$, $p = .103$, 95% CI = $-.32, .03$).

Self-threat. Using Study 1’s self-threat measure adapted to this context, participants indicated, in relation to the helping interaction they described, the extent to which they felt (1 = “*not at all*”; 7 = “*very much*”) each of the following: “My competence was being questioned”; “My ability was being challenged”; “My status was being challenged”; “I may lose status”; “My coworker was trying to get my manager to question my ability”; and “It is likely that I would lose status in the eyes of my team members by using help from my coworker” ($\alpha = .90$).

Outcome variables. Participants indicated the extent to which they *accepted help* from the helper with four items: “I allowed this coworker to help me”; “I used this coworker’s help”;

“I accepted this coworker's help”; and “I implemented this coworker's help” ($\alpha = .93$). We used the same two-item *performance evaluation* scale ($\alpha = .95$) and the same three-item *relational evaluation* scale ($\alpha = .94$) from Study 1.

Balanced social exchange. We adapted five items from a scale that measures the balance of a social exchange relationship between a supervisor and subordinate (Bernierth, Armenakis, Feild, Giles, & Walker, 2007), changing the referent to coworker. The items were “I do not have to specify the exact conditions to know my coworker will return a favor”; “If I do something for my coworker, they will eventually repay me”; “I have a balance of inputs and outputs with my coworker”; “My efforts are reciprocated by my coworker”; and “My relationship with my coworker is composed of comparable exchanges of giving and taking” ($\alpha = .85$).

Frequency of interaction with helper. As in Study 2, it was important to control for how frequently recipients typically interacted with the helper. We used the same item as in Study 2. Results of hypothesis tests remain substantially unchanged if we remove this control variable.

STUDY 3 RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables are provided in Table 5. A CFA indicated that the five-factor model (i.e., self-threat, help accepted, performance, relational evaluation, and balanced social exchange) had good fit to the data ($\chi^2 (160) = 756.49$; TLI = .94; CFI = .95; SRMR = .04; RMSEA = .08). We examined alternative models by constraining the correlations among all pairs of factors to 1, and all such models led to significantly worse fit. For example, constraining performance and relational evaluation to correlate at 1 led to worse fit: ($\chi^2 (161) = 1202.60$; TLI = .89; CFI = .91; SRMR = .05; RMSEA = .10).

Helping manipulation checks. To confirm the effectiveness of the helping manipulation, we used the scales developed in Study 2 and asked participants (who were recipients) how much

their coworker engaged in reactive helping (e.g., “My coworker helped me because I made it clear I wanted their help”; $\alpha = .97$) and anticipatory helping (e.g., “My coworker demonstrated initiative in helping me in advance of being asked”; $\alpha = .96$). Participants in the anticipatory helping condition reported their coworker engaging in more anticipatory helping ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.44$) than participants in the reactive helping condition ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.75$), $F(1, 627) = 171.37$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .215$; whereas, participants in the reactive helping condition rated their coworker as engaging in more reactive helping ($M = 6.21$, $SD = .81$) than participants in the anticipatory helping condition ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.80$), $F(1, 627) = 597.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .488$.

Tests of Hypotheses 1-3. We used the same analytical approach described in Study 1 to test Hypotheses 1-3. In the unconditional path model, anticipatory (vs. reactive helping) significantly increased self-threat ($B = .30$ [$SE = .07$], $p < .001$), and self-threat significantly and negatively predicted help accepted ($B = -.35$ [$SE = .05$], $p < .001$), performance evaluation ($B = -.49$ [$SE = .04$], $p < .001$), and relational evaluation ($B = -.41$ [$SE = .04$], $p < .001$). As expected, anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping had an indirect effect through self-threat on help accepted ($-.11$; 95% CI $[-.19, -.05]$), performance evaluation ($-.15$; 95% CI $[-.24, -.08]$), and relational evaluation ($-.12$; 95% CI $[-.20, -.06]$). These results support Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Next, we examined the relative status moderation effects in the full, integrative path model with the interaction terms included on self-threat (see Table 6). The interaction of both the higher-status helper and helping condition ($B = .63$ [$SE = .21$], $p < .01$), and the peer-status helper and helping condition ($B = .47$ [$SE = .18$], $p < .05$), on self-threat were significant. Simple slopes indicated that when the helper had higher status ($B = .52$ [$SE = .14$], $p < .001$) or peer status ($B = .35$ [$SE = .10$], $p < .001$), anticipatory helping increased self-threat compared to reactive helping; by contrast, when the helper had lower status, there was no difference between

anticipatory and reactive helping on self-threat ($B = -.11$ [$SE = .16$], $p = .47$). Further, although anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping from a higher-status helper increased self-threat more than from a peer-status helper, their respective slopes were not different ($B = .16$ [$SE = .17$], $p = .34$).

We then tested the conditional indirect effects of anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping on outcomes. When the helper had higher status, anticipatory helping had significant and negative indirect effects via self-threat on help accepted ($-.18$; 95% CI $[-.34, -.08]$), performance evaluation ($-.25$; 95% CI $[-.46, -.09]$), and relational evaluation ($-.21$; 95% CI $[-.38, -.08]$). However, when the helper had lower status, anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping had no significant indirect effects on outcomes. Moreover, the differences among the indirect effects of anticipatory help from a higher-status versus a lower-status helper were all significant: help accepted (difference = $-.22$; 95% CI $[-.41, -.09]$), performance evaluation (difference = $-.31$; 95% CI $[-.57, -.11]$), and relational evaluation (difference = $-.26$; 95% CI $[-.48, -.09]$). Hypothesis 3 was thus supported. In addition, the results for peer-status helpers were like those of higher-status helpers—that is, the differences in indirect effects of anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping on outcomes via self-threat for peer- (vs. lower-) status helpers were significantly more negative.

