

**Can we get social assistance without losing agency?**

**Engaging in market relationships as an alternative to searching for help from others**

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Milyavsky and colleagues (2022) propose in their target article that “From birth to death, people rely on two types of means for goal attainment: their individual competencies and the help of others” (p. 3). Such an observation seems uncontroversial and it can be used to explore and interpret hundreds of everyday experiences. The authors provide concrete examples to which the above-cited rule might be applied, such as cooking dinner or fixing a car. Indeed, in many situations, in order to complete a certain task, people can choose from only two mutually exclusive alternatives: either to act independently and attempting to attain the goal on their own, or to turn to others for help. However, our view is that the distinction between relying on agentic self and asking for help as the exclusive alternatives to accomplish a certain goal seems too narrow. Furthermore, reducing many different possibilities of action to these two types of means overlooks the fact that asking for help is not the only alternative for self-agentic action. Interacting with the social environment to deal with real-life challenges should not and cannot be limited to just one possibility which is non-contingent on help of others. We claim that people can use “social assistance” in different ways, and that a range of “social means” might be available when one is not capable or not willing to act on their own. In such a situation, people can simply pay for support provided by strangers instead of searching for someone who might be helpful. Exchange—either market-type or private—can also be considered as an option for relying on one’s own strength.

In our commentary, we would like to raise two issues related to the psychological consequences of utilizing different forms of assistance. First, we point out that looking for help is not the only alternative to agentic independence and people can also use other forms of social assistance. Second, we propose that whether the relationship between agency and assistance is hydraulic or not might depend on the type of assistance itself. In other words, our suggestion is that the hydraulic relationship might be limited to situations when a person in need turns to others for non-contingent help, which indeed can diminish the sense of agency

in a specific domain. However, highly agentic individuals can also feel motivated to use assistance in the form of market or private exchange. In other words, we think that the relationship between agency and the search for assistance may be more nuanced than Milyavsky et al. (2022) suggest.

### **Is help of others the only alternative to a lack of individual competencies?**

Theories existing in social psychology identify various forms of sociality, for example by making a distinction between communal relationships on one hand and exchange or market relationships on the other (e.g., Clark & Mills, 1993, 2012; Fiske, 1991, 1992, 2004). The nature of communal relationships implies that “benefits are given without the donor or the recipient feeling the recipient has an obligation to repay” (Clark & Mills, 2012, p. 234). Such relations are in most cases gratuitous and asymmetrical, which means that people offer benefits not because they expect anything in return and of a comparable value, but because they intend to increase the recipient’s welfare or happiness. People interacting with each other in a communal mode find it natural to be helpful, friendly, generous, and altruistic, and social connections within a family exemplify such relationships (Clark & Mills, 1993). In other words, non-contingent helping is arguably the *sine qua non* of communal relationships, and offering and giving help are prominent signals that the helper wants to form a communal relationship (Clark et al., 1987; Clark & Aragón, 2013; Fiske et al., 2019). In contrast, exchange or market relationships—such as those between sellers and buyers or employers and employees—are based on clear, comprehensible, and easy-to-recognize rules giving people insight into the situation and, as a consequence, the feeling of personal control over the course of events (Fiske, 2004; Gasiorowska & Zaleskiewicz, 2021). They emphasize rationality, logical thinking, efficiency, self-control, and equal exchange (Molinsky et al., 2012; Persky, 1995; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Zaleskiewicz & Gasiorowska, 2017), but at the same time do not

allow for intimacy and emotional connectedness (Jiang et al., 2014; Mead & Stuppy, 2014; Vohs, 2015).

