

Hierarchy and Helping Behavior in Work Teams: The Role of Legitimacy Perceptions

Çalışma Takımlarında Hiyerarşi ve Yardım Etme Davranışı: Meşruiyet Algısının Rolü

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Abstract: Despite the prevalence of hierarchies in work life, much research has focused on their performance outcomes, paying little attention to how hierarchies affect cooperative behavior among the members of organizational units. In an effort to fill this gap, the current research investigates the relationship between the degree of hierarchy and members' helping behavior in organizational work teams. Results from a field study conducted with 393 members of 60 work teams show that, at the team-level, hierarchies are negatively associated with helping behavior in organizational work teams, and that this relationship is moderated by members' perceptions of hierarchy legitimacy. More specifically, when team members perceive the hierarchy to be less legitimate (i.e., less fair and less proper), hierarchy is even more negatively related to helping behavior. Yet, when team members perceive the hierarchy to be more legitimate, hierarchy does not have such a clear effect on members' helping behavior. These findings offer important implications for organizations that seek to foster cooperative behavior among their employees and abolish the detriments of hierarchies in this respect.

Keywords: Hierarchy, Hierarchy Legitimacy, Helping Behavior, Work Teams

JEL Classification: M0, M1, M19

Öz: Yapılan pek çok araştırma, çalışma hayatındaki yaygınlıklarına rağmen hiyerarşilerin örgütsel birimlerin üyeleri arasındaki iş birliği davranışını nasıl etkilediğine çok az eğilerek performans sonuçlarına odaklanmıştır. Bu boşluğu doldurma çabasında olan bu çalışma, örgütsel çalışma takımlarındaki hiyerarşi derecesi ile üyelerin yardım etme davranışı arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmaktadır. Altmış çalışma takımından 393 üye ile yürütülen bu saha araştırmasının sonuçları, örgütsel çalışma takımlarında hiyerarşilerin yardım etme davranışı ile negatif ilişkili olduğunu ve bu ilişkinin üyelerin hiyerarşi meşruiyeti algıları tarafından düzenlendiğini göstermektedir. Daha spesifik olarak, takım üyeleri hiyerarşiyi daha az meşru (yani daha az adil ve daha az uygun) olarak algıladığında, hiyerarşi yardım etme davranışıyla daha da olumsuz ilişkilidir. Ancak takım üyeleri hiyerarşiyi daha meşru olarak algıladığında, hiyerarşinin üyelerin yardım etme davranışı üzerinde net bir etkisi bulunmamaktadır. Bu bulgular, çalışanları arasında iş birlikçi davranışı teşvik etmeye ve bu bakımdan hiyerarşilerin zararlarını ortadan kaldırmaya çalışan kuruluşlar için önemli çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hiyerarşi, Hiyerarşi Meşruiyeti, Yardım Etme Davranışı, Çalışma Takımları

JEL Sınıflandırması: M0, M1, M19

1. Introduction

Contemporary organizations often utilize work teams to address the challenges of operating in a competitive and complex business landscape (O'Neill and Salas, 2018). With their reputation as drivers of organizational performance, work teams consist of members who possess complementary skills, carry out organizationally relevant tasks, interact socially, and display interdependencies in terms of workflow, goals and outcomes (Kozlowski and Bell, 2013; Kozlowski and Ilgen, 2006). So, while technical competencies such as task-related

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knowledge, skills and experience are critically important for the productivity of work teams (Bunderson, 2003), members' cooperative behaviors are not to be neglected to ensure their harmonious and effective functioning (Mathieu et al., 2008; Stewart and Barrick, 2000).

Helping exemplifies one such cooperative behavior that fosters higher-quality working relations among the members of work teams (Podsakoff et al., 2009). Being a part of the altruism dimension of organizational citizenship behavior, helping refers to providing voluntary aid or assistance to other team members with their work-related problems (Organ, 1988). In other words, helping is a prosocial behavior that includes aiding other members to execute their tasks effectively, and taking active steps to solve and prevent the occurrence of difficult problems at work (LePine et al., 2002; Podsakoff et al., 2000). Because helping behavior relates to actions that positively affect others (Mossholder et al., 2011), it has been well recognized that helping spurs positive work performance outcomes in organizations, both quality- and quantity-wise (Organ et al., 2006; Podsakoff et al., 1997).

