

Exploring the Social Representations of Vulnerable Populations Being Helped

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Resorting to Social Representation Theory, the aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of help recipients about Help, namely in terms of the shared representations about Helping Institutions, the self-perceptions of aid recipients and the potential Social Status Distance with regard to their helpers. Twenty-five members of vulnerable groups that benefited from help programs offered by Non-Profit Institutions/Organizations, aged between 18 and 70-years-old, responded to semi-structured interviews. Following the theoretical-methodological orientation of the structural approach of Social Representation Theory (Abric, 1984), the 800 free evocations and 149 words produced during the interviews, underwent a prototypical analysis with open-EVOC software (2000). In addition to contributing to Social Representation Theory by considering the theme of helping relations, the results of the present study showed – in contrast to the literature on orientations toward help (Nadler, 1997; 1998; 2002; 2015) – the importance, at different levels, of both autonomy and dependency orientations (and not just the latter). This study showed the importance, for the recipients of help, of being protagonists, active and autonomous in the process of improving their psychological and material situation; together with the importance of enjoying material goods, even if it means depending on an institution. Results are

discussed as a potential contribution to designing help programs that might provide greater benefits and well-being to help recipients.

Keywords: social representations, intergroup helping relations, recipients' perceptions of help

Almost all human societies state that we should be sensitive to other human beings, and it is usually labelled as immoral to not respond to others in need (Nadler et al., 2009). Yet, these same societies hold an ambivalent attitude as far as helping relations are concerned: we should help all those who need our assistance but avoid relying on others when we need help ourselves (Stürmer & Snyder, 2010). This study aims to contribute to the field of helping relations by understanding the perceptions of aid recipients. More specifically, through the lens of Social Representation Theory (SRT) (Moscovici, 1961/1976), this study aims at understanding what the perceptions on Help itself are, namely in terms of the shared representations about Helping Institutions, the self as aid recipient and the potential power difference with regards to their helpers. This research is relevant for understanding how to optimize the help programs' planning and, thus, avoiding potential power asymmetries that may cause damage to those being helped.

The fact that, in general, self-reliance implies strength and dependence on others implies weakness (Granqvist et al., 2010), might shed some light on the reasons behind the existence of ambivalent attitudes towards helping relations. Indeed, it is possible to find expressions, in various cultures around the globe, surrounding the positive value assigned to independence and the negative value assigned to dependence. For instance, religious sacred books are an interesting example of how different cultures deal with this issue. In the Koran, the Jewish prayer book, the Raja Yoga Hindu culture's sacred book and the Bible, we can find expressions or prayers that illustrate this phenomenon. For instance, in the Raja Yoga Hindu culture's sacred book, it is said that "The mind of the man who receives gifts is acted on by the mind of the giver. Receiving gifts is prone to destroy the independence of mind and encourage slavishness. Therefore, accept no gifts" (for more examples, see: Nadler et. al, 2009; Nadler, 2015). More concretely, the negative meaning associated with dependence comes from the fact that being dependent implies having less power than being independent (Nadler, 2009, 2015).

The importance of helping relations has also been reflected in social psychological research. For almost 50 years, social psychologists have been concerned with specifying the

conditions under which helping is more or less likely, the motives involved, as well as demographic and personality characteristics that foster it. Nevertheless, only in the last decades have social psychologists paid attention to the fact that helping relations also imply different power relations between an agent, who has more knowledge or material resources, and a recipient, who is dependent on the help. This view on helping behavior had several implications in the conceptualization of prosocial behaviors and helping relations (Nadler et al., 2009).

HELPING BEHAVIORS AND RELATIONS

The research on helping behaviors has been centered, since the early 1960's, on personal, interpersonal, and situational determinants of people's readiness to help others (Nadler, 2015). Recently, research has changed its focus onto the relations between helper and recipient (on interpersonal and intergroup levels), the helping program proposed, and the consequent self- and social categorizations of the recipient as a help recipient (e.g., Threat to Self-esteem Theory, Intergroup Helping as Status Relations Model; Fisher et al., 1982; Nadler, 2002; Nadler & Halabi, 2006; Nadler & Chernyak, 2014; Shneider et al., 1996).

Helping relations are a particular category of intergroup relations that imply an asymmetry in status/power and the dominance of the helper over the recipient (Nadler, 2002; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985). Nadler and Halabi (2006, p. 98) state that "helping relations are inherently unequal social relations", as the mere fact of having a donor and a recipient marks the donor as having higher social power. Moreover, "intergroup helping relations may both reflect and be affected by differential between-group power relations" (Nadler, 2002, p. 448). In helping programs, the recipients are usually members of a vulnerable group that receives – from an advantaged group – guidance thought to increase their prospects in life (e.g., education, work, etc.; Pettigrew & Martin, 1987). According to the literature, just the application of the program could reinforce the stereotype that members of vulnerable groups cannot make it alone (e.g., Fischer & Nadler, 1982; Nadler & Halabi, 2006).