Hypotheses 4 and 5. We tested whether a more balanced social exchange would mitigate the self-threat from a higher-status (peer-status) helper's anticipatory helping (Hypothesis 4) in a three-way interaction analysis framework (Dawson & Richter, 2006). Accordingly, we reran the conditional model shown in Table 6 and added the required two-way interaction terms (helping condition \times balanced social exchange, higher-status helper \times balanced social exchange, and peer-status helper \times balanced social exchange) as well as two three-way interaction terms (helping condition \times higher-status helper \times balanced social exchange, as well as helping condition \times peer-status helper \times balanced social exchange). Both three-way interaction terms were significant:

results indicated that balanced social exchange moderated the relationship between helping condition and self-threat when the helper had higher status ($B = -.70$ [$SE = .19$], $p < .001$) or peer status ($B = -.62$ [$SE = .17$], $p < .001$). Probing these interactions (Figure 4), simple slopes supported Hypothesis 4 for both higher- and peer-status anticipatory help as anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping increased threat when the social exchange relationship was lower (-1 SD) in balance (higher status: $B = 1.02$ [$SE = .19$], $p < .001$; peer status: $B = .86$ [$SE = .15$], $p < .001$), but higher- and peer-status anticipatory help had no effect on self-threat when the social exchange relationship was high ($+1$ SD) in balance (higher status: $B = -.08$ [$SE = .20$], $p = .68$; peer status: $B = -.06$ [$SE = .13$], $p = .65$). Further, when the helper had lower status, none of the effects of anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping on self-threat were significant regardless of the balance of social exchange.

Finally, we examined Hypothesis 5. At low levels of balanced social exchange, higher- and peer-status anticipatory (vs. reactive) help had significant and negative indirect effects via self-threat on help accepted (higher status: $-.36$; 95% CI $[-.64, -.16]$; peer status: $-.31$; 95% CI $[-.51, -.15]$), performance evaluation (higher status: $-.50$; 95% CI $[-.89, -.20]$; peer status: $-.43$; 95% CI $[-.63, -.25]$), and relational evaluation (higher status: $-.42$; 95% CI $[-.74, -.17]$; peer status: $-.36$; 95% CI $[-.55, -.21]$). At high levels of balanced exchange, higher- and peer-status anticipatory help had no significant indirect effects on outcomes. Moreover, the differences among these indirect effects at high (vs. low) levels of balanced social exchange were all significant: help accepted (higher-status difference = $.39$; 95% CI $[.13, .76]$; peer-status difference = $.33$; 95% CI $[.16, .55]$), performance (higher-status difference = $.54$; 95% CI $[.14, 1.06]$; peer-status difference = $.46$; 95% CI $[.26, .68]$), and relational evaluation (higher-status difference = $.46$; 95% CI $[.12, .88]$; peer-status difference = $.38$; 95% CI $[.22, .59]$). Hypothesis 5

was thus supported.⁷

Study 3 Discussion

Study 3 constructively replicated and extended the results of our previous studies. Extending external validity by investigating a range of actual helping interactions among coworkers in a wide range of organizational contexts, we find again that, on average, anticipatory helping (compared to reactive helping) is more self-threatening and leads to recipients' lower acceptance of help and their lower performance and relational evaluations of the helper. Moreover, we find that these negative effects of anticipatory helping are stronger when the helper had higher (or peer) status than the recipient. Our data also give credence to the practical importance of this finding as most helping interactions reported by participants occurred from higher- (or peer-) status helpers (79.3% of helping interactions reported).

Given the pervasiveness of anticipatory helping from helpers with higher- and peer-relative status, and the potential repercussions of anticipatory helping from such individuals, an extension of Study 3 is that we find support for how a balanced social exchange between the helper and recipient mitigates the negative effects of anticipatory help. Higher- and peer-status individuals' anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping significantly increased recipient self-threat and diminished helper outcomes when recipients viewed their exchange relationship with the helper as less balanced, but these effects were significantly weaker when recipients viewed the relationship as more balanced.

While Study 3 replicates and extends our previous two studies, it does not address one key issue: how can higher- (and peer-) status helpers provide anticipatory helping that limits

⁷ As a robustness check and based on the same reasoning outlined in Study 2, we examined the interaction of interaction frequency and anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping. This term significantly predicted recipient self-threat ($B = -.14$ [$SE = .05$], $p < .01$), but more importantly, the results of our hypotheses tests remain substantially unchanged when controlling for this additional interaction term.

recipients' self-threat if they have a limited or no preexisting exchange relationship with the recipient? To address this, we conducted a final study, Study 4, to examine whether higher- (and peer-) status helpers can simply *signal* a balanced social exchange when they engage in anticipatory helping by highlighting either (1) a *past* exchange or (2) potential *future* exchange with the recipient. Consistent with our theory, such a signal of balance should still mitigate the negative effects of anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping.

