



**Mansoura University**  
**Faculty of Tourism and Hotels**

## **THE SPIRIT OF ASSISTANCE: VISUALIZING PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN TOMB SCENES**

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### Abstract

Altruism, assistance, care, and empathy are essential social values that contribute significantly to the well-being and cohesion of human societies. In ancient Egypt, the concept of help is discernible through scenes of daily life, particularly within labor depictions, where the fluidity of movement and interaction among individuals is emphasized. Body language and hand gestures serve as powerful visual cues that clarify and reinforce the presence of supportive actions between individuals. These scenes reflect how ancient Egyptians collaborated and assisted one another in practical tasks, embodying a spirit of mutual aid that contributed to the efficiency and simplicity of their daily lives. In contemporary psychology, similar behaviors are interpreted within the framework of helping and prosocial action. Drawing on this modern understanding, the current study explores how ancient Egyptian visual narratives embody and articulate the concept of assistance, bridging past and present perspectives on human cooperation.

**Keywords:** Helping behavior – Tomb scenes – Psychology – Prosocial

### روح المساعدة: تصوير السلوك الاجتماعي الإيجابي في مناظر المقابر المصرية القديمة

الإيثار، والمساعدة، والرعاية، والتعاطف هي قيم اجتماعية أساسية تسهم بشكل كبير في رفاهية وتماسك المجتمعات البشرية. في مصر القديمة، يمكن ملاحظة مفهوم المساعدة من خلال مناظر الحياة اليومية، وخاصة في تصوير مناظر العمل، حيث يتم التأكيد على مرونة الحركة والتفاعل بين الأفراد. وتعد لغة الجسد وإيماءات اليدين إشارات بصرية قوية توضح وتعزز وجود أفعال الدعم والمساندة بين الأشخاص. تعكس هذه المناظر كيف تعاون المصريون القدماء وساعد بعضهم

البعض في المهام العملية، مما يجسد روح المساعدة المتبادلة التي ساهمت في كفاءة وبساطة حياتهم اليومية. في علم النفس المعاصر، يتم تفسير السلوكيات المشابهة ضمن إطار المساعدة والسلوك الاجتماعي الإيجابي. واستنادًا إلى هذا الفهم الحديث، يستكشف هذا البحث كيف تجسد السرديات البصرية في مصر القديمة مفهوم المساعدة وتعبّر عنه، موصلة بين رؤى الماضي والحاضر حول التعاون البشري.

الكلمات الدالة: سلوك المساعدة – مناظر المقابر – علم النفس – السلوك الإيجابي

## Introduction

The definition of Helping is “Helping represents an intentional action that has the outcome of benefiting another person”. “Helping and altruism are two fundamental types of prosocial behavior”. While the concept of helping concerns the outcomes of an action, the concept of altruism concerns the motivation underlying behavior. Moreover, altruism was defined as “a special type of helping in which the benefactor provides aid to another person without anticipation of rewards from external sources for providing assistance”. Altruism is a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare.<sup>1</sup>

With feelings of concern and sympathy or compassion, one reacts emotionally to help the other. The principle of caring looks like a natural extension of empathic distress in particular situations which always leads a person to help people in need. In this concept empathy and the principle

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Dovidio, & Louis A Penner, “*Helping and Altruism*” in Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Interpersonal Processes, Grath J. O. Fletcher and Margaret S. Clark, eds., Blackwell publishers Ltd, 2001, 162-163.

of care form helping behavior.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Empathy, in particular, is a fundamental human capacity that supports social interaction by allowing individuals to recognize and respond to the needs of others. This recognition not only encourages spontaneous acts of kindness but also helps maintain and strengthen social bonds through mutual support. Due to its significant role in promoting prosocial behavior, empathy has become a key focus in the study of helping behavior within social psychology.<sup>3</sup>

Tracing individual gestures in tomb wall scenes through human body language, was a central feature in Egyptian art. Throughout pharaonic history, a distinctive and consistent vocabulary of postures and gestures was employed to convey meaning and communicate social or ritual significance. Moreover, gestures can involve movements of the entire body, but they most often rely on specific actions of the head, arms, or hands.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the upcoming papers will place particular emphasis on the visual representation of offering help to others in ancient Egyptian art. This study will depend on hand gestures and body language as key tools employed by artists to convey acts of help, support, and altruism. Special attention will be given to the role of visual cues in tomb scenes and daily life depictions, highlighting the social and cultural values conveyed through the artistic representation of helping behaviors, as interpreted through the framework of social psychology.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Ottoni Wilhem, & Rene Bekkers, *Helping Behavior, Dispositional Empathic Concern, and the principle of Care*, Social Psychology Quarterly, American Sociological Association, Vol. 73, no. 1, 2010, 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Bekkers, Renè, & Ottoni-Wilhelm, Mark, *Principle of Care and Giving to Help People in Need*, European Journal of Personality, Eur. J. Pers. 30, 2016, 240, DOI: 10.1002/per.2057.