Given that helping behavior is associated with favorable work outcomes, a great deal of effort has been exerted into elucidating its antecedents. For example, past research has revealed that individual factors (e.g., personality; King et al., 2005; empathy and concern for others; Clark et al., 2019), work group context (e.g., cohesion, cooperative norms and conflict; Ng and Van Dyne, 2005), organization-related factors (e.g., perceived organizational justice and support; Choi, 2006; Ladd and Henry, 2000) and leader-related factors (e.g., authentic leadership style; Hirst et al., 2016) are determinants of helping behavior in organizations. Surprisingly, however, despite the pervasiveness of social hierarchies in organizations and their relevance for member interactions (Leavitt, 2005), how the degree of hierarchical differentiation within work teams (i.e., the degree of asymmetries in members' power, status, and influence; Anderson and Brown, 2010) impacts helping behavior has remained largely unstudied. It is therefore the central goal of the present paper to close this gap and add to the existing scholarly knowledge on whether and when hierarchies help or harm team members' cooperative tendencies. Based on extant literature on hierarchies and helping, this paper proposes that hierarchies jeopardize helping behavior in organizational work teams and the debilitating effect of hierarchy on helping behavior becomes even stronger when team members perceive the hierarchy to be illegitimate.

The effect of hierarchy on helping behavior and the moderating role of legitimacy perceptions in this relationship is tested utilizing a sample of 393 employees from 60 work teams operating in 48 organizations (see Figure 1 for the conceptual model). The study presented here aims to contribute to existing research in several ways. First, most research on

hierarchies has focused on their performance outcomes and except for a few studies (e.g., Halevy et al., 2012), not much attention has been devoted to how hierarchy affects intra-team helping behavior or other behaviors that closely relate to cooperation within teams. Second, although some researchers have investigated antecedents to team-level helping (e.g., Ng and Van Dyne, 2005; Porter, 2005), the degree of hierarchy within teams has not been scrutinized as a potent antecedent despite its well-documented impact on team processes and outcomes (Anderson and Willer, 2014). Third, by casting hierarchy legitimacy as a key moderator of the linkage between hierarchy and helping behavior, this study responds to calls for contingency theories of hierarchy that explicitly identify legitimacy as a potential moderator of this relationship (see Halevy et al., 2011). Finally, this study offers new perspectives for managerial practice by suggesting that not only the presence of hierarchical differences but also the extent to which these are viewed as legitimate should be taken into account when making hierarchies salient in work teams.

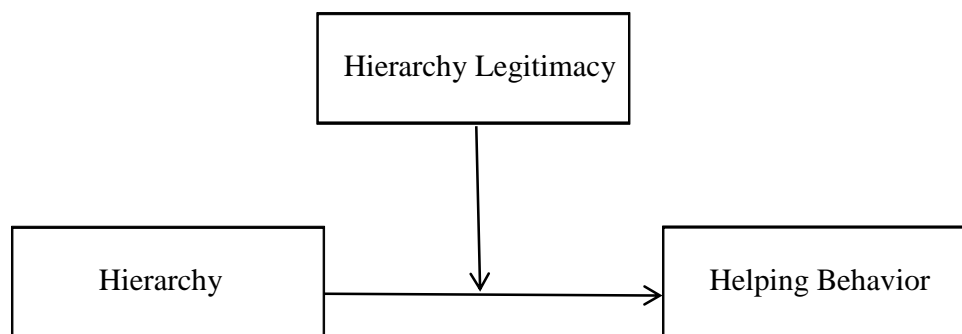


Figure 1. The Conceptual Model

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. *Hierarchy and Helping Behavior*