STUDY 4 METHOD

Sample and Procedure

Study 4 used a similar experimental design as Study 1a/1b. Below we summarize the key details and results, while a full report of the study methods, including details of the manipulations and measures, is included in the online supplement: [Supplemental Material G](#). A total of 1500 participants (57.1% male, 42.0% female, and 0.9% who identified as non-binary; average age of 34.72 years ($SD = 9.84$)) read about a higher- or peer-status helper (using the same manipulation from Supplemental Study 1b that used status characteristics) who engaged in reactive or anticipatory helping, and participants reported their reactions to this helper. We did not include a lower status helper condition in this study because our focus was on helpers whose anticipatory helping causes greater self-threat in recipients (i.e., higher- and peer-status helpers). We used the same measured outcomes and the same manipulations for reactive and anticipatory helping from Study 1a; however, a critical feature of the present study is that we added a new “balanced anticipatory helping” condition, which signaled either *past* (or *future*) balance:

Alex stops and says, “I’d be happy to help you with coming up with ideas for the investment strategy, as I know *I needed your help with my work in the past (I’ll need your help with my work in the future)*. If you send me the data, I can also work on some ideas for the next project meeting.”

Thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions in a 3

(helping: reactive versus anticipatory versus balanced anticipatory helping) \times 2 (status of helper: peer versus higher) between-subjects design.

Results and Discussion

We sought to test our hypothesis that signaling a balanced social exchange (i.e., past or future reciprocity) reduces the threat of anticipatory helping from a higher- (or peer-) status helper. Consistent with our previous studies, self-threat did not differ between any of the helping conditions for higher- and peer-status helpers ($ps > .40$). Because of this, we collapsed the status conditions together and conducted an ANOVA with self-threat as the dependent variable, helping type as the factor, and we controlled for helper's relative status. Results showed that for higher- and peer-status helpers, anticipatory helping that signaled balance ($M = 2.90, SD = 1.32$) was significantly less self-threatening than anticipatory helping that did not signal balance ($M = 3.17, SD = 1.40$), $t(1496) = -3.20, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .01^8$, but balanced anticipatory helping was still significantly more self-threatening than reactive helping ($M = 2.31, SD = 1.19$), $t(1496) = 7.03, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .032$. Moreover, when the helper had higher or peer status, anticipatory helping that signaled (vs. did not signal) balance had significant and positive indirect effects on the recipient's willingness to accept help (.17; 95% CI [.06, .29]), performance evaluation of the helper (.11; 95% CI [.04, .19]) and relational evaluations of the helper (.10; 95% CI [.04, .16]).

In sum, these results are consistent with our predictions, and complement the findings in Study 3, by suggesting that in the absence of a preexisting relationship, higher- and peer-status helpers can engage in anticipatory helping, while mitigating its potential negative consequences, by *signaling* a balanced social exchange relationship.

⁸ We examined the effects of the two versions of the balanced anticipatory helping condition (signaling past versus future reciprocity) and found that there was no significant difference between these versions on self-threat ($p = .338$), as such, we include both versions as part of the same balanced anticipatory helping condition in our analyses.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Overall, four studies and one supplemental study provide broad support for our theoretical model and suggest that anticipatory helping can be self-threatening to the recipient, leading to lower acceptance of the help, and lower performance and relational evaluations of the helper. In addition, we found that these effects of anticipatory helping are stronger when the helper has higher (or peer) status, rather than lower status, in relation to the recipient⁹. Studies 3 and 4 also found that having or signaling a balanced social exchange between higher- (or peer-) status helpers and recipients reduces the self-threat and negative effects of anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping. These findings constitute important contributions to existing research on helping, social exchange, and status.

Theoretical Contributions

Contributions to the helping and support literatures. As noted, unlike most past research that does not differentiate between anticipatory and reactive helping (for reviews, see Bolino & Grant, 2016; Podsakoff et al., 2009), our theory and findings demonstrate why such distinctions matter (see also Lee et al., 2019; Spitzmuller & Van Dyne, 2013). We reveal that not only is workplace anticipatory helping more common and widespread than previously assumed, but we also offer a new theoretical explanation to why past research has likely emphasized the beneficial treatment helpers receive (from reactive helping) while overlooking (anticipatory) helping's more negative responses from recipients. To this end, we explain how help can threaten recipients and result in lower performance and relational evaluations for helpers when it is provided in an anticipatory, rather than reactive, manner.

⁹ We calculated direct and total effects of anticipatory helping on outcomes for Studies 1-3 (see [Supplemental Material H](#)). Results of Study 1 and Study 3 are consistent with complementary mediation while Study 2 are indicative of indirect-only mediation (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010).

We also find consistent support for helper's relative status as a key boundary condition (Flynn, 2006; Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014), such that anticipatory helping is more self-threatening and subsequently leads to less positive helper outcomes, when it comes from a higher- (or peer-) status, but not a lower-status, helper. In this way, our theory and findings make the important point that members with relatively lower status—those who typically face backlash for status-inconsistent behavior, such as speaking up or trying to influence others (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986)—can engage in anticipatory helping, a more assertive and socially risky form of helping, without threatening recipients or causing defensive reactions. Thus, helpers with relatively lower status are able to help others at work in either a reactive or anticipatory manner without causing harmful outcomes to themselves or the recipient. In this context, our findings on helpers' relative status may also elucidate why past research finds generally positive outcomes for helping behaviors; because supervisors are often used as a source of evaluations of employee outcomes from their helping (e.g., Johnson et al., 2002; MacKenzie et al., 1991; Podsakoff et al., 2009), and because the helpers in these cases (i.e., supervisors' subordinates) are relatively lower in status, then supervisors may be less threatened by subordinates' helping regardless of whether it is reactive or anticipatory helping.

