Other People as Situations:

 Relational Context Shapes Psychological Phenomena

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 Abstract

 Researchers usually construe situations in terms of their impact on individuals, taking little account of a fundamental feature of situations: Who else is involved or implicated in that situation and the nature of the relationship between those persons. This chapter provides a framework for conceptualizing these relationship effects, followed by a review of relationship-context effects in 6 prominent areas of social-psychological research: prosocial behavior, social influence, person perception, self-concept, self-regulation, and evaluative judgments. This review indicates that relationship contexts are one of the most powerful and pervasive situational influences, fundamentally shaping human behavior. In the chapter we further argue that any conceptualization of situations that seeks to be comprehensive must incorporate these relationship context effects.

(113 words)

Key words: Relationship context, situation, prosocial behavior, social influence, person perception, self-concept, self-regulation, evaluative judgments.

Betsy, the owner of a thriving business has called her new employee, Paul, into her office. Paul was supposed to have been at a lunch meeting earlier that morning but missed it. Upon his arrival, Betsy looks down at the floor and softly says, “You know, you really hurt my feelings when you weren’t there for lunch.”

 John has carried several boxes and pieces of furniture up two flights of stairs to help his girlfriend, Tasha, move into her new apartment. He sets the last piece down and says he must go. As he leaves, he says he’ll send his bill to her.

 These scenarios likely seem odd. Few bosses would tell employees that their poor performance was hurtful. Few romantic suitors would present their love interests with a bill for moving assistance.

 Yet, these scenarios can make more sense by varying relational context, even while keeping all other aspects of these interactions and situations the same. If Paul is not Betsy’s employee but rather her adult son, then her soft voice and hurt feelings following a missed lunch seem more sensible. If John is not Tasha’s new girlfriend but rather a hired mover, then the announcement of the impending bill makes perfectly good sense. In other words, consideration of relational context affords a better appreciation of our psychological functioning.

 Although psychologists have studied many phenomena in an individualistic manner, focusing just on a single person’s thoughts, feelings and behaviors, people are highly social beings. Infants would not survive if they did not attach to caretakers and caretakers to them. Many theorists now agree that we are simply built to live lives that are interdependent with other people, although that interdependence can take a variety of forms. This interdependence, we argue, is not just a phenomenon to which those interested in relationships per se should attend; rather, it is fundamental and inextricably woven into the fabric of human behavior. As such, pursuing understandings of human behavior without taking its relationship context into account runs the risk of omitting a central—if not the most central—determinant of that behavior and one that interacts in important ways with other determinants of that behavior (Reis, Collins & Berscheid, 2000).

 In this chapter, we make a case that, of all the situational factors that might be considered in helping us to understand psychological phenomena, the relational context in which a person finds him or herself is not only one of the most important contexts, it is probably the most important context. Although there are surely some situations in which the actual or psychological presence of other persons is relatively unimportant – e.g. making breakfast for oneself -- we argue that the large majority of human behavior occurs in situations in which the actual or psychological presence of other people is influential. It is important to keep in mind that many seemingly solitary acts still have a relationship context, because one is anticipating the reaction of other people – for example the solitary act of writing sections of this chapter involved anticipating reactions of our co-authors, the editors and other readers.

What is relational context?

 Some thoughts, feelings and actions occur outside of social context, when people are alone and not thinking about other people implicitly or explicitly. Yet any interaction between two or more people occurs within a relational context. This is true even if that interaction involves people who have never seen one another before and have no reason to suspect that they will ever see each other again. This type of interaction is common and it occurs within one type of relationship, that with a stranger. In addition, as several examples discussed later in this chapter suggest, relational context may not require physical presence of an interaction partner. Thinking about a physically absent relationship partner, consciously or unconsciously, may shape psychological functioning and serve as relational context. Beyond that, the nature of relational context is multiply determined by what people desire from the relationship, the histories people bring to their relationships, the wider social and cultural context within which a relationship exists, and other factors.

 Before we discuss how relational context is crucial to understanding most psychological phenomena, we first define relational context. Relationship context can be thought about in at least the following ways.

 **Relationship Type.** Different relationships can and do serve different functions for people (Bugental, 2000; Clark & Mills, 2012; Fiske, 1982). People have goals to mate and to reproduce, to attach to caretakers, to insure their offspring reach maturity, to build coalitions, and to engage in economic exchange. People pursue these goals ultimately or proximally. For example, people may wish to bond with each other in such a way as to be immediately mutually and non-contingently responsive to each other, providing each with a sense of security and source of social support in times when that is needed, heightened enjoyment of mutually beneficial activities, and shared joy in times of good fortune. Or, to give another example, mating serves the ultimate goal of preserving genes by attracting a male and a female to each other, to have sex, produce children and, perhaps to bond together so as to successfully raise offspring to their own sexual maturity. As a third example, people may form an exchange relationship to provide a means of exchanging goods efficiently and fairly. Because relationships serve different functions, the norms they follow, their biological concomitants, and their antecedents and consequences vary (Bugental, 2000; Clark & Mills, 2012). Any given relationship may serve one or more of these functions. Yet not all relationships serve all functions. Moreover, because the different goals can call for behaving in diametrically opposed ways, the goals may be best pursued in different relationships. For example, pursuing economic exchange calls for charging a partner for services provided whereas building a long term, mutually caring coalition calls for providing support non-contingently if and when needs arise.