As in any social group, hierarchies (i.e., an implicit or explicit rank order of individuals with respect to a valued social dimension; Magee and Galinsky, 2008, p.354) are inevitable in work settings. Within work teams, such a rank ordering usually stems from differences in the amount of status, power or influence that individuals possess in the eyes of their fellow team members (Anderson and Brown, 2010). Being rather informal in nature, status hierarchies reflect differences in the amount of prestige, respect, admiration and voluntary deference that individual team members are afforded by others in the team (Anderson et al., 2015; Kilduff et al., 2016). Generally emerging from differences in members' formal positions within the team, power hierarchies are indicative of differences in members' (perceived or actual)

control over others' valued resources or outcomes, mostly through rewards and punishments (Fiske and Bai, 2020; Keltner et al., 2003). Influence hierarchies, on the other hand, convey differences in members' ability to alter other team members' thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behavior (Anderson and Kilduff, 2009; Chattopadhyay et al., 2020).

It is neither unusual nor surprising that organizational members aspire to climb up the hierarchy in their immediate work settings (Gould, 2003). After all, a favorable place in the hierarchy comes with a number of benefits for those who manage to ascend it. For example, prior research has shown that a higher rank in the hierarchy is associated with higher self-esteem (Sumanth and Cable, 2011) and improved physical and mental health (Adler et al., 2000; Sherman et al., 2012). Furthermore, higher-ranking individuals gain easier access to material and social resources, have a greater say in decisions and actions that affect the direction of the team, get more credit for the work done, and eventually receive better performance ratings and compensation (see Bendersky and Shah, 2012; Gruenfeld and Tiedens, 2010). On the contrary, lower-ranking members are largely deprived of these advantages, reporting poor health conditions, lower levels of self-esteem (see Anderson et al., 2015) and lower subjective well-being (e.g., experience of negative emotions and lower life satisfaction; Anderson et al., 2012). Given that acquiring rank in the hierarchy involves valuable rewards, most individuals, particularly those who have already attained it are motivated to retain it and/or compete for it (Anderson et al., 2020).

Both theory and research have suggested and demonstrated mixed effects of hierarchical differences on team processes and outcomes. On the one hand, hierarchies have been criticized for reducing trust among team members, lowering member morale and motivation, and thereby hampering member satisfaction and team performance (Anderson and Brown, 2010). Existing scholarly work also hints at a detrimental effect of hierarchies on information sharing and team learning (Edmondson, 2002). Moreover, past research has put forward that the link between hierarchies and poorer team performance is most frequently mediated by conflict or frictions among team members, which lead to lower quality relationships within teams (Greer et al., 2017). On the other hand, however, hierarchies have also been praised for facilitating problem-solving and decision-making, enhancing coordination of member efforts and team tasks, reducing debilitating conflict, and motivating members to contribute to the accomplishment of common objectives (see Anderson and Willer, 2014; Halevy et al., 2011). Yet, in spite of empirical evidence yielding divergent findings on the functions and detriments of hierarchies, how hierarchical differences impact upon intra-team helping behavior specifically remains an important research agenda to be further explored.

As mentioned above, whereas higher-ranking members enjoy the advantages associated with their position in the hierarchy, there are several costs that accrue from holding lower rank. Status characteristics theory (Berger et al., 1972; Berger et al., 1980) provides a theoretical basis for understanding why this may be the case in work teams. This theory asserts that hierarchies are primarily determined by performance expectations that team members hold for one another. So, members who possess characteristics that are likely to contribute to a team's success are usually granted more opportunities to influence team decisions, processes and outcomes (Bunderson, 2003). Accordingly, because lower-ranking members are generally believed to lack these important characteristics that provide value to the team (e.g., expertise), they usually end up having little to no say in making decisions for the team or steering the direction that the team is heading toward. In addition to not being admired or held in high-esteem, lower-ranking team members' demands, wishes or suggestions thus also mostly go unnoticed or ignored (Anderson et al., 2020). Prior research has shown that when employees feel that they are cared for and their contributions are valued, they tend to respond to favorable treatment from their organizations or other employees by exhibiting helping behavior in return (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2015; Thompson et al., 2020). Since lower-ranking members are unlikely to feel this way, they will be less inclined to help others solve or circumvent work-related problems. Furthermore, lower-ranking members tend to evaluate their standing in the team relative to that of higher-ranking members, and this upward social comparison creates a cognitive awareness of the privileges that higher-ranking members enjoy in the team, making lower-ranking members frustrated about and more sensitive to hierarchical differences in the team (Greer et al., 2017). So, the observed inequity in the team's hierarchical structure and being deprived of highly valued benefits that higher rank brings may lead lower-ranking members to withdraw any collaborative efforts to invest into maintaining social exchanges with their fellow team members by performing helping behavior. Furthermore, because lower-ranking individuals tend to have lower confidence in their abilities to contribute to team tasks and goals (Anderson et al., 2020), it is likely that they see little value in expending effort into helping others to accomplish collective goals. Finally, larger hierarchical differences have been shown to jeopardize interpersonal trust relationships and motivation (Anderson and Brown, 2010), which, in turn, negatively impact upon one's willingness to voluntarily aid others in performing their tasks or fulfilling their work-related duties and obligations (Choi, 2006).