Social Status Distance

The perceived status of the actors in intergroup relations is a powerful variable: "status is an element of social structure that ranks groups according to their social position, prestige, or worth and serves as a signal of whether an individual deserves to be treated with greater respect, deference, or honor" (Phillips et al., 2009, p. 713). Researchers such as Blau (1977), and

McPherson and Smith-Lovin (1987) discussed the concept of “Status Distance” as the level of difference between individuals with respect to the status they hold.

The concept can also be applied to groups (Bogardus, 1925; Simmel, 1908/1921): Social Status Distance focuses on people’s willingness to interact with members of different groups (e.g., racial or ethnic), especially those more distant in terms of status (Blau, 1977; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987). Because social status can work as a source of (dis)similarity, social status distance can be an obstacle in building a relationship at both interpersonal and intergroup levels (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987).

The disparity in social status between the donor and the recipient inherent to institutional helping (Nadler & Chernyak, 2014), can lead to a stigmatizing experience for the recipients (Pratkanis & Turner, 1996; Steele, 1992), as well as a threat to their self-esteem (Fisher et al., 1982), and, thus, undermine the success of the helping program (e.g., Nadler & Chernyak, 2014). Thus, one of the objectives of the current study was to understand if a power/status asymmetry, akin to the Social Status Distance concept, was perceived to exist by the help recipient and, if so, whether it was considered important and impactful.

Characteristics of the Helper and the Relationship with the Recipient

Extensive research on the bystander effect has shown that people are more likely to help when the situation is perceived as dangerous, a perpetrator is present, and the help required is physical (Fischer et al., 2011). There is comparatively less research on the contingencies of those being helped, but it is known that being helped by a similar versus dissimilar, and known versus unknown other, has different outcomes. At an interpersonal level, it seems more threatening to receive help from a similar and known other (Fisher et al., 1982) Nadler et al., 1974). Interestingly, when changing the focus to intergroup relations, it seems more threatening receiving help from a dissimilar and unknown other (outgroup) than from a similar and known other (ingroup), at least when the outgroup is ego-relevant (i.e., relevant for people's own self-concept; Nadler, 2002).

Help Characteristics

Another characteristic fundamental to understanding the recipient’s reaction to help is the autonomy or dependency orientation of the provided help, as the type of orientation can perpetuate asymmetries to a greater or lesser extent (e.g., Nadler, 2015).

Autonomy-oriented help consists of providing the recipients with the tools to solve their problems independently. It implies the helper's belief and a view of the recipients as efficacious individuals who, with the appropriate tools, can cope with the difficulties. Dependency-oriented help, in contrast, consists of providing the recipient with the full solution to the problem. It implies a view of the recipients as unable to solve their problems and, furthermore, reinforces their dependency on the helper (Nadler, 2002).

Helping behaviors, helping relations and their implications have mainly been investigated through quantitative methodologies, principally experimental (Fisher et. al, 1982; Nadler et al., 1974; Nadler et al., 1983). However, given the complexity of this form of intergroup relation, a more comprehensive understanding is needed, in particular from the perspective of the recipients of help themselves. The present study aims at contributing to this field with a qualitative lens, focused on shared representations at a broad level of analysis. Thus, in order to obtain a more complete and in-depth view of the beneficiaries' perspective, framing this work from the viewpoint of SRT (Moscovici, 1961/1976) was essential. In doing so, the present work offers an important contribution as the theme of Help and Help perceptions is not yet explored in the field of social representations.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION THEORY

SRT is concerned with the way in which knowledge is represented in a community, shared by its members, and becomes a true 'common sense theory' concerning any aspect of life and society (Galli, 2014).

Among its different approaches, we opted for using the theoretical-methodological orientation of the structural approach, a perspective that conceives Social Representations (SR) as knowledge structures about themes of social life, shared by groups and formed by interlinked cognitive elements (Wachelke & Wolter, 2011). The main theory of the structural approach is the Central Core Theory (CCT; Abric, 1993), according to which SRs are internally organized by a central core and a peripheral system, which are interconnected and complementary. To explore the structure of the SRs of help recipients, we used the prototypical analysis, one of the most widespread methods for the structural approach and one of the most common strategies for studying SRs, especially in applied research, given that its objective is not the direct contribution to the theories of social thought, but rather the understanding and diagnostics of social themes, in order to implement interventions (Wachelke & Wolter, 2011).