<sup>4</sup> Wilkinson, Richard H., *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1994, 192-193.

## Depictions of Assistance in the Private Tomb Wall Scenes

In this section, four selected scenes from private tombs will be illuminated to explore how the concepts of assistance and altruism were visually represented in ancient Egypt. By examining these key examples, we aim to understand how acts of helping and mutual support were perceived and commemorated in the past, and to draw insightful parallels and enduring values relevant to contemporary social practices.

For example, In the Mastaba tomb of Ty at Saqqara from the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty a scene shows the boatmen depicted engaging in a form of jousting<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 1). Notably, one man is shown offering his hand to assist another who is about to fall from the boat.

Also depicted is a scene from the Mastaba tomb of Ty at Saqqara, where men are shown carrying bundles of papyrus<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 2). To highlight the theme of assistance and cooperation, one man is seen helping another, who appears to be struggling to stand while holding a bundle of papyrus.

In the tomb of Ni-ankh-Pepi at Zâouyet El-Mayetin (Fig. 3), four registers depict the gathering of dates and the sequential process of making date wine.<sup>7</sup> In the upper register, five men are shown transporting baskets filled with dates on the right side of the scene. Two pairs of men are depicted assisting each other in lifting the baskets onto their heads, emphasizing cooperation during the task.

From the tomb of Niankh-khnum and Khnum-hotep at Saqqara scene of rendering accounts, filling granaries, measuring corn, sifting and winnowing.<sup>8</sup> The second register shows filling the granaries (Fig. 4).

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<sup>5</sup> Porter, Bertha & Moss, Rosalind L. B., *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings*, vol. III, part 2, Memphis: Saqqâra to Dahshûr, Oxford: Griffith institute, 1981, 476.

<sup>6</sup> Porter, & Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings*, vol.3, part 2, 476.

<sup>7</sup> Porter, Bertha & Moss, Rosalind L. B., *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings*, vol IV, Lower and Middle Egypt, Oxford: Griffith institute, 1968, 137-138.

<sup>8</sup> Porter, & Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings*, vol.3, part 2, 643.

After the grain has been measured under the supervision of the agricultural officials, filled sacks are brought to the granaries. The pictorial register shows this transport to the granaries. Four men carry the filled sacks on their heads, one to the left; the one at the front has reached his destination and, bending slightly, lets the grain sack slide from his head. He is helped by a farmer standing to the right of the granary, who receives the sack with both hands and empties it, while the man standing to the left fills the granary. The transfer of the sack and the man standing to the right of the granary is labeled with an inscription: *šsp it r šnwt* (?) 'Receiving the barley at the granary'.<sup>9</sup>

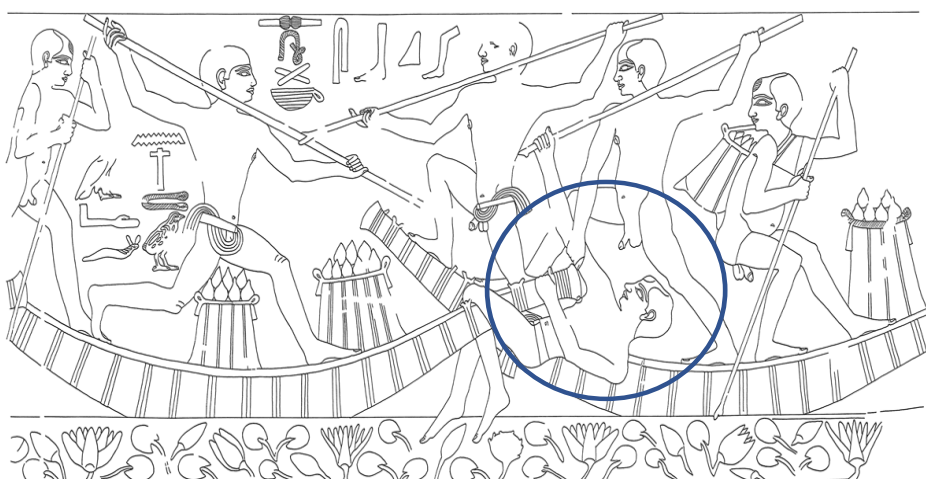


Fig. 1. Fighting boatmen from Mastaba of Ty at Saqqara, the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty  
- Old kingdom. After: Wild, Dessins De Henri, *Le Tombeau De Ti*,  
MIFAO 65, vol.2, 1953, pl. CXI.