In addition, our research both identifies and solves an important conundrum for organizations: anticipatory helping from relatively higher-status helpers (with superior expertise, skills, and knowledge) is likely vital for other team members' learning and performance (e.g., Fisher et al., 2018; Grodal et al., 2015; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001), but our findings confirm that it can be self-threatening and recipients are less likely to use it (see also Nadler, Halabi, Harapz-Gorodeisky, & Ben-David, 2010). In Study 3 and Study 4, we show how higher- and peer-status helpers can mitigate defensive responses from their anticipatory help—that is, by

signaling a balanced social exchange relationship with a recipient so that anticipatory helping is construed as more supportive and less challenging. In doing so, we further advance the literature by identifying two essential moderating factors that explain *when* anticipatory and reactive helping have different effects.

Because helping manifests as different forms of task assistance, our theory and findings also contribute to research on related constructs such as advice and instrumental support. For example, studies on unsolicited advice and support, which have largely been conducted in healthcare or personal relationships settings, suggest that recipients view unsolicited advice as more self-serving and intrusive (Boutin-Foster, 2005; Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997), which can negatively affect recipients well-being (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Deelstra et al., 2003; Song & Chen, 2014) and their learning and performance (Landis et al., 2021). Our work thus contributes to these research streams by (1) broadening the focus to examine work-related helper outcomes (e.g., performance evaluations), (2) identifying *when* such effects are more likely (i.e., based on the relative status of the advice or support giver), and (3) providing an avenue through which higher (and peer) status individuals can soften the negative responses to their unsolicited advice or support (i.e., by signaling a balanced social exchange).

Contributions to social exchange theory. Although scholars have recognized that the norm of reciprocity—recipients reciprocating positive (negative) actions by initiators with positive (negative) attitudes and behaviors—may be an oversimplification (Cropanzano et al., 2017), detailed theory regarding how, why, or when social exchange encounters do not follow the norm of reciprocity is lacking. To this end, we provide such specifics to explain why (self-threat) and when (relative status and unbalanced social exchanges) recipients of anticipatory (vs. reactive) helping do not reciprocate in kind but tend instead to reject the help and lower their

performance and relational evaluations of helpers. In addition, our findings help extend existing social exchange predictions. For instance, past work has suggested that employees who give more than they receive at work (i.e., are perceived as generous) will enhance how positively they are viewed by other members in their team (Flynn, 2003a); however, we argue that this may only be true for reactive helping, and that giving more anticipatory help than receiving it will likely result in *worse* outcomes for the helper.

Contributions to research on status. We also contribute to research on status, which has typically considered helping as an effective strategy for employees to enhance perceptions of their contribution to the group, and consequently, their status (e.g., Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Willer, 2009). We modify this assertion to suggest that, in general, reactive helping may be more beneficial than anticipatory helping for increasing the helper's status (i.e., being seen as a higher performer and more likable colleague). Moreover, our findings challenge the dominant perspective that higher-status actors are rewarded more for their behaviors (Hollander, 1958; Merton, 1968) and their helping interactions (Flynn, 2006; Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014), and thus such helpers might be expected to benefit more from taking the initiative of anticipatory helping. Rather, we find that higher-status helpers provoke stronger negative reactions from recipients when they help in an anticipatory manner. This is important because higher-status group members are typically confident and assertive and may wrongly assume their anticipatory help is welcomed and effective.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations in these studies offer potential avenues for future research. First, the low mean levels of self-threat in our studies suggest that although anticipatory helping was found to be more self-threatening than reactive helping, the level of threat is still relatively low in

absolute terms. However, a systematic review of management studies (see [Supplemental Material I](#)) examining self-reported measures of threat indicates that the levels of threat we observe in our study are consistent with past research. Thus, this issue of low levels of threat is not unique to our study and could be due to the fact that individuals tend to be reluctant to acknowledge or admit they feel threatened (Turner, Pratkanis, Probasco, & Leve, 1992). Moreover, our theory and findings are important not because of the absolute levels of threat, but because we find differential effects of helping type on recipient self-threat. That said, future research could provide further evidence of anticipatory helping's effects on self-threat by investigating it in ways that circumvent recipients' reluctance to self-report threat, such as by using experimental manipulation of the psychological process (e.g., Marr & Thau, 2014).

Second, motivated by our focus on social exchange theory, our hypotheses focused on how the recipient would respond to and evaluate the helper. However, the difference in source of ratings (direct recipients vs. third-party observers) could alter the effects that reactive and anticipatory helping have on threat and helper outcomes (Dalal & Sheng, 2019), such that more negative outcomes occur from those who receive anticipatory help compared with those who observe it as a third party (e.g., Flynn & Yu, 2021; Whiting et al., 2008). Future research should therefore examine such distinctions in the source of ratings of helper outcomes.

In addition, there are other fruitful avenues for future research inspired by our findings. First, future field studies can use the anticipatory and reactive scales we developed, as opposed to general helping measures, to more accurately assess and estimate the effects of these specific helping behaviors on helper outcomes. Second, although we examined two moderating factors—relative status and recipients' perception of balanced social exchange—there are other situational and individual characteristics of the helping interactions that may impact the effects of

anticipatory helping. For example, as we discuss regarding the results of Study 2, the workload of the recipient may determine when anticipatory helping leads to more or less acceptance of help (i.e., recipients with high workloads may accept anticipatory help despite feeling threatened). Thus, future research could examine workloads and other situational characteristics (e.g., helping norms) that may modify the effects of anticipatory helping.