SRT, based on people's perceptions and opinions and created as a bottom-up theory of 'common knowledge', seemed to perfectly frame the context in which we desired to develop this research. In fact, by addressing the Helping Relations issue and the recipients' perceptions of being helped with CCT and the prototypical analysis, we obtained an ordered and detailed set of data, easy to analyze and understand (Quenza, 2005). Finally, by using the SRT as a guiding principle for the research, we aimed at extending its fields of exploration.

METHODS

This study was conducted via semi-structured interviews, a methodology commonly used in SRT (Moscovici, 1976) and its structural approach (Abric, 1984; Vergès, 1994), that offers relative flexibility and allows researchers to investigate people's perceptions in depth (Alshenqeti, 2014).

Some data were obtained using free association (questions concerning Helping Relations and Self) and other data were obtained using open questions (questions regarding Social Status Distance).

Conducting a prototypical analysis made it possible to explore and describe the SR structure of a given social 'object', namely 'Help'. According to Vergès and Bastounis (2001), this technique also allows the structure of both the central and the peripheral systems of the SR to be defined.

Participants

Twenty-five people partook in the study; 70% of the participants were from Portugal, of which 7% presented themselves as Portuguese gypsies, 15% were from São Tomé and Príncipe, 7% from Syria, 4% from France and 4% from Russia (48% women; age $M = 46.4$, $SD = 11.6$). Most of them were illiterate, and they were all members of vulnerable groups, benefiting from help programs offered by four Portuguese Non-Profit Institutions/Organizations, selected through a criteria of accessibility: a general call for participation was sent to different organizations/institutions, and data were collected from those that responded positively.

The Non-Profit Institutions/Organizations presented the following characteristics: two of them offered what is considered to be dependency-oriented help such as providing food and clothes; and two of them offered what is considered autonomy-oriented help, such as social (re)integration (Nadler, 2002). Three out of the four Institutions/Organizations were Christian.

The vulnerable groups to which the participants belonged to can be defined as people formerly involved in drug addiction, prostitution, and/or homelessness, as well as refugees, people with an income below the poverty line, and immigrants.

Procedures

For practical reasons, data collection was conducted in the facilities of the organizations where the participants benefited from help (all in the Lisbon metropolitan area), with all the interviews being conducted in European Portuguese, apart from the interviews with the refugee population, which were conducted in English. Collecting sensitive data by interviewing vulnerable populations involves various ethical issues, and, thus, all ethical standards of conducting research with vulnerable populations were met, and the ethical approval of the ethical committee of a Portuguese university was sought and granted. For the same reason, it was necessary to have the mediation of the institution, the full consent of the interviewees, and the use of a known space – even though the use of a familiar space had the disadvantage of having people potentially being more aware of socially desirable answers (Krumpal, 2013).

The interview had a duration between 10 and 25 minutes, depending on the participant's willingness and loquacity.

Instrument: Interview Structure And Operationalizations

The data were collected using a semi-structured interview including free association tasks, open-ended questions, and socio-demographic questions. The guide for the interview was created with the aim of exploring the beneficiary's perceptions on the received help. A review of the existing literature regarding helping relationships and helping behaviors revealed that the most important variables taken into consideration were: the orientation of help (autonomy or dependency), the self-perceptions, and the relationship with the helper (e.g., Fisher et al., 1982; Nadler et al., 1974; Blau, 1977; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987; Nadler, 2015). Given that help relations occur between people/groups that may vary in terms of distance in (social) status, and that the relations are influenced by the (social) status distance (Blau, 1977; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987; Bogardus, 1925; Simmel, 1908/1921), we also explored whether the recipients of help perceived the existence of such distance in terms of (social) status and if this influenced the perceptions about the help received. Therefore, we constructed an interview's questionnaire that could provide an in-depth view of the different aspects that might constitute

Help, in order to analyze them together and explore the perceptions relative to Help. Thus, the interview guide included the following three main points.

Help Institution

Three association tasks aimed at understanding the respondents' shared representations about the institution/NGO they received help from, as well as perceptions about the orientation of the specified type of help – that is, dependency- or autonomy-oriented (Nadler, 1997, 1998, 2002).

Self

Four association tasks aimed at exploring whether there was some sort of shared identity as help recipients, was composed of four free association tasks, two of which were adapted from Schwarzer and Jerusalem's (1995) Self-efficacy scale used to assess self-perceptions of esteem and efficiency. Given the explorative purpose of the present study, we included these tasks even though asking for this sort of perception possibly elicited idiosyncratic responses that could have made it quite difficult to understand an eventual underlying SR.