Higher-ranking members, on the other hand, mostly engage in downward comparison and realizing that their standing in the hierarchy relative to others carries with it a number of

rewards, aspire to maintain their advantageous position (Anderson et al., 2020; Greer et al., 2017). Consistently, higher-ranking team members' desire to maintain the privileges they enjoy makes them more cautious toward anything or anyone that risks their favorable position, so they may well refrain from behaviors such as providing work-related advice or assistance to others, as helping lower-ranking team members may encourage them to challenge the existing hierarchy and ascend it. Hence, the first hypothesis follows as:

H1: Hierarchy is negatively related to team helping behavior in organizational work teams.

2.2. The Moderating Role of Hierarchy Legitimacy

Legitimacy, in general, pertains to “the belief that authorities, institutions, and social arrangements are appropriate, proper, and just” (Tyler, 2006, p. 376). Accordingly, hierarchy legitimacy refers to the extent to which the hierarchy is viewed as “appropriate, proper, and just”. Research has shown that individuals are more likely to accept or even embrace a legitimate hierarchy because legitimacy evokes perceptions of social justice by ensuring that status, power or influence is allocated in an equitable manner in the group (Halevy et al., 2011; Tost, 2011). In a legitimate hierarchy, each individual's rank is determined by his/her merits or by the amount of contribution that he/she makes to the team, so be it high or low, each individuals' standing in the hierarchy is considered to be fair and well-deserved (Hays and Blader, 2017; Tyler, 2006). For the very same reason, legitimate hierarchies are also less likely to be questioned or challenged, and they tend to elicit voluntary deference and cooperation in groups (Halevy et al., 2012; Tyler and Blader, 2005).

In an illegitimate hierarchy, however, team members are inclined to think that the process through which status, power or influence is allocated is unjust or unreasonable, and that their position within the hierarchy is undeserved (Greer et al., 2017). In other words, when hierarchy legitimacy is low, with their opinions ignored and suggestions or wishes not taken into account, lower-ranking individuals tend to think that the treatment they get from their fellow team members is not well-grounded or justifiable. This then naturally brings lower-ranking members to the realization that their deprivation of valued benefits is unfair, creating feelings of bitterness and irritation and making them even more dissatisfied with their position in the team's hierarchy. Thus, consistent with research demonstrating the significance of justice perceptions for exhibiting helping behavior (e.g., Shin et al., 2015), a higher degree of hierarchical differentiation accompanied by perceptions of unfairness in the team's hierarchy will further induce lower-ranking team members to act against the team and avoid team-

oriented behavior such as helping. As for the higher-ranking individuals, because they value their privileged position in the hierarchy, they will strive to hold on to it even when they know that they have not earned it (Hays and Goldstein, 2015). Yet, since the illegitimacy of the hierarchy is likely to make them feel insecure about their current rank and raises concerns that their undeserved position might be challenged by lower-ranking members (Greer et al., 2017), they are expected to react with rather competitive, self-oriented behaviors than cooperative, others-oriented behavior such as providing work-related assistance or help to others when they need it. As such, the second hypothesis reads as:

H2: Hierarchy legitimacy moderates the relationship between hierarchy and team helping behavior in organizational work teams such that this negative relationship becomes even stronger when legitimacy is lower.