To better understand how the differentiation between communal and market or exchange relationships can be useful in the context of the interplay between agency and social assistance, we might return to the car fixing example given by Milyavsky and colleagues (2022). If we consider this activity as a specific task to be completed by using “social means”, we could further discuss how its completion might be done depending on the type of a relationship an individual is or is going to be involved in. Asking for presumably non-contingent help would be equivalent to engaging in a communal relationship. Even if doing so would reflect one’s inability to act in an agentic manner and completing the task on one’s own, it would potentially be associated with long-term positive emotions stemming from building an interdependence with others (Clark et al., 1987). What we suggest, however, is that the repertoire of “social means” available in such a case is not limited to asking others for non-contingent help, and that in most cases people can also use other options—options that are more independent of emotions and are analogous to being in an exchange relationship. First, if the car owner feels incompetent in terms of performing the repair, but specializes in medical issues, so they can offer someone else (e.g., a neighbor or an acquaintance) a private exchange of favors, i.e., giving free medical advice in exchange for fixing a car. Such a private exchange would fit what Fiske (1991, 1992, 1994) named an equality-matching relationship, in which in-kind or tit-for-tat reciprocity is a dominant exchange norm regulating the giving and taking of favors, but money is not involved. Finally, one can take the car to a garage and have it repaired. This would reflect engaging in a typical market exchange situation, in which ratio comparisons of the values of diverse entities are possible through the use of a single value or utility metric, i.e. money (Fiske 1992, 1994).

The three examples of using social assistance we describe here are comparable from the formal point of view, since they all involve an individual acting in tandem with others instead of being agentic and attaining a goal independently. However, they undoubtedly differ with respect to various psychological characteristics, with the most striking disparity between helping in communal sharing and buying assistance in market pricing (McGraw & Tetlock, 2005). First, helping is in most cases non-contingent—people often support close others without expecting anything in return, which makes such a situation asymmetrical (Clark & Aragón, 2013). Market exchange, however, is symmetrical and proportional in nature: people expect that the input they provide will be repaid not only at a comparable value but also as quickly as possible (Fiske, 1992; Zaleskiewicz et al., 2020). Second, asking for help is related to greater uncertainty, since when people ask for help, they cannot be sure that others will react positively to their request. Utilizing market exchange offers more control (Gasiorowska & Zaleskiewicz, 2021): market transactions explicitly provide rules about who should be doing what, the number of outputs and inputs, the timing of the interaction, etc. They also regulate a predictable pattern of interplays among group members. In other words, when people pay for something, they can in most cases expect that their order will be processed effectively, because this is how an efficient market works. Third, being involved in a communal relationship is linked to having the communal mindset, while engaging in a market exchange relationship is connected to having the market mindset (Fiske, 1992; Gasiorowska & Zaleskiewicz, 2021; Zaleskiewicz et al., 2020) or using market cognition (Zaki et al., 2021). The market mindset is also associated with a sense of control and self-efficacy (Gasiorowska et al., 2018). Therefore, a paradox seems to arise here: when people turn to market exchange in order to attain their goals, they may experience more rather than less agency, which contrasts with the assumptions of the model introduced by Milyavsky and others (2022). We explore this issue in more detail in the next section.

## **Is the relationship between agency and social assistance always hydraulic?**

According to the hydraulic model proposed in the target article (Milyavsky et al., 2022), the more people rely on their own competencies, the less they are motivated to search for social assistance, and vice versa—utilizing such assistance might cause them to feel incompetent or unskilled. This theoretical prediction seems adequate for those forms of sociality that are based on asking for help (such as communal relationships), but it is not necessarily appropriate for getting involved in exchange or market relationships. To illustrate what we suggest here, we once again turn to the car repair illustration. In this example, low agency means, in a most straightforward form, that one is not competent to fix a car on their own. In an extreme case, a car owner may be so incompetent that they are even unaware of what to do to solve the problem at hand quickly and effectively via a market transaction—where is the nearest automobile repair shop, how to evaluate its quality, how to contact it, etc. Undeniably, the only solution in such a case would be to search for the help of more skillful others. From the psychological perspective, this would reflect not only low agency but even some kind of helplessness. However, in our view, individuals who are not competent in certain domains may just use market exchange as an alternative form of solving a difficulty. In such a case, utilizing assistance due to a lack of competence does not have to be associated with reduced agency. In fact, people may even derive a feeling of agency, realizing that they were able to maximize their benefits thanks to engaging in a market transaction. For example, in the car repair example, finding a good, cheap, and reliable garage and having one's car properly fixed could result in feelings of pride—an emotion that is associated with internal appraisal of self-agency, responsibility, controllability, and own effort (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Lerner & Keltner, 2000).