Social Status Distance

Social status distance was explored through three open-ended questions to obtain flexibility and freedom, and enable the interviewees to elaborate on various issues (Dörnyei, 2007). These were adapted from the Bogardus Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1925), and were intended to assess the interviewees' perceived social status distance towards the institution and its staff (Maurer & Keim, 2018). More specifically, with this section we firstly wanted to understand if there was a perceived difference of status regarding the Helping Institution and its staff, and whether such an asymmetry would be explained by a difference in terms of power, and whether this was relevant for the beneficiaries. Then, we also aimed at identifying the type of relationship the beneficiaries perceived as having with the Institution and its staff – both in terms of neutrality, superiority and inferiority, and in terms of it being viewed as family, friendship, collaboration or work (Phillips et al., 2009).

Socio-Demographic Information

Finally, the interview guide also included nine questions addressing socio-demographic information. Six questions concerned the persons themselves (gender, age, family composition,

year of schooling, etc.) and three questions concerned the type of aid received, from which institution(s) the aid was received, and the duration of the aid.

Data Analysis

The data were collected and analyzed following the Structural Approach (Abric, 1976; 2003) to SRT, more specifically CCT and prototypical analysis. To define the hierarchical structure of the SRs based on prototypical analysis, two kinds of data were intersected: the frequency of the evocations and their mean rank. In an association task, the words or expressions that are among the first to be produced and have a high frequency are salient and important to the participants. This becomes an indicator of the typicality (Rosch, 1973) of words produced. Based on these elements, it is assumed that the words or expressions with a higher frequency and a lower rank (i.e., among the first ones produced) are most central and thus belong to the common and shared central system of a SR.

Open-EVOC software (2000) was used to explore the central core and the peripheral systems of Help, more concretely in terms of the possible SRs of the Helping Institution, the Self, and Social Status Distance. This software allowed us to conduct a prototypical analysis by entering the words evoked (which had already undergone lemmatization) and creating its classic tables. The evoked words were also analyzed in terms of their correspondence to the semantics of autonomy and dependency orientations, based on the definitions provided in the literature (e.g., Nadler, 2002).

RESULTS

800 free evocations were produced, of which 375 related to the “Helping Institution” and 425 to the “Self”. 149 evocations related to “Social Status Distance” were found. Lemmatization was carried out on the corpus.

Concerning the composition of the tables portraying the results, the cut-off points for the two coordinates of frequency and evocation rank were decided as follows: regarding evocation rank, the mean of the number of evocations produced by each participant was adopted (Wachelke & Wolter, 2011). Since most participants produced either 2-3 words or 5-6 words, the low mean ranks was established at 1.5; thus, results above 1.5 were considered as a high mean rank. Taking into consideration the small number of participants and, therefore, of evocations obtained, we decided not to define a minimum value of frequency and to use as a

frequency cut-off point the perceptible jump in the continuity of evocation proportion of each table portraying the results (Wachelke & Wolter, 2011).

It is important to note that, although the interviews targeted people from highly differentiated vulnerable groups (former drug addicts, former prostitutes, former homeless persons, refugees, people with an income below the poverty line and immigrants) receiving help from differentiated institutions, we found what appeared to be shared representations of Help. Thus, it seemed that having different types of vulnerability and receiving different types of help (two institutions provided autonomy-oriented help and two institutions provided dependency oriented help)¹ was not relevant enough to produce very different responses. Accordingly, we decided to present the data in an aggregated manner, rather than separated by type of vulnerability or type of help received. Only the tables of the most interesting results of the prototypical analysis are presented, but all outcomes were considered during the analysis.

Help Institution

375 evocations related to the “Helping Institution” were originated. More precisely: 125 evocations for the first task, 125 for the second task and 125 for the third task.

Table 1.

Prototypical Analysis of the Evocations about the “(name of the) Helping Institution”

	Low Rank (≤ 1.5)			High Rank (>1.5)		
	Evocation	Freq.	Rank	Evocation	Freq.	Rank
Frequency ≥ 2	God	4.8	1.5	Do not Know	30.5	3.9
	Family	4	1.8	Help	6.4	2
	Change	2.4	1.3	Friendship	6.3	3.5
	Well-being	2.4	1.67	Salvation	2.4	3.33
	Need	2	1.5			
	Hope	2	1.5			
Frequency < 2	Occupation	0.8	1	Hunger	1.6	2
	Life	0.8	1	Love	1.6	2.5
				Support	1.6	2.5
				Joy	1.6	3

¹As most of the Institutions presented themselves as Christian (three out of four), this was not considered a factor of differentiation to begin with.

Gratitude	1.6	3
Confidence	1.6	4
Reinsertion	1.6	4
Fear	0.8	2
Challenge	0.8	2
Knowledge	0.8	2
Rehab	0.8	2
Stability	0.8	2
Respect	0.8	2
...

Note. Frequency $\geq 2\%$ and rank ≤ 1.50 : hypothesized central system; frequency $\geq 2\%$ and rank > 1.5 : first peripheral zone; frequency $< 2\%$ and rank ≤ 1.50 : second peripheral zone; frequency $< 2\%$ and rank > 1.50 : distant periphery.

