

Social scientist: While providing help inspires others, people would rather help a family member than a neighbor

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Credit: Blue Bird from Pexels

Doing the shopping for a neighbor, driving a friend to an appointment, helping an aunt with the garden: there are plenty of people who

occasionally provide a little assistance. In her Ph.D. thesis, Marlou Ramaekers has shown that while providing help inspires others to do the same, we are more inclined to help family members than neighbors. Ramaekers will receive her Ph.D. at Radboud University on 12 January.

There are plenty of people who occasionally help a friend, relative or neighbor with small, practical matters. Although this kind of help is not always necessary, it is still welcome. In [scientific literature](#), this is also referred to as "informal help," because it has not been formally organized. Informal help is of great importance in our society, because the government continues to place increasing emphasis on civic participation and solidarity between citizens.

Social scientist Ramaekers researched the way in which [social factors](#) influence the help that is given to others. "Previous research primarily focused on the individual who was providing the help: the kind of personality that this person had, and the amount of time and money that they were able to devote to the task," says Ramaekers. "I think that looking at the subject from this angle is too limited. It's actually our [social environment](#) that matters, as well as the person who is receiving the help."

Giver-receiver relationship

Ramaekers used large-scale questionnaire research to analyze the relationship between the giver and the recipient, the family and society as a whole. "Because informal help has no formal rules or procedures, the most relevant things when it comes to this form of help are actually the person who is being helped, what other people are doing and how they view this help and the people with whom they are in contact."

For example, the study showed that there are different things that can motivate people to help, such as being surrounded by other people who

are providing informal help. "When someone provides informal help, it motivates others to do the same. And this can cause a [chain reaction](#)," says Ramaekers.

At the same time, the study showed that people are more likely to help [family members](#) than friends or neighbors. "When it comes to neighbors, it turns out that it's not only who the neighbor is that matters, but that their reputation within the neighborhood also plays a role. If people know that the neighbor is always willing to help others, they'll be more inclined to help him than if he was someone who was known for never helping other people," Ramaekers explains.

Policy

Although it might seem self-evident that people are more likely to help a family member than a neighbor, it is an important finding of Ramaekers's research. "When it comes to helping each other with small chores, neighbors are actually able to help each other more easily. People are generally positive about helping their neighbors, but by the same token they seem to feel less obliged to help them, even though [government policies](#) are increasingly based on [civic participation](#)," says Ramaekers.

"I feel that governments need to be more discerning in this regard and that they need to carefully consider those people who might be left out of the equation. If people are already less inclined to help their neighbors out with such small chores, governments should not simply assume that people will actually offer their neighbors more structured help."

Provided by Radboud University

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