Additionally, besides relative status, another factor that may make anticipatory helping more or less threatening is the helper's level of interactional justice (Flynn & Brockner, 2003). Helpers who enact greater interactional justice (e.g., treating the recipient with dignity and respect) when engaging in anticipatory helping may produce less self-threat in recipients. Hence, future research can investigate interactional justice and other helper behaviors and characteristics that moderate our core findings. Furthermore, past work has shown that the recipients of reactive help value it more right after the helping interaction compared to one month later (Flynn, 2003b). Interestingly, we might expect the opposite for anticipatory helping—recipients might immediately react to anticipatory help by assigning it a low value due to their self-threat, but actually value the help significantly more at a later point in time when they are no longer (or less) threatened by it. Future studies could examine how recipients value reactive versus anticipatory help across different points in time. Finally, research has shown that when a helper tries to take control over the recipients' tasks (i.e., imposed, forced, or directive support) this can increase recipients' self-threat (Bavik et al., 2020; Deelstra et al., 2003; Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). Therefore, it would be beneficial for future research to examine whether anticipatory helping is seen as controlling and how it relates to imposed or directive instrumental support.

Practical Implications

This research provides a number of practical implications for employees and leaders. First, our findings license lower-status members—who often self-censor because they worry about how higher-status members will perceive and respond to them (Anderson et al., 2001; Berger et al., 1972)—that they can engage in anticipatory helping, a more assertive and socially risky form of helping, without triggering defensive reactions by recipients. Thus, it may provide an avenue for lower status helpers to contribute to their group without facing backlash. Second, our finding that recipients are more threatened by, and less likely to accept anticipatory helping, from peer-, and especially higher-status helpers, gives these helpers a strong reason to pause and consider *how* they can engage in anticipatory helping while reducing its potential threat. With respect to this point, we identify that higher- and peer-status helpers should ensure recipients perceive a balanced social exchange; they can do so by asking for, welcoming, and receiving help from recipients at other times or by framing their anticipatory helping as reciprocating past or future help the recipient provided. Finally, leaders can create beneficial helping norms by encouraging and rewarding employees for seeking help, providing help, and accepting help. These actions can establish a collaborative environment so that group members are less threatened by anticipatory helping and can reap the full benefits of both types of helping at work.

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APPENDIX A

Reactive and Anticipatory Helping Scales

Items

Reactive Helping

1. I help my coworker when they make it clear that they want my help
2. I help my coworker when they ask for help
3. I agree to do things for my coworker when I am asked
4. I assist my coworker when they ask for help
5. I help my coworker when they ask me to do so

Anticipatory Helping

1. I demonstrate initiative in helping my coworker in advance of being asked
 2. I anticipate the needs of my coworker and offer to help them before being asked to do so
 3. I assist my coworker with their work without them asking for help
 4. I anticipate the needs of my coworker and offer to help
 5. I help my coworker prior to them asking for my help
-

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Variables (Study 1)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Anticipatory Helping (1 = Anticipatory, 0 = Reactive)	.52	.50	-							
2 Peer-Status Helper	.32	.47	.004	-						
3 Higher-Status Helper	.33	.47	-.003	-.48**	-					
4 Self-Threat	2.42	1.33	.30**	-.02	.16**	(.93)				
5 Willingness to Accept Help	5.20	1.38	-.44**	-.06	-.01	-.59**	(.97)			
6 Performance Evaluation of Helper	5.42	1.12	-.30**	.05	-.08*	-.50**	.60**	(.89)		
7 Bonus	48.66	30.21	-.25**	.06	-.07*	-.28**	.41**	.39**	-	
8 Relational Evaluation of Helper	5.41	1.04	-.27**	.06	-.07*	-.43**	.57**	.69**	.39**	(.95)

Note. N = 1052. Peer-status helper was coded as 1 = peer status, 0 = lower or higher status compared to recipient; Higher-status helper was coded as 1 = higher, 0 = peer or lower compared to recipient; Reliabilities along the diagonal in parentheses. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Regression Results of Conditional Path Model (Study 1)

Variable	Self-Threat		Willingness to Accept Help		Performance Evaluation of Helper		Bonus		Relational Evaluation of Helper	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	1.96**	.09	6.90**	.08	6.48**	.07	65.90**	2.13	6.24**	.07
Anticipatory Helping (1 = Anticipatory, 0 = Reactive)	.41**	.13	-.79**	.07	-.37**	.06	-11.34**	1.84	-.32**	.06
Peer-Status Helper ^a	.01	.13	-.12	.08	.13	.07	3.34	2.15	.15*	.07
Higher-Status Helper ^a	.18	.13	.17*	.08	.05	.07	-.45	2.16	.06	.07
Anticipatory Helping × Peer-Status Helper	.41*	.19								
Anticipatory Helping × Higher-Status Helper	.75**	.19								
Self-Threat			-.54**	.03	-.38**	.02	-5.08**	.70	-.30**	.02
<i>R</i> ²		.13		.43		.27		.11		.21

Note. N = 1052. Table entries report unstandardized parameter estimates with standard errors. ^a Reference status group is lower-status helper; Peer-status helper was coded as 1 = peer, 0 = higher or lower status compared to the recipient; Higher-status helper was coded as 1 = higher, 0 = peer or lower status compared to the recipient. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 3
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Variables (Study 2)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Anticipatory Helping	3.85	1.61	(.97)								
2 Reactive Helping	5.53	1.53	.62**	(.99)							
3 Helper Relative Status	-.15	1.92	-.12	-.18	(.92)						
4 Helper Peer Rank	.31	.47	-.10	-.20	-.06	-					
5 Helper Higher Rank	.39	.49	-.01	.10	.53**	-.54**	-				
6 Self-Threat	1.85	1.32	.18	.15	-.08	.25*	-.18	(.93)			
7 Help Accepted	5.29	1.44	.43**	.29*	-.15	.05	-.15	.07	(.90)		
8 Performance Evaluation of Helper	5.55	1.06	.32**	.18	-.17	.13	-.19	-.25*	.37**	(.89)	
9 Relational Evaluation of Helper	6.25	.96	.002	-.08	-.15	.08	-.26*	-.32*	.27*	.50**	(.87)
10 Interaction Frequency	4.86	1.75	.71**	.51**	-.14	.07	-.10	-.04	.34**	.40**	.19

Note. *N* = 63-64. Helper peer rank was coded as 1 = peer, 0 = lower or higher rank compared to recipient; Helper higher rank was coded as 1 = higher, 0 = peer or lower rank compared to recipient; Reliabilities along the diagonal in parentheses. **p* < .05; ***p* < .01.

