

Helping Strangers Is Lower in Embedded Cultures

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The embeddedness cultural value orientation regards the extended in-group, not the individual, as the key social unit. Embedded cultures focus on the welfare of the in-group, limiting concern for outsiders' well-being. Therefore, the authors hypothesized that people in high-embeddedness cultures are less helpful to strangers in need. They related countries' embeddedness scores to rates of helping strangers in three field experiments across 21 countries. Large cross-national differences in helping strangers related strongly and negatively to cultural embeddedness in subsets of wealthy and developing countries. This suggests that prevailing cultural values affect the way people relate to needy others outside their in-group.

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Humans have evolved to be dependent on groups for care (de Waal, 2008). Yet profound cross-cultural differences exist in prosocial behavior (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Henrich et al., 2005). For example, in one study rates of helping a handicapped stranger pick up dropped magazines ranged from 22% to 95% across 23 countries (Levine, Norenzayan, & Philbrick, 2001). Helping strangers was more frequent in poorer countries, possibly reflecting stronger adherence to traditional ethical guidelines that mandate assisting strangers. It was also more frequent in Spanish or Latin American cultures, possibly reflecting an emphasis on amiability in these cultures (Levine et al., 2001).

Attempts to find theoretically persuasive cultural explanations for these differences, such as using individualism-collectivism, have failed (Levine et al., 2001). This article accounts for previously measured national differences in helping strangers with the cultural value orientation of embeddedness that meaningfully distinguishes groups around the world (Schwartz, 2006).

Cultures high on embeddedness regard the family or extended in-group rather than the autonomous individual as the key social unit. People are expected to find meaning in life through identifying with the group in which they are embedded, participating in its shared

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way of life, and striving toward its shared goals. Embedded cultures emphasize restraint of actions that might disrupt in-group solidarity or the traditional order. Focusing on in-group members' welfare, embedded cultures give little encouragement to concern for the well-being of those outside this group. Therefore, the more embedded the culture in a country, the less people should help strangers. Combining data from two large, independently conducted international research projects permitted a strong test of this hypothesis.

Method

Country-Level Helping Scores

Helpfulness toward strangers data were taken from Levine et al.'s (2001) 23 country study, in which trained, college-aged, local experimenters pretended to need help in three different situations: dropping a pen without noticing ($n = 424$), accidentally dropping a pile of magazines while walking with an injured leg ($n = 493$), and appearing to be a blind person requiring assistance to cross the street ($n = 281$). Experiments were conducted on clear days in two or more locations in downtown areas of major urban centers during business hours in 23 countries. The proportion of individuals who helped in each situation was recorded, excluding children, the physically disabled, and others less capable of helping. Each country received a global help score based on the average of the z -standardized score of helping in the three situations. (For more details, see Levine et al., 2001.)

Cultural Embeddedness Scores

We measured cultural embeddedness with scores available from our ongoing cross-cultural value studies for 21 of these countries. Scores were based on responses to the Schwartz Value Survey (Schwartz, 1992) by 8,089 university students from 20 countries and 6,112 teachers from 18 countries. Marker values for cultural embeddedness (e.g., social order, respect for tradition, security, and obedience) were averaged and aggregated in each country. Across countries, students' and teachers' scores correlated strongly ($r = .87$, $p < .001$), indicating that different samples provide similar relative ratings. For 3 countries without teacher data and 1 country without student data, we estimated scores for the missing sample by regression. We then averaged student and teacher scores for a national embeddedness score.

Results

Overall helping correlated negatively with embeddedness ($r = -.43$, $p < .06$) and with national wealth (1997 Gross Domestic Product per capita [GDP]; $r = -.42$, $p < .06$). To test for the joint effects of wealth and embeddedness, we ran a multiple regression with both variables as predictors of helping. In this analysis, both GDP ($\beta = -.81$, $p < .0001$) and embeddedness ($\beta = -.82$, $p < .0001$) related strongly negatively to helping, indicating they both contributed independently to a prediction of country-level differences in helping. The lower the embeddedness and the lower the country's wealth, the more prevalent was the helping of strangers.

Because embeddedness and GDP are related ($r = -.49$), we were interested in testing the robustness of the hypothesized embeddedness–helping relationship across economic development levels. Therefore, to test for the possibility of GDP as a moderator of the embeddedness–helping relationship, we also ran a regression analysis with the product term of the centered scores of helping and embeddedness as recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). Again, both GDP ($\beta = -.84, p < .0001$) and embeddedness ($\beta = -.88, p < .0001$) predicted helping, whereas the interaction effect had no predictive power beyond that of GDP and embeddedness ($\beta = .13, ns$).

To illustrate the robustness of the embeddedness–helping relationship across different levels of country wealth, we examined the embeddedness–helping relationship in two separate regression analyses, one for 11 developing (GDP < \$12,000) and one for 10 wealthy (GDP > \$14,000) countries. Embeddedness related strongly negatively to helping in both developing ($\beta = -.77, p < .01$) and wealthy ($\beta = -.69, p < .03$) countries. Figure 1 plots countries' embeddedness and helping levels, presenting two parallel regression lines for developing and wealthy countries. For each subset of countries, cultural embeddedness predicted a substantial portion of the variance. In developing countries, it accounted for 59% of the variance, and in wealthy countries for 47%.