Of the 125 words evoked in relation to the first task of the section on Help Institution, six seemed to constitute the first quadrant (so the possible core of the SR): *God* (4.8% frequency, 1.5 mean average) was the most central representation, which is not surprising considering that the representations are contextually and historically dependent, and three out of four of the Institutions were Christian institutions. *Family* (4% frequency, 1.8 mean average), the second representation of the central core, was understood as a type of perceived relation with the Helping institution, as was the evocation *Friendship* in the second quadrant. *Change* (2.4% frequency, 1.3 mean average), a representation linked to the autonomy-oriented help semantic, was reinforced by the evocation *Reinsertion* in the second quadrant. *Well-being* (2.4% frequency, 1.67 mean average) touched the autonomy and the positive perceptions semantics. We also found the same semantics of autonomy and positivity in the words *Joy* (fourth quadrant), *Peace* (third quadrant) and *Stability* (fourth quadrant). Even if not of great salience, opposite in terms of its meaning and quadrant to the evocation *Well-being*, we found the evocation *Fear* (fourth quadrant). Also part of the central core was the evocation *Need* (1.6% frequency, 1.5 mean average), which was linked to the dependency-oriented help semantic and directly connected with the evocations *Hunger*, *Help* and *Support*, the three of them appearing in the second quadrant. *Hope* (1.6% frequency, 1.5 mean average), the last evocation of the central core, was connected to the autonomy-oriented help semantic that seemed to be the most salient one in the prototypical analysis of the Helping Institution.

Looking at the prototypical analysis of the advantages of benefiting from a Help institution program (second task), in the central core, we found again the words *Change* (1.6% frequency, 1 mean average) and *Peace* (1.6% frequency, 1.5 mean average). In the second quadrant, the semantics of dependency-oriented help (*Help, Food, Clothes, Support*) and relations (*Friendship, Companionship, Family*) were again present.

For the prototypical analysis of the disadvantages of benefiting from a Help Institution program (third task), we mostly found the evocation *None* (6.4% frequency, 1 mean average). Most of the participants did not find any disadvantage or did not want to analyze this topic. *Coexistence/Living together* (1.6% frequency, 1 mean average) was quite salient and it represented the other side of the relations semantic. The evocation *Not having alternatives* (1.6% frequency, 1.5 mean average) was strongly connected with *Need*, stressing the strong feeling of being dependent. Here, once again we see the evocation *Fear* (1.6% frequency, 1.5 mean average), already found in the SR of the Helping Institution (first task).

Self

425 evocations related to the “Self” were originated. More precisely: 125 evocations for the first task, 100 for the second task, 100 for the third task and 100 for the fourth task.

Looking at the perceptions of the Self, it was possible to see that a shared identity was elicited among respondents. Looking at both the evocations connected to the “Self as individual” (first task) and the “Self as a social person” (second task), the most salient words were connected to the semantic of relations (*Friend, Closed*).

Table 2.

Prototypical Analysis of the Evocation about the Input “Problem (associated with the self)”

		Low Rank (≤ 1.5)		High Rank (>1.5)			
		Evocation	Freq.	Rank	Evocation	Freq.	Rank
Frequency ≥ 2	Money		6	1.43	Do not know	51	3.2
	Health		4	1.25	Solving (problems)	4	2
	Children		3	1.33	House	2	2
	None		2	1	Faith	2	3
Frequency < 2	Drugs		2	1			
	Problematic		1	1	Despair	1	2

Sadness	1	1	Pray	1	2
God	1	1	Employment	1	2
War	1	1	Temptation	1	2
Loss of control	1	1	Family	1	2
Difficulty	1	1	Error	1	2
Accident	1	1	Job	1	2
Institution Name	1	1	Conflict	1	2
Alcohol	1	1			

Note. Frequency $\geq 2\%$ and rank ≤ 1.50 : hypothesized central system; frequency $\geq 2\%$ and rank > 1.5 : first peripheral zone; frequency $< 2\%$ and rank ≤ 1.50 : second peripheral zone; frequency $< 2\%$ and rank > 1.50 : distant periphery.

The first quadrant of the prototypical analysis on the input “problem” connected to the self (third task), was composed by the words *Money* (6% frequency, 1.43 mean average), *Health* (4% frequency, 1.25 mean average) *Children* (3% frequency, 1.33 mean average), *None* (2% frequency, 1 mean average), and *Drugs* (2% frequency, 1 mean average). The SR’s central core on the input “value” connected to the self (fourth task), resulted in the following evocations: *God* (6% frequency, 1.67 mean average), *Friendship* (4% frequency, 1 mean average), *Children* (3% frequency, 1.67 mean average), *Home* (2% frequency, 1.5 mean average), *Acceptance* (2% frequency, 1.5 mean average), *Relations* (2% frequency, 1.5 mean average), and *People* (2% frequency, 1.5 mean average).