<sup>9</sup> Moussa, Ahmed M. & Hartwig Altenmüller, *Das Grab des Nianchnum und Chnumhotep*, Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1977, Abb 24, 127.

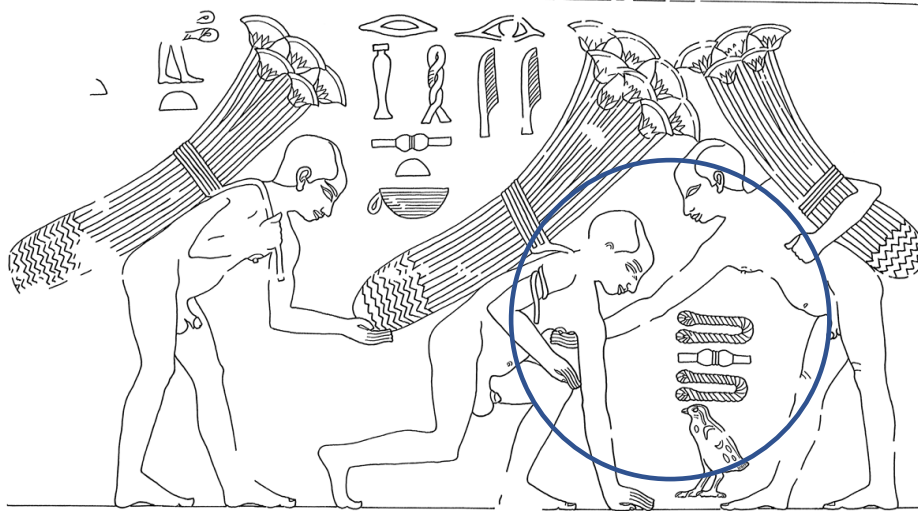


Fig. 2. Papyrus gatherers and carriers from the tomb of Ty at Saqqara, the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty - Old kingdom. After: Wild, *Le Tombeau De Ti*, pl. CX.

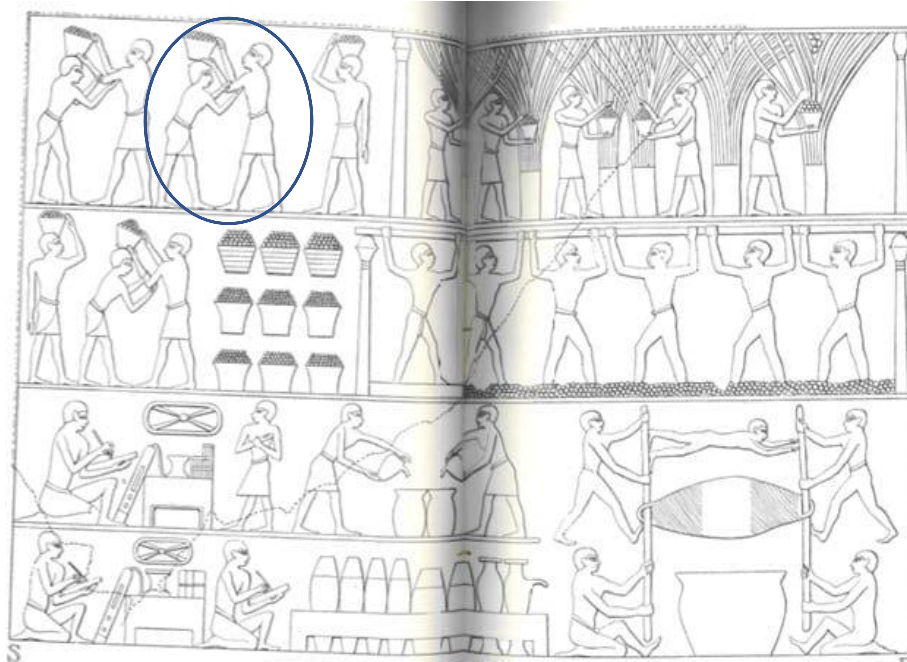


Fig. 3. The tomb of Ni-ankh-pepi at Zàouyet El-Mayetin, gathering dates and making of date wine. After: Varille, Alexandre, *La Tombe De Ni-*



*Ankh-Pepi: A Zàouyet El-Mayetin*, Le Caire: Imprimerie De L'Institut Freancais D'Archeologie Orientale, 70, 1938, pl. XIII.