3. Method

3.1. Sample and Procedures

In order to test Hypotheses 1 and 2, participants were recruited as part of a larger survey distributed to work team members from 48 organizations operating in diverse sectors (e.g., industry, logistics, financial services, insurance, healthcare, government services, education, etc.) in the Netherlands. In all of these organizations, work was structured mainly around work teams and it was ensured that each team matched the formal definition or description of work teams in the organizational literature (see Kozlowski and Ilgen, 2006). Although initially 453 team members were approached, 60 did not respond to any of the study variables in the questionnaires, so the final sample comprised 393 work team members from 60 work teams in 48 organizations (response rate = 87%). Of the 393 respondents, 57% were female, 53% held a university degree or higher, and the average age within the teams was 40.53 ($SD = 11.27$). On average, team members had an organizational tenure of 11.84 years ($SD = 11.01$) and a team tenure of 4.95 years ($SD = 5.21$). The average team size within the study sample was 7.55 ($SD = 2.87$).

Two separate questionnaires were distributed to the participants; one to be filled in on site in the presence of the researcher and one to be handed in personally to the researcher in an envelope a week later. The purpose of measuring the predictor and outcome variables at two different points in time was to minimize artifactual covariation between the variables of interest in this study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In the first questionnaire, participants reported their perceptions regarding the degree of hierarchy within their work teams (i.e., the independent variable) and the extent to which the hierarchy was viewed as legitimate (i.e., the

moderating variable). In the second questionnaire, participants communicated their observations regarding the level of helping within their work teams (i.e., the dependent variable). Respondents were pre-informed about the voluntary nature of participation and confidentiality. All measures were translated into Dutch using a double-blind back-translation procedure.

3.2. Measures

Participants assessed *the degree of hierarchy* within their teams by responding to three self-developed items based on the general description of hierarchical teams: (1) “There are big status differences in my team”; (2) “In my team, everyone has equal influence” (reverse-coded); and (3) “The power differences among the team members are large in my team”. These items were rated on a response scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and, together, formed a reliable scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .68$). Participants’ responses to these three items were averaged to form an overall measure of hierarchy for each team member. Furthermore, in order to be able to test the study hypotheses at the team-level, the interrater agreement index (i.e., r_{wg}) as well as ICC₁ and ICC₂ scores had to be calculated. For this variable, aggregation to the team-level was supported (ICC₁ = .10, ICC₂ = .45, $F(59,330) = 1.83$, $p \leq .001$; median $r_{wg(j)} = .73$, $SD = .29$; James et al., 1984).

Again, on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), participants responded to three items measuring their perceptions of *hierarchy legitimacy*. Based on the work of Healy et al. (2006), these items read as: (1) “I generally tend to think that the hierarchy within my team is fair”; (2) “Within my team, the right people are promoted to higher positions”; and (3) “In my team, people with a higher hierarchical position deserve their place”. These three items constituted a reliable scale with Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$ and were averaged to form an overall measure of hierarchy legitimacy for each team member. Aggregation to the team-level was also warranted for hierarchy legitimacy (ICC₁ = .18, ICC₂ = .63, $F(59,330) = 2.67$, $p < .001$; median $r_{wg(j)} = .85$, $SD = .21$).

Finally, participants rated *team helping behavior* with five items adapted from Podsakoff et al. (1990). These five items represented the altruism dimension of the larger organizational citizenship behavior scale. On a 7-point Agree-Disagree scale, participants responded to the following items: (1) “Team members are always ready to lend a helping hand to one another”; (2) “Team members take over tasks from other team members who have been sick or absent”; (3) “Team members help others who have heavy workloads”; (4) “Team members help one another with task performance, even when they are busy themselves”; and (5) “Team

members willingly help one another, even if that is not directly part of their tasks". The Cronbach's α value for the combined five-item scale was .90. Again, team members' responses to these five items were averaged to compute a single score for each individual. Aggregation statistics also allowed for the aggregation of this variable to the team-level ($ICC_1 = .22$, $ICC_2 = .68$, $F(59,327) = 3.14$, $p < .001$; median $r_{wg(j)} = .95$, $SD = .05$).