The semantics of relations with evocations such as *Friendship*, *Children*, *Relations*, *People* and *Family*, *Love*, and *Good mother*, and the semantics of material goods (dependency) with evocations such as *Money*, *Home*, *Work*, were the most prominent.

Social Status Distance

149 words related to “Social Status Distance” were found. More precisely: 75 words for the first task and 74 for the second task.

The most salient evocations were the opposite semantic words, *Same* (22% frequency, 1.9 mean average) and *Different* (20% frequency, 1.2 mean average). *Do not want to talk about it* (12% frequency, 1.33 mean average) was the third evocation composing the central core. Although it was not the most salient evocation, the one with the highest frequency was *I do not know* (28% frequency, 2 mean average), followed by *Perceptions of inferiority* (12% frequency,

2 mean average). Among the evocations related to the relation with the Help Institutions' staff, *Friendship* (13.51% frequency, 1.2 mean average) was the most salient one.

Table 3.

Prototypical Analysis of Words evoked about Social Status Distance

	Low Rank (≤ 1.5)			High Rank (> 1.5)		
	Evocation	Freq.	Rank	Evocation	Freq.	Rank
Frequency ≥ 10	Same	22	1.9	Do not know	28	2
	Different	20	1.2	Inferior	12	2
	Do not want to talk about	12	1.33			
Frequency < 10	Positive Attitudes	16	2.67			
	Relations	1.33	1			

Note. Frequency $\geq 10\%$ and rank ≤ 1.50 : hypothesized central system; frequency $\geq 10\%$ and rank > 1.5 : first peripheral zone; frequency $< 10\%$ and rank ≤ 1.50 : second peripheral zone; frequency $< 10\%$ and rank > 1.50 : distant periphery.

This result was in line with the previous one, revealing that, in terms of relations, the help recipients see themselves as *Friends* of those who help them. In terms of comparison, even if the word *Same* is the most salient, we cannot conclude that the help recipients see themselves at the same level as those providing help, given that *Perceptions of inferiority* were also quite frequent.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE ORIENTATIONS

Help and Helping relations are fundamental behaviors, explored from multiple lenses (e.g., religious, psychological, sociological, biological; Nadler et al., 2010). This study contributed to deepening the understanding of Help from the perspective of the recipients, framing the problem through "*common knowledge*" (Moscovici, 1976). Thus, the study aimed to explore the vulnerable populations' shared representations about the Helping Institutions, and to understand whether the perception of (in)dependence from/on a given help program, as well as the Social Status Distance from the helper, were perceived as relevant for their self-concept.

As previously stated, the current study was based on the concept of "*help as a mixed blessing*" (Nadler & Jeffrey, 1986), relying on the evidence of the relative amount of support

or damage that helping relations can cause (Fisher et al.1982; Nadler, 2015). To the best of our knowledge, there seems to be no literature addressing this issue through a qualitative methodology and through the eyes of the help recipient. Furthermore, by resorting to SRT (Moscovici, 1961/1976) for studying Help, and using it for exploring specific shared representations of the studied target, we also contributed to expanding the scope of SRT itself, providing validation for it in relatively new contexts.

More concretely, although the SRs in the literature traditionally reflect broader societal perspectives (in the context of Help, e.g., issues surrounding what the representations of the Portuguese in general are about help and help recipients), the present study offers insight into a rather narrower set of shared representations: the direct representations that the targets of the representations under study share amongst themselves (i.e., what do the help recipients themselves think about being a help recipient). Highlighting what the perceptions about Help are, operationalized in terms of the shared representations about the Helping Institutions, the recipient's self-perceptions, and the relevance, or lack thereof, of the Social Status Distance between the helper and the recipient, it was possible to analyze the Help field from a different perspective. That is, the Help field was analyzed in a way that furthers our understanding of how to optimize help programs, contributing to their development, and attempting to prevent these asymmetric relations from leading to self-stigmatization and threatening the self-esteem of recipients (Fischer & Nadler, 1982; Nadler, 2002; Nadler & Halabi, 2006).