The relationship between embeddedness and helping is robust to the type of sample providing value scores (developing countries: teachers $r = -.85, p < .001$, students $r = -.65, p < .05$; wealthy countries: teachers $r = -.70, p < .05$, students $r = -.68, p < .05$). Controlling for country wealth, embeddedness correlated negatively with helping in each situation: blind person, $r = -.41, p = .07$; hurt leg, $r = -.50, p < .05$; and dropped pen, $r = -.73, p < .0005$.

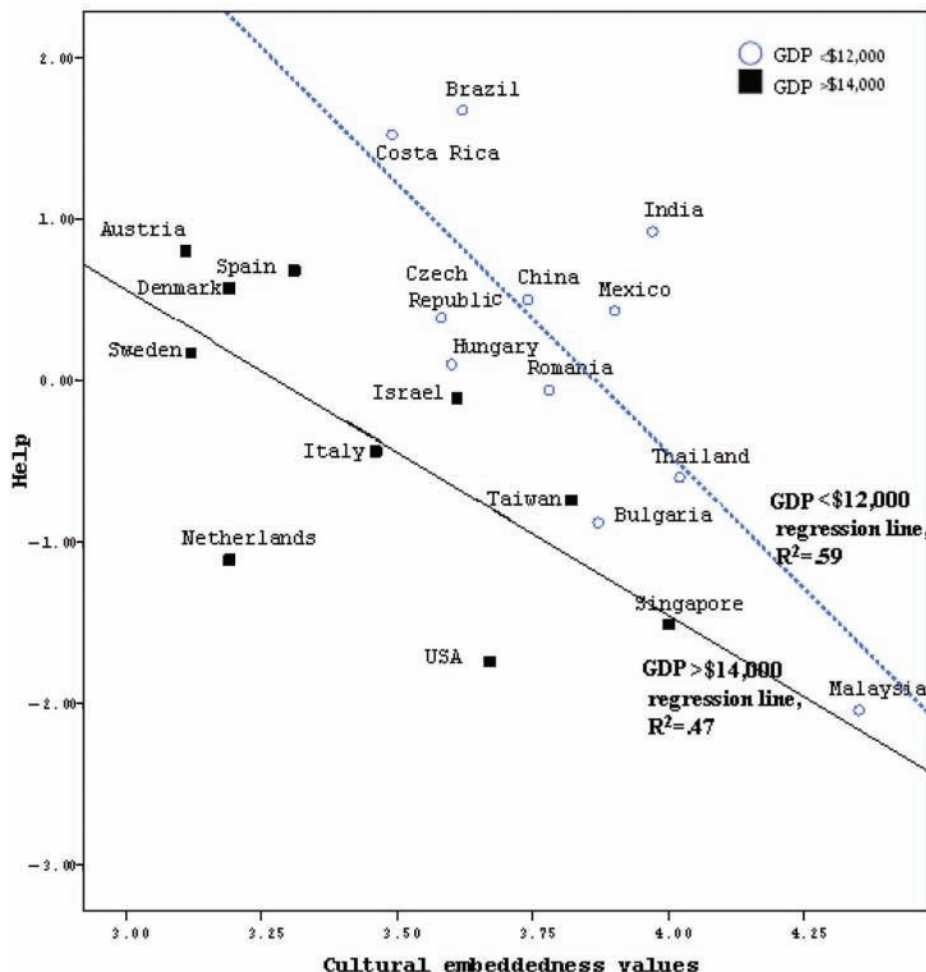
Of the other six cultural dimensions described by Schwartz (2006), only harmony values correlated with help, $r = .41, p = .063$, probably reflecting the emphasis of this value on positive social relationships. They had no predictive power over and above that of embeddedness and GDP. One key cultural dimension which is negatively related with embeddedness is cultural individualism–collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). Twenty-two of the cultures with helping data overlapped with those described by Hofstede (2001). As with the expert ratings of individualism–collectivism (Levine et al., 2001), the scores reported by Hofstede did not correlate with helping, $r = -.12, ns$.

Conclusion

The strong negative associations between embeddedness and helping strangers underscore the probable influence of culture on the way people relate to needy others outside their in-group. In highly embedded cultures, norms prescribing helping extended kin and cultivating supportive ties within one's community are strong. Our findings suggest that these norms do not apply to outsiders. Findings of strong respect for parents but rejection of immigrants in highly embedded cultures (Schwartz, 2006) support this inference. In summary, helping strangers in large urban contexts is less frequent in embedded cultures. This pattern was found in both wealthy and developing nations.

Because of the focus of embeddedness values on the in-group, we expected helping strangers to be lower in highly embedded cultures. The nature of the field study of helping did not enable us to test the flip side of this hypothesis, namely that helping in-group members

Figure 1
A Scatterplot of the Prevalence of Helping Strangers and Cultural Embeddedness



Note: In the developing countries (upper-right side), $\beta = -.77$, $t = -3.63$ $p = .006$; in the wealthier countries (lower-left side), $\beta = -.69$, $t = -2.71$ $p = .027$.

is more frequent in these cultures. This limitation should be addressed in future research. These analyses provide further support for the role cultural values may play in cross-cultural differences in behavior (Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 2006).

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