TABLE 4
Regression Results of Conditional Path Model (Study 2)

Variable	Self-Threat		Help Accepted		Performance Evaluation of Helper		Relational Evaluation of Helper	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	1.65**	.29	5.43**	.39	6.04**	.27	6.92**	.26
Interaction Frequency	-.36**	.12	.01	.14	.09	.10	.13	.09
Helper Peer Rank ^a	.87*	.39	.12	.45	.42	.31	-.08	.30
Helper Higher Rank ^a	-.14	.43	-.37	.48	-.18	.33	-.54	.32
Anticipatory Helping	.39**	.14	.34*	.16	.19	.11	-.03	.11
Reactive Helping	.13	.13	.07	.14	.02	.10	-.06	.09
Helper Relative Status	-.03	.10	-.02	.11	-.05	.07	-.02	.07
Anticipatory Helping × Helper Relative Status	.12*	.05						
Self-Threat			-.02	.14	-.31**	.09	-.24**	.09
<i>R</i> ²		.28		.21		.31		.23

Note. *N* = 64 (63 for relations with self-threat). Table entries report unstandardized parameter estimates with standard errors. ^a Reference rank group is lower rank helper; Helper peer rank coded as 1 = peer, 0 = higher or lower than recipient; Helper higher rank coded as 1 = higher, 0 = peer or lower than recipient. All predictor variables (except self-threat and rank variables) were centered at the sample means of the variables. **p* < .05 ***p* < .01.

TABLE 5
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Variables (Study 3)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Anticipatory Helping (1 = Anticipatory, 0 = Reactive)	.50	.50	-							
2 Peer-Status Helper	.53	.50	.03	-						
3 Higher-Status Helper	.26	.44	-.07	-.63**	-					
4 Self-Threat	1.61	1.03	.20**	-.04	.09*	(.90)				
5 Help Accepted	5.98	1.42	-.33**	.01	.07	-.42**	(.93)			
6 Performance Evaluation of Helper	6.05	1.24	-.28**	.06	-.02	-.61**	.63**	(.95)		
7 Relational Evaluation of Helper	6.09	1.17	-.22**	.06	-.02	-.56**	.55**	.78**	(.94)	
8 Balanced Social Exchange	5.40	1.09	-.13**	.12**	-.04	-.45**	.44**	.58**	.56**	(.85)
9 Interaction Frequency	5.89	1.42	-.03	-.01	-.02	-.16**	.13**	.22**	.24**	.21**

Note. N = 629. Peer status helper was coded as 1 = peer status, 0 = lower or higher status compared to recipient; Higher-status helper was coded as 1 = higher, 0 = peer or lower compared to recipient; Reliabilities along the diagonal in parentheses. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 6
Regression Results of Conditional Path Model (Study 3)

Variable	Self-Threat		Help Accepted		Performance Evaluation of Helper		Relational Evaluation of Helper	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	1.48**	.11	6.67**	.13	6.93**	.10	6.77**	.10
Interaction Frequency	-.05*	.03	.03	.03	.07*	.03	.08**	.03
Balanced Social Exchange	-.40**	.03	.37**	.05	.41**	.04	.38**	.04
Anticipatory Helping (1 = Anticipatory, 0 = Reactive)	-.11	.16	-.66**	.10	-.38**	.07	-.23**	.07
Peer-Status Helper ^a	-.03	.13	.17	.12	.12	.09	.11	.09
Higher-Status Helper ^a	.04	.15	.42**	.14	.16	.10	.15	.10
Anticipatory Helping × Peer-Status Helper	.47*	.18						
Anticipatory Helping × Higher-Status Helper	.63**	.21						
Self-Threat			-.35**	.05	-.49**	.04	-.41**	.04
<i>R</i> ²			.25		.32		.52	

Note. N = 629. Table entries report unstandardized parameter estimates with standard errors. ^a Reference status group is lower-status helper; Peer-status helper was coded 1 = peer, 0 = higher or lower status than recipient; Higher status helper was coded 1 = higher, 0 = peer or lower status than recipient. Interaction frequency and balanced social exchange variables were centered at the sample mean. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

FIGURE 1
Theoretical Model of Helping Type and Helper's Relative Status on Helper Outcomes