The interviews revealed interesting results, namely concerning the ideal SR of the Helping Institution. Its most salient evocations were *Family, Change, Well-Being, Necessity, Hope, and Fear*. The most significant themes were connected to the semantic of Help (both its dependency- and autonomy-orientations) and the semantic of the Relations with the institution. It was quite curious that the prototypical analysis of the Helping Institutions (first task) revealed evocations with opposite semantics: *Necessity* (dependency-oriented Help) vs. *Well-being* (autonomy-oriented help). Among the advantages of benefiting from a Helping Institution, material objects were named as well, such as *Food* and *Clothes*, which lead back to the semantics of dependency-oriented help (for more details, see the RESULTS section, and Table 2). Also mentioned were positive perceptions of one's own being, such as *Self-esteem* and (once again) *Well-being*, which lead back to the semantics of autonomy-oriented help. Thus, the analysis also seemed to suggest the importance of both orientations of Help for its recipients: it seemed to show that perceptions of both internal autonomy and external (material) dependency coexisted. More concretely, significant evocations referring to both the semantics of the

autonomy-orientation and those of the dependency-orientation, seemed to indicate that both orientations are important and that the beneficiaries seemed to perceive an internal autonomy as well as an external (material) dependency.

The literature presents autonomy-oriented help as more effective (Nadler, 2002), and most of the help programs developed in recent years embraced this vision. Yet, dependency-oriented programs persisted and kept on satisfying only the basic needs of recipients. Nevertheless, our results seem to highlight that the coexistence of the two orientations was relevant and helpful for the help recipients. Therefore, in designing/planning a help program, it could be useful to, on the one hand, meet the basic needs of the beneficiaries (dependency-oriented), while, on the other hand, taking into consideration their necessity of perceiving themselves as fully autonomous in terms of decision-making, and fully capable of action and self-care (autonomy-oriented). It could be the case that, once their basic needs are met (or partially met), it is easier for the participants to engage in processes designed to promote their internal autonomy (e.g., Maslow, 1943). This feeling of effectiveness or internal autonomy could be stimulated by the relationships between those who help and those being helped. It could also be the case that, in line with the belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980), recipients of help blame themselves for their vulnerable situation (e.g., when they refer to drugs) and, thus, feel responsible for its solution as well.

Regarding the shared representations of the Self, although the nature of this theme made it difficult to explore the structure of the SR, a sort of shared identity was still elicited. The results showed more evocations of the Self in relation to others, than as an individual. Some evocations (11) referred to self-esteem, and some (12) referred to the social roles the participants engaged in. The semantic relations with others and with material needs, were probably the most common. As stated, Self-perception in the context of the Help Institution was mostly described as related to others: this kind of shared self-perception suggested the importance that being part of a group (the above-mentioned shared identity) might have for the help recipients; and this might be quite important, as the feeling of belongingness may increase the perception of self-efficacy (Nadler, 2015), thus, contributing to the reinforcement of feelings of autonomy (Sousa et al., 2012)

The open-ended questions were the most delicate part. The participants struggled to express themselves without a guideline to follow and – as for the free association tasks about the words *Problem* and *Disadvantages* – the participants did not feel comfortable talking openly: using a participant's words, "*I don't want to complain about anything*". Although

interviewing the participants in the facilities of the Helping Institutions probably influenced these non-answers, inferences about their meaning can still be made. In fact, the evocation order and frequency analysis showed that the recipients' perceptions of the relation and the Social Status Distance toward the helping institution was one of no distance, that is, a relation on the same level, with the most salient words being *Same* and *Friendship*. Nevertheless, previous work on religious groups' help have shown that the type of help provided is contingent on the perception of recipients' responsibility for being in a vulnerable situation and for escaping it (Jackson & Esses, 1997), and participants could be aware of that.

Considering the most frequent answers to the Social Status Distance tasks, we could also see the non-willingness of the interviewees in answering and analyzing the issue. Yet, in this context, even the word *Same* was used by many to avoid the question, for example, by saying "*everybody is the same*", and thus reporting a general perspective that probably does not reflect their own personal perceptions. Few people reported a feeling of inferiority and disparity towards the Helping Institution.

Moreover, we should take into consideration that, as much as we provided a safe environment for participation, the questions presented in the semi-structured interview could be categorized as sensitive and, thus, prone to being distorted by biases such as social desirability and the threat of disclosure (Krumpal, 2013). Thus, one can speculate that they coped by avoiding to answer, by underreporting their thoughts, or by reporting their perceptions in a more positive light than they actually are. It seemed to confirm what Nadler (2002) reported on the relationships between ingroups and outgroups: in all the institutions, the beneficiaries were assisted by people with a higher social status level (therefore, an ego-relevant outgroup). Thus, this apparent difficulty in answering questions about Social Status Distance, seems to be in line with the Intergroup Helping as Status Relations Model (Nadler & Halabi, 2006, 2015; Halabi et al., 2016): when ingroup membership is ego-relevant, helping relations with the outgroup constitute a means to establish, reinforce or challenge the existing social hierarchy, thus being threatening for the self-esteem and well-being of those being helped.