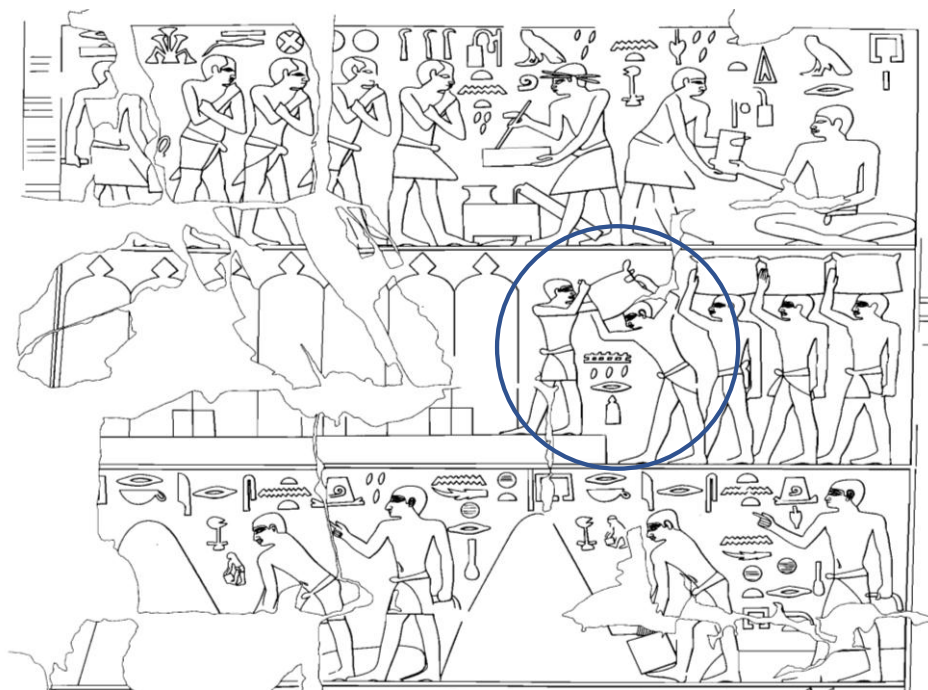


Fig. 4. Tomb Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara – the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty - Old kingdom. After: Moussa, Ahmed M. and Hartwig Altenmüller, *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep*, Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1977, Abb 24.

## Interpreting Acts of Assistance in Ancient Egypt through Social Psychology

Social psychologists have applied their theories and research methods to better understand altruism and helping behavior, why people choose to help others and what factors influence these decisions. Although all acts of assistance fall under the broad category of helping behavior, they can vary greatly in terms of motivation, intention, and context. For instance, helping may be driven by genuine concern for

others (altruism), a desire for social approval, or even personal gain. Additionally, some helping behaviors are spontaneous and direct, like assisting someone in an emergency, while others are planned and indirect, such as donating to a charity. Understanding these differences is essential to analyzing the complexity of human social behavior.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the social-cognitive framework categorizes prosocial behavior actions directed toward the well-being of others into three main types: helping, sharing, and comforting. Each type corresponds to a specific negative condition: helping responds to instrumental need, sharing to unmet material desire, and comforting to emotional distress.<sup>11</sup>

With more clarification, the dispositional form of the empathy–helping idea suggests that people who naturally feel more concern, sympathy, or compassion for others are more likely to help them (pls. 1-2). According to the principle of care, individuals help those in need not only out of emotional concern, but also because they see helping as a moral responsibility. While empathy creates emotional motivation, the principle of care adds a sense of ethical duty, providing a stronger foundation for prosocial behavior. Care is a specific form of moral motivation that arises from empathy and can create conflicting demands in helping situations. It may prompt individuals to assist others but does not always offer clear guidance on how to prioritize competing needs, such as when one is asked to help both an in-group and an out-group member at the same time.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the dilemma of helping refers to the complex dynamics embedded in the act of offering assistance. The very notion of help often implies that the recipient is not responsible for resolving the issue, while the burden of responsibility shifts to the helper. When people claim that someone 'deserves help,' they may merely mean that the

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<sup>10</sup> Clary, E. Gil, & Orenstein, Leslie, *The Amount and Effectiveness of Help: The Relationship of Motives and Abilities to Helping Behavior*, SAGE: Social Science Collection, 58-64.