In addition to the main study variables, team size, members' average age, and average team tenure (i.e., the duration of membership in the current team) were included as potential control variables in the subsequent data analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics. As expected, hierarchy was significantly and negatively correlated with helping behavior ($r = -.30$, $p < .05$). Furthermore, hierarchy legitimacy was only marginally significantly correlated with helping behavior ($r = .25$, $p = .054$). Of all the potential control variables, only team members' average team tenure was significantly correlated with helping behavior ($r = -.31$, $p < .05$), so in order to avoid the inclusion of "impotent" covariates (Becker, 2005), only this variable was controlled for in the following data analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Zero-Order Correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Team size	7.55	2.87					
2. Average age	39.37	7.62	.44**				
3. Average team tenure	4.85	3.21	.17	.46**			
4. Hierarchy	3.41	0.65	-.04	-.09	.17		
5. Hierarchy legitimacy	4.73	0.70	-.18	-.25	-.13	.05	
6. Helping behavior	5.52	0.55	-.15	-.22	-.31*	-.30*	.25

Note. N = 60. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

4.2. Regression Results

The study hypotheses were tested using ordinary least square (OLS) regressions. In line with Aiken and West (1991), all variables were standardized and the interaction effect was computed by multiplying the independent variable and the moderating variable (i.e., hierarchy and hierarchy legitimacy, respectively). The first step involved regressing helping behavior on average team tenure and hierarchy. The second step included regressing helping behavior on average team tenure, hierarchy and hierarchy legitimacy. The final step comprised regressing

helping behavior on average team tenure, hierarchy, hierarchy legitimacy and the interaction of hierarchy and hierarchy legitimacy.

As anticipated, the regression results yielded a significant main effect of hierarchy on helping behavior in organizational work teams ($B = -.14, p < .05$), confirming a negative direct relationship between these two variables. Hypothesis 1 was therefore supported. Further analyses revealed that this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction effect with hierarchy legitimacy. More specifically, in line with expectations, hierarchy legitimacy did moderate the relationship between hierarchy and helping behavior ($B = .12, p < .05$). Additional simple slope analyses (Aiken and West, 1991) confirmed that when hierarchy legitimacy was lower, hierarchy was significantly and negatively related to helping behavior ($-1\ SD: B = -.24, \beta = -.44, SE = .08, p < .01$). However, when hierarchy legitimacy was higher, the relationship between hierarchy and helping behavior was non-significant and neutral ($+1\ SD: B = -.01, \beta = -.02, SE = .09, p = .895$). Taken together, these results provided support for Hypothesis 2 and confirmed that the negative relationship between hierarchy and helping behavior became even more pronounced when hierarchy legitimacy was lower. These findings are summarized in Table 2 and the interaction plot is depicted in Figure 2.

Table 2. Regression Analyses Results

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>Helping behavior</i>					
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
<i>Control</i>						
Average team tenure	-.15*	.07	-.13	.09	-.12	.07
<i>Main Effects</i>						
Hierarchy	-.14*	.07	-.15*	.09	-.13	.07
Hierarchy legitimacy			.13	.10	.15*	.07
<i>Two-Way Interaction</i>						
Hierarchy * hierarchy legitimacy					.12*	.06
R^2 (Adjusted R^2)	.40 (.13)		.46 (.17)		.52 (.21)	

Note. N = 60. Unstandardized regression coefficients are presented. * $p < .05$.