In line with our reasoning, prior research demonstrated that involvement in exchange relationships and having the market mindset may be associated with increased rather than

decreased agency. First, such a conclusion might be derived from research investigating the psychological consequences of money—a prototype of market relationships and a prominent market-mode cue (Fiske, 1992; Gasiorowska et al., 2016; Vohs et al., 2006). When people are primed with money, they become more agentic and self-sufficient (Gasiorowska et al., 2016; Vohs et al., 2006), and they demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem, sense of control, and self-efficacy (Gasiorowska et al., 2018; Mukherjee et al., 2013). Second, Abele and Brack (2013) found that people value agentic traits of others in exchange relationships to a higher extent than they do in communal relationships. Third, in a series of our experiments, we demonstrated that people exposed to market relationships experience a boosted sense of personal control, which is an important aspect of agency (Gasiorowska & Zaleskiewicz, 2021). Finally, being in market mode seems to be associated not only with high levels of agency, but also with a strong motivation to protect the feeling of being agentic. When people need help from others to have their needs satisfied, but at the same time highly value their own agency, they might deny the significance of help they received. Wang and Krumbhner (2016) demonstrated that money cues lead to objectification, to the denial of others' agency, and the tendency to construe social relationships based on the instrumental value of others. When reminded of money, people might be even eager to socialize with others, but only when socializing is seen as functional and utilitarian (Vohs et al., 2012), and, therefore, useful for one's feeling of agency. Taken together, these findings suggest that engaging in some relationships (exchange or market relationships in this case) and using market-based forms of assistance do not have to be associated with reduced agency.

As noted by Milyavski et al. (2022), agentic individuals may feel so strong and self-sufficient that they feel reluctant to search for some forms of social support (asking for non-contingent help), even if such behavior would be in many cases very adaptive (Vohs et al., 2006). The feeling of agency should not, however, restrain them from using more

instrumental forms of social assistance, such as exchange or transaction. This implies that agency should be seen as something opposite to some forms of “social means” but, at the same time, something that makes people open to other forms of “social means”. High agency or motivation to sustain its high level may restrain people from the search for some forms of social support (e.g., help from others), but at the same time motivate them to use other forms of social assistance (e.g., exchange or market transaction) (Gasiorowska & Zaleskiewicz, 2021). Hence, we propose that forms of social assistance such as market transactions can even increase, not decrease one’s agency.

To summarize, we propose that the spectrum of possibilities people can use to attain their goals transgresses the narrow distinction between agency and turning to others for help, and that the association between agency and assistance does not have to be hydraulic in nature, as proposed in the target article. Non-contingent help of others can be an effective way of attaining one’s goals, especially when close others are available, eager, and able to provide an aid. We agree with Milyavsky and colleagues (2022) in that asking for and receiving help might be associated with reduced agency. However, we also propose that when someone feels incompetent or lacks necessary knowledge, or just does not want to act independently, other social means such as market or private exchange—without detrimental effects on agency—might also be used. Interestingly, being involved in market exchange does not have to be related to decreased agency, and in many cases, people must be agentic enough to know how to use the exchange effectively.

Finally, Milyavsky and others (2022) suggest that, over the course of their development, people become more agentic due to achieving more resources, knowledge, and skills, implying that maturity is associated with less dependence on social assistance. We generally agree with that but, in addition, believe that in becoming adult and more agentic, people also learn how to use their resources to effectively deal with life’s difficulties and to



attain important goals. In other words, they gain experience showing that non-contingent help and market exchange are two distinct forms of assistance that might be useful when individual skills are insufficient, and they learn how to choose a proper social means that would benefit them the most in a specific situation.

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