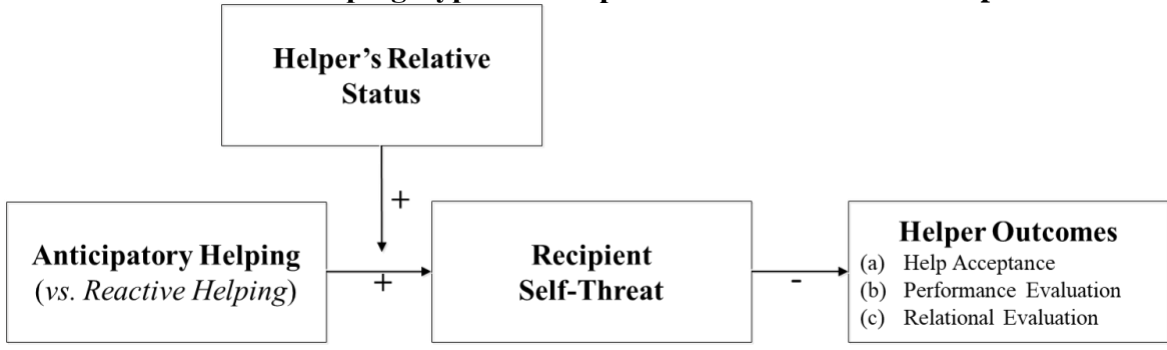
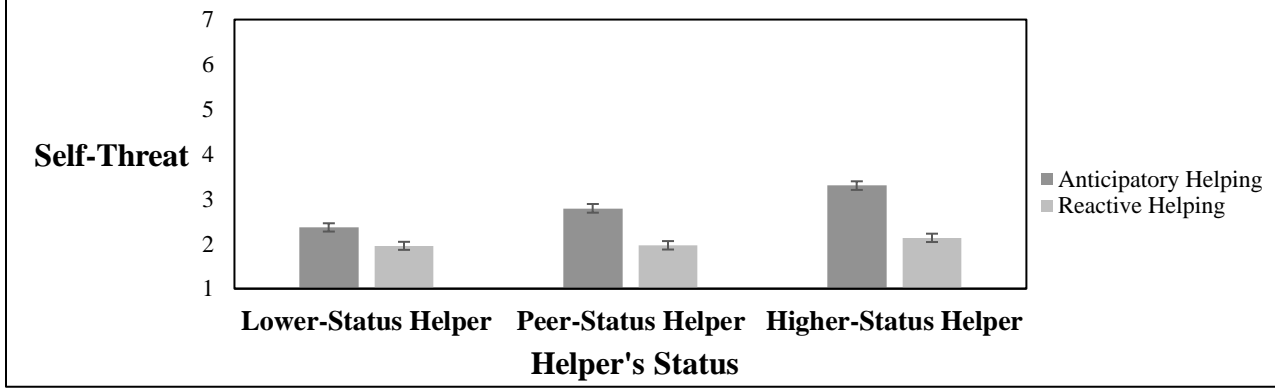


FIGURE 2
Interaction Effects of Helping Type and Helper's Relative Status on Self-Threat (Study 1)



Note. Error bars represent standard error.

FIGURE 3
Interaction Effects of Anticipatory Helping and Relative Status on Self-Threat (Study 2)