This research presented other limitations. The number of participants was low, but a saturation point was reached and, thus, there was no need to proceed collecting data. We must also remember that working with vulnerable populations means working with a sensitive population and, in that sense, we should only collect data that is strictly necessary, both in terms of the number of questions and the number of participants. Thus, the mediation of the Helping Institutions was fundamental, but many of the contacted institutions rejected participating in

the current research study in order to safeguard their beneficiaries from being subjected to a potentially uncomfortable situation – a perfectly valid position.

Furthermore, given the potential complexity of the issue at hand, and given that most of the study's participants were illiterate, it might be the case that we also faced communication issues. We could not exclude that problems vis-à-vis the answering of questions by participants were also due to communication barriers.

In terms of suggestions for future research and given that the real perception and impact that Social Status Distance had on the recipients of Help was not clear, it would be interesting to further study it qualitatively, with a study focused on this topic and thought to avoid the social desirability bias, by including, for example, the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960, 1964).

At the perceptual level, the most interesting finding concerned the coexistence of the autonomy-orientation and the dependency-orientation of help. A future study could investigate the weight and importance that the two different orientations might have for help recipients, as well as the factors that might impact the weight and importance of such perceptions (Nadler, 2002). This finding might serve as a useful guideline to the institutions that offer help programs. The institution might consider the importance, for the help recipients, of being protagonists, active and autonomous in the process of improving their psychological and material conditions (i.e., autonomy-oriented help), without neglecting the importance of the provision of material support when this is needed (i.e., dependency-oriented help) – even if the latter means that the dependency on the institution is strengthened. It is also advisable to remember the importance of offering help when it is required (requested help) and not when it is thought to be needed (assumptive help), as the latter type of help could reinforce threats to the self-esteem of those being helped (Halabi et al., 2011).

It is also worth highlighting that we studied vulnerable populations. The study's participants and the broader "category" of vulnerable populations, are populations subject to structural disadvantages, and are more likely to face societal devaluation, material hardship, and the restriction of opportunities than those in higher-status categories. This is especially worth mentioning given that such structural disadvantages are based on membership with a social group/category that might not be a personal choice (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Research on structural disadvantages and societal devaluation, shows how these, on their own, can cause negative psychological effects, such as low self-esteem and low perceptions of efficacy (Outten et al., 2009). However, while group membership is a basis for such disadvantages, the strength

of identification with the (disadvantaged) ingroup can also lead to a sense of connectedness and belongingness that provides group members with the means of better coping with societal devaluation (Leach et al., 2010; McNamara et al., 2013). These results are in line with our own results on the importance of positive relationships and on the perception of belongingness, which also seem to highlight how connectedness is a basic social motive (Smith & Mackie, 2007).

The evidence on societal devaluation, and from our research, seems to challenge the classical literature: according to the classic view, interventions are often based on the assumption that individualistic characteristics of responsibility, independence, and self-reliance lead to better social integration and self-esteem. On the contrary, results from the societal devaluation field – as well as our results – suggest that it is the capacity of connecting with other people (be they ingroup or outgroup members) that promotes the creation of meaningful social identities, and that therefore more easily helps escaping the negative psychological consequences of the lowered sense of efficacy and the lower self-esteem that are associated with constrained life conditions (Bakouri & Staerklé, 2015).

It therefore appears that, in this context, collectivist (rather than individualist) behavioral norms (e.g., belongingness vs. individual success) were more effective, even if the study was carried out in an individualistic society (yet, Portugal remains one of the less individualistic European nations – in Hofstede’s insight simulation, Portugal scores only 27% on individualism; Hofstede, 2018). Although, to the best of our knowledge, there seems to be no research on helping relations in collectivist versus individualist contexts, it can be speculated that receiving help in a collectivist society would be less threatening than in an individualist society. Nevertheless, receiving help from an outgroup with higher social power would be threatening in both settings (Halabi et al., 2012). Given this consideration, and given the results obtained, we can also hypothesize that, to be successful, the social setting (individualist-collectivist) might not be of fundamental importance for the creation of help programs.

Resorting to SRT as a framework has allowed us to implement easy and effective data collection with clear results that can promote, on the one hand, the broadening of SRT's scope of interest by further expanding the study of helping relations, and on the other hand, the conception of improved help programs that foster proactive and efficacious relationships in order to avoid the possible negative consequences that help relations might have. Moreover, the present work, by focusing on the more specific shared representations of the targets of the representation being studied, contributed to the expansion of research topics in SRT and the use

of SRT. To conclude: our usage of SRT, not for the purpose of finding a SR per se but rather as an analytical tool that enabled an in-depth understanding of the aid recipients' view of Help itself, shows the incredible flexibility and versatility of SRT and opens the possibility of using this theory more frequently, for a qualitative approach to other research topics that are usually studied quantitatively.

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