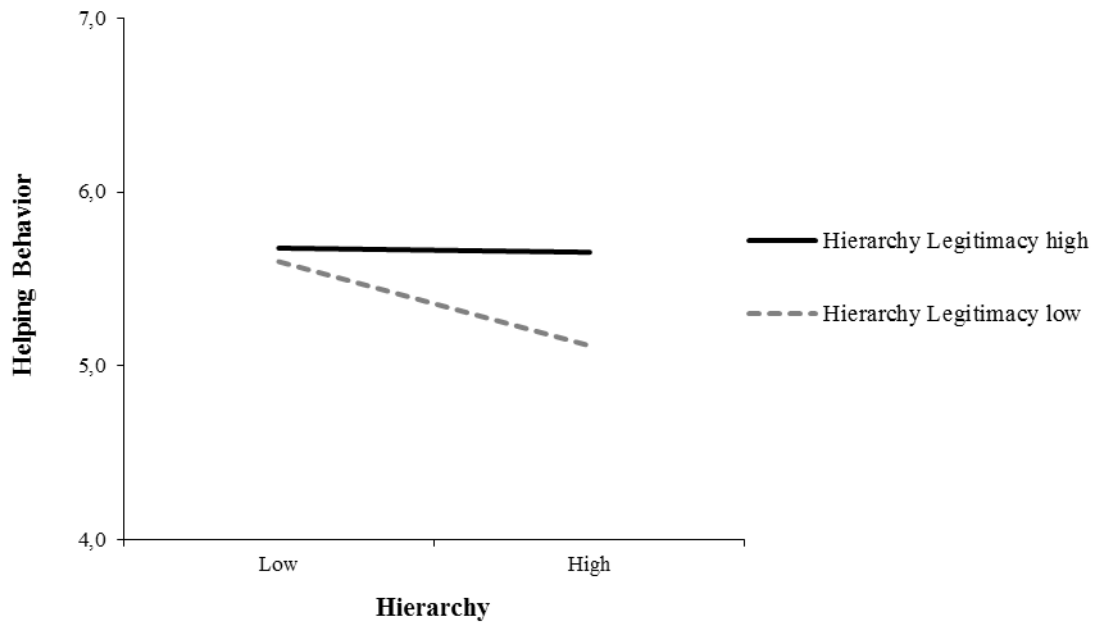


Figure 2. Interactive Relationship of Hierarchy and Hierarchy Legitimacy with Helping Behavior

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Existing theory and research have proposed and shown that hierarchies are not uniformly good or bad, but they rather act as a double-edged sword having the potential to avail and jeopardize team functioning (Anderson and Willer, 2014; Greer et al., 2018). Recognizing this notion, the findings presented in this paper speak for a less optimistic view of hierarchies and suggest that, as far as interpersonal helping is concerned, hierarchies may have debilitating consequences for work teams and, in a broader context, for the organizations in which these work teams operate. More specifically, the results demonstrate that hierarchies negatively impact team helping behavior and this negative effect is amplified when team members perceive the hierarchy within their work teams to be unfair and improper (i.e., illegitimate). Yet, when viewed as just and proper, hierarchies are found to have a rather neutral effect on helping behavior and therefore cannot be claimed to harm helping within work teams.

The current findings yield that higher degrees of hierarchy are associated with team members' reduced propensity to provide aid or assistance to one another with their work-related tasks or problems. So, by revealing that hierarchies affect group members' relationships in deleterious ways and serve as a hindrance toward cooperative behavior in

work teams, this research provides support for the dysfunctional views on hierarchy and extends past research by unfolding the negative impact of hierarchies on an important team outcome (see Anderson and Brown, 2010; Greer et al., 2017). Furthermore, because existing literature is largely centered around the functionalist perspective on hierarchies, this study also responds to calls for more attention to be devoted to the dysfunctional perspective to better grasp the harm that hierarchies may impose upon member relations and interactions in organizations. Moreover, in support of both theory (e.g., Halevy et al., 2011) and research (e.g., Tarakci et al., 2016), the current findings provide evidence for the critical role that hierarchy (il)legitimacy plays in capturing the effect of hierarchies on team outcomes. More specifically, the results yield that, whereas hierarchies tend to reduce helping behavior among work team members, this negative effect is more pronounced when team members perceive lower legitimacy and disappears when team members perceive higher legitimacy. The present research therefore contributes to prior theory and research by demonstrating that legitimacy perceptions serve as a buffer against the negative effect of hierarchy on helping behavior. By casting hierarchy legitimacy as a key moderating factor of the relationship between hierarchy and helping behavior, this paper also contributes to the growing literature on hierarchies by confirming the role of legitimacy perceptions in explicating the team-level effects of hierarchies.