<sup>11</sup> Dunfield, Kristen A., *A construct divided: prosocial behavior as helping, sharing, and comforting subtypes*, *frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 5, 2014, 10, Doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00958.

<sup>12</sup> Bekkers, & Ottoni-Wilhelm, *Principle of Care and Giving to Help People in Need*, 240, 255.

individual is not to be blamed for their situation, a perception that plays a crucial role in determining the willingness to provide support.<sup>13</sup>

In ancient Egypt, the concept of help was vividly expressed and emphasized through visual representations in art and tomb scenes. Drawing on insights from psychological research on assistance, we can identify the spirit of helping behavior depicted in these scenes. For instance, in Figure (1), a boatman is shown reaching out and firmly grasping the arm of another man who appears to be slipping from an adjacent boat. This gesture prevents the latter from falling, symbolizing an immediate and practical act of aid.

Additionally, in Figure (2), three men are depicted carrying bundles of papyrus. The central figure is shown bending down, while the two men on either side assist him in rising by supporting him with their hands. This interaction highlights a collaborative effort and reflects the embodied representation of assistance and mutual support in daily life scenes.

In Figures (3) and (4), assistance is illustrated through scenes involving the lowering of heavy sacks and the lifting of baskets. Each composition features two men, with one providing physical support to the other in accomplishing the task. The act of helping is conveyed through the expressive movement of the hands and the bodily posture of both figures, particularly the bending stance of the one receiving help. These visual elements underscore the collaborative nature of labor and the embodied gestures of support in ancient Egypt.

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<sup>13</sup> Brickman, Philip, & Rabinowitz, Vita Carulli, & Jr., Jurgis Karuza, et al., *Models of Helping and Coping*, American Psychologist, April 1982, 376, DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.37.4.368.



Pl. 1. Helping Others. After:

<https://www.successconsciousness.com/blog/quotes/quotes-about-helping-others/>, accessed 27-5-2022, 12:22 am.






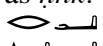


Pl. 2. Helping Others is the Key to Happiness. After:

<https://www.becomingminimalist.com/helping-science/>, accessed 27-5-2022, 12:24 am.

## Conclusion

The concept of help is rooted in various motivations such as empathy, care, and altruism, each of which enhances the willingness to offer assistance. These factors also influence the nature, and the type of help extended to the recipient. In the absence of such assistance, societal values and moral frameworks are at risk of deterioration. Furthermore, psychological interpretations of helping behavior and related prosocial terms emphasize that such acts arise from one person's recognition of another's need, ultimately contributing to the well-being of both parties involved. The ancient Egyptians appear to have internalized and expressed this prosocial value, embedding it meaningfully into their daily lives and artistic traditions.

In ancient Egypt, helping behavior was not only recognized but also deeply understood and appreciated. This is evidenced through its visual representation in tomb scenes, where the act of assistance was prominently depicted. The ancient Egyptians vividly illustrated the idiom "give a hand" through dynamic scenes of helping actions, particularly in the four selected tomb examples. The hieroglyphic signs  and  represent forearm with hand holding conical loaf or a rounded loaf, they mean "give"  *imi* or *rdi* .<sup>14</sup> The sign  (forearm with hand holding bowl), it is functioned as the determinative for words such as *hmk*: to present, and *drp*: to offer.<sup>15</sup> The ancient Egyptian word for help  *rdi* '(wy) 'give a hand (help)', 'to extend the hand or to reach out a hand to someone'.<sup>16</sup> These selected signs and word are employed here to emphasize the central role that hand gestures play in the visual representation of assistance. In the previous tomb scenes, the positioning, movement, and interaction of hands are not merely functional but serve

<sup>14</sup> Gardiner, Alan, *Egyptian Grammar: Being an Introduction to the study of Hieroglyphs*, Oxford: Griffith Institute, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1957, 454, 533.

<sup>15</sup> Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 454; Wilkinson, Richard H., *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1992, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Erman, Adolf & Grapow, Hermann, *Wörterbuch Der Aegyptischen Sprache*. II, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1971, 465.

as key narrative tools through which ancient Egyptian artists conveyed acts of help, support, and cooperation. By closely clarifying these hand movements within the depicted interactions, we gain deeper insight into how physical gestures were used to express the prosocial and moral values associated with assistance in daily life scenes.

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