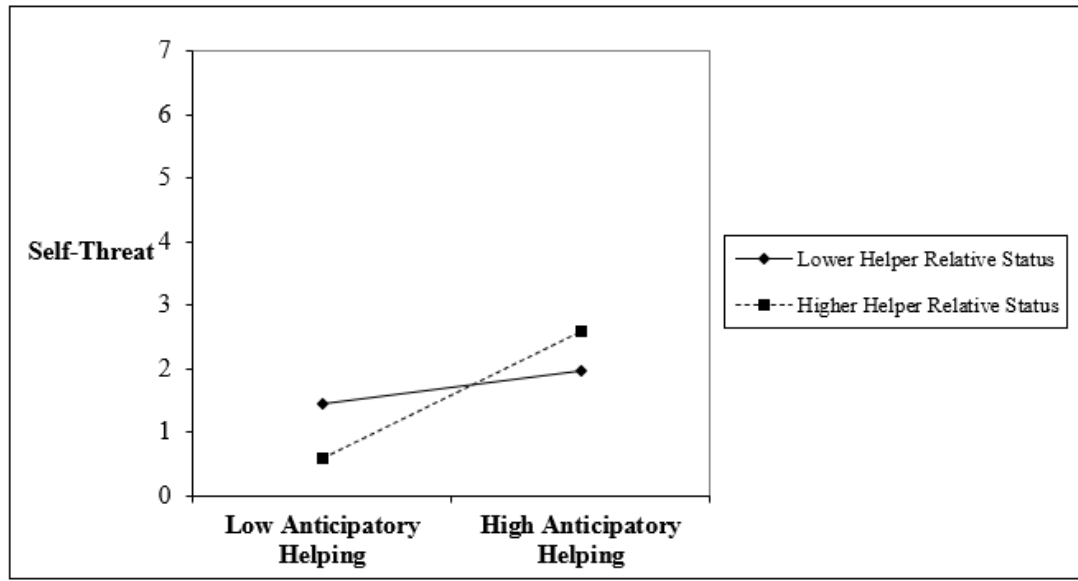
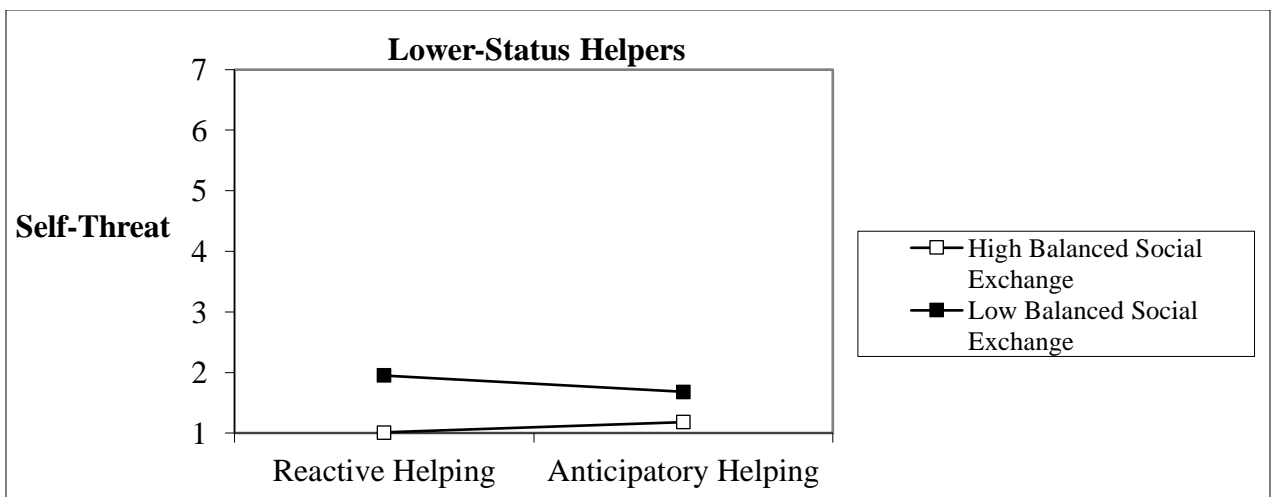
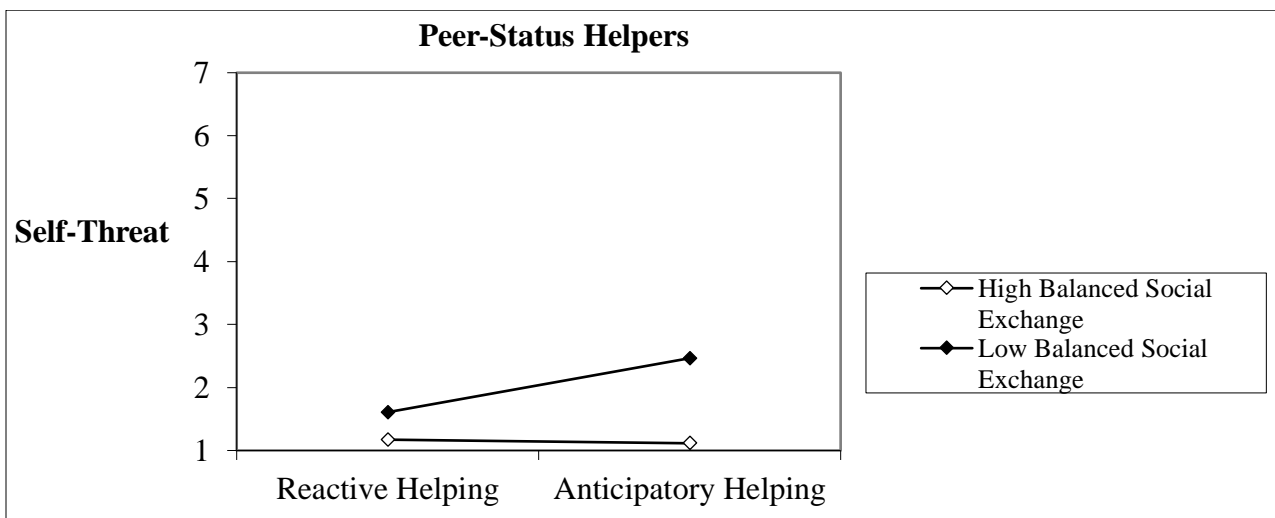
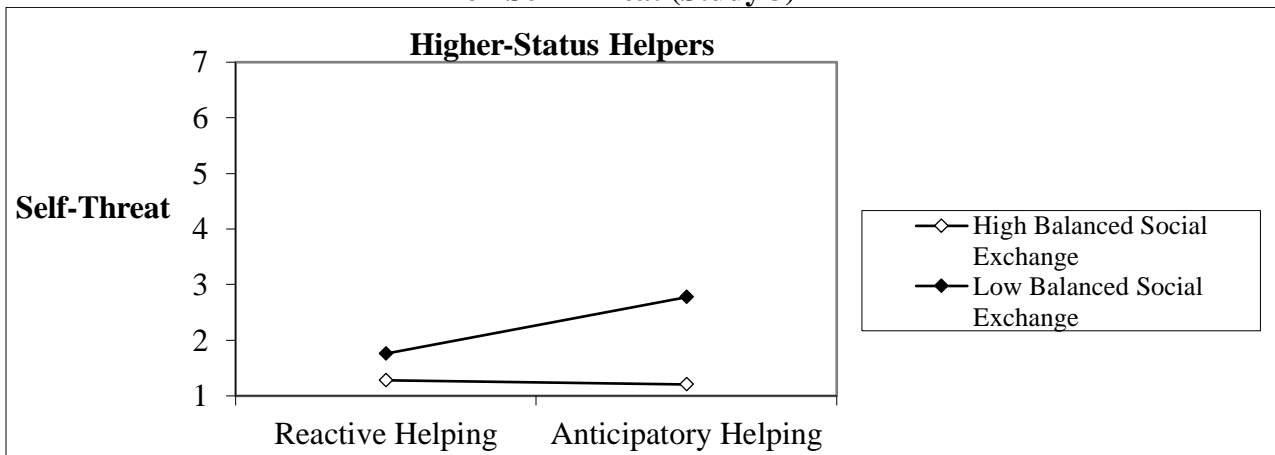


FIGURE 4
Interactive Effects of Helping Type, Helper Relative Status, and Balanced Social Exchange on Self-Threat (Study 3)



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