Hierarchies are an inevitable part of organizational life and tend to emerge even when organizations strive to avoid them by supporting egalitarian structures and empowering practices (Leavitt, 2005). Thus, knowing when hierarchies can be hazardous and when they do not hurt is vital, particularly if organizations aspire to capitalize on the benefits of working in teams where members are expected to prioritize group goals over their personal goals and be cooperative. The findings of this paper suggest that when team members' achievement of rank is not viewed as fairly deserved, a hierarchical team structure is even a bigger barrier to cultivating cooperative behavior among the team members. For that reason, managers or team supervisors are strongly recommended to consider team members' perceptions regarding hierarchy legitimacy in order to avoid the costs that may accrue from pursuing or encouraging hierarchical structures, and strive for establishing egalitarian structures when team members appear to think that favorable hierarchical positions are not earned in a just manner.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the present study bears several methodological strengths, its limitations should also be acknowledged. The data utilized for this study was collected from members of real-life

organizational work teams, enabling generalizability of the results to a wide range of organizations with different tasks, customers and structures. Nevertheless, the number of participating teams was not uniform across organizations. Furthermore, because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, inferences of causality could not be established. Future work on hierarchies could therefore benefit from longitudinal and/or experimental research to provide further evidence on the suggested pattern of relationships and to warrant causal claims in this respect.

Another limitation pertains to the context of data collection whereby the study sample was restricted to members of organizations operating only in the Netherlands. Past research has conveyed that the Dutch culture is characterized by relatively low power distance (Hofstede, 1994) suggesting that the sample utilized for the purposes of this study could be less likely to accept or tolerate inequality in the social hierarchy, and to react more strongly to unfair distribution of power, status or influence in their work teams (Hofstede, 2001). In other words, leniency towards egalitarianism as a prominent feature of the Dutch culture could partly explain why the team members in the study sample may abstain from helping one another in the face of inequality. Future research could thus strive to replicate the findings of this study in countries with relatively high power distance to figure out whether the proposed relationships also hold in settings where individuals are culturally more tolerant toward hierarchies.

The findings presented here also indicate some other interesting future research directions. Although prior work has identified legitimacy perceptions as a critical moderator of the linkage between hierarchy and team functioning (e.g., Halevy et al., 2011; Magee and Galinsky, 2008), the stability of the hierarchy is also an important factor that requires further attention (see Bendersky and Pai, 2018). For example, in an experimental study, Georgesen and Harris (2006) have found that higher-ranking individuals rated their subordinates and the experience with them very negatively when their hierarchical position was threatened (i.e., when the hierarchy appeared to be unstable) and when they expected their subordinates to perform poorly on a problem-solving task. Hence, consistent with prior work underlining the relevance of hierarchy stability for explaining the impact of hierarchy on team processes and outcomes (e.g., Maner and Mead, 2010), future research could attempt to illustrate how hierarchies would affect members' willingness to exhibit cooperative behavior when team members perceive the hierarchy to remain fixed and static (i.e., stable) versus changing or shifting (i.e., unstable) over time. Furthermore, the permeability of team boundaries (i.e., the extent to which members can leave their current work team and join another; Tajfel and

Turner, 1979) can be another factor affecting work team members' responses to hierarchies. Future scholars could therefore expand upon this line of inquiry and investigate whether the detrimental impact of hierarchies on helping behavior would be lessened or enhanced when team members are warranted social mobility so that they can switch to another work team or an organization with ease.

5.3. Conclusion

In accordance with increasing focus on hierarchies in the workplace and in organizational literature, this study extends knowledge on the detriments of hierarchies for cooperative behavior in organizational work teams and stresses the relevance of fairness perceptions for neutralizing this debilitating effect. The present paper therefore unveils a potential downside of hierarchies and shows how this downside can be remedied by establishing structures that reflect a fair and proper rank ordering of individuals based on their merits or qualifications that are valuable for the team. By doing so, this paper also aims to warn practitioners about the significance of hierarchy legitimacy to abolish the harm that hierarchies may cause on voluntary cooperation in organizations.

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