 The particular type of relationship in which a person finds him or herself (or whether a person is in no particular relational context) constitutes a major part of what we mean when we speak of relational context, but relationship type is just one way to consider relational context.

 **Relational Character**. Just as people have personalities, relationships themselves have characteristics. These attributes can vary within a single relationship type as well as between relationship types. For instance, relationships can be characterized by varying levels of trust between the people involved, they can involve partners who are very similar or dissimilar to one another, people can be more or less certain about what kind of relationship they have with the other person, and members can be more or less committed to staying in a relationship over time or, indeed, not committed at all.

 It is important not to confuse relational character with personality. Many characteristics of relationships reflect the unique combination of members that cannot be explained by the personalities of either member alone. For example, because some people are generally more trusting than others, trust can be considered an individual difference variable, but that’s not the same as relational trust, which, within a given relationship, may deviate from a person’s typical trust level in positive or negative ways. In other words, no matter how trusting one is in general, one is likely to trust some partners more than other partners.

 **Developmental Stage of Relationships**. Many types of relationship have stages that characterize their current status, ranging from initiation (which includes deliberation about whether one wishes to be in the relationship), commitment to the relationship (for whatever length of time), implementation of the norms of the relationship, maintenance of the relationship, and deterioration of the relationship. The nature of these stages will vary by relationship type, and not all relationships will show the same progression across stages, but the point here is that within a particular type of relationship, relationships can be characterized in terms of distinct stages, and the stage of a relationship often has implications for psychological functioning. For example, criticizing a partner’s sloppy attire likely has different meaning on a first date than in a long-term term stable relationship or while partners are getting divorced.

 **Relationship histories (and forecasted futures).** Partners in existing relationships have both histories and imagined futures within and for their relationships. These two factors are a part of relational context and will play a role in shaping psychological phenomena. For instance, a romantic partner may have been unfaithful in the past yet still remain with that partner. Even if forgiveness and reconciliation have taken place, the relational history will leave its mark on the relationship. Similarly, partners may have expectations for the future that guide relationships (Lemay, 2016). For example, some college students may view their romantic relationships as temporary ones from the start, knowing that they intend to to go to graduate school and do not wish to make accommodations for their partners; other students, in contrast, may prioritize their relationships over graduate school, hope that their relationships will be long term ones, and more readily make accommodations for their partners. Both temporal factors are a part of relational context.

 Importantly, the history of one relationship can affect the character of other relationships. People carry their relationship histories forward with them and view new partners through the lens of those past relationships. Perhaps most thoroughly investigated in this respect are the attachment styles people bring to new relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver,

2016). Attachment styles describe “working models” as mental representations of the self, others, and the world based on early interactions with caregivers, which bias cognition, emotion, and behavior when forming new close relationships in adulthood. Other researchers, not grounded in attachment theory, have made a case for the impact of relational histories on reactions to new relationships in other ways. Research on transference, for instance, suggests that aspects of new interaction partners (personality, interests, physical appearance) which remind us of old partners may result in cognitive, affective and behavioral reactions toward those new partners that have been transferred from the old partners (Anderson, Reznik, & Manzella, 1996) – at least when the new partner occupies a role that is similar in function to the old partner.

 **A broader point: Relationships make up social networks and culture**. In this chapter, we focus on the nature, character, stage, histories and projected futures of dyadic relationships as important contexts the fundamentally shape psychological and behavioral processes. Others have made a similar point that broader cultures alter psychological processes (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Relationships are mini-cultures of their own. National cultures, ethnic cultures, and the cultures of different social classes are reflected in and, in large part, sustained by the nature of interactions within dyadic relationships and group interactions. Another way of saying this is that culture often influences individuals through the nature of their connections with others in that culture. Thus our points are akin to the points made by many others about the importance of taking culture into account in understanding human behavior. Understanding how relational contexts themselves vary by culture and influence psychological phenomena is itself an important issue to address.

**Relational Context Matters**

 **Relational context is often neglected in psychological research**. Although few theorists would disagree with the common assertion that people are fundamentally social in nature (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Beckes & Coan, 2011), much psychological research, even social psychological research, focuses squarely on individuals. Individuals are recruited for studies, and usually perform tasks in isolation in laboratory cubicles or at their computers. If they do interact with another individual, that individual often appears in the form of a picture, film, or verbal description of someone they have never met before. When people do interact with another person, the nature of relationship with that person is often held constant. Obtained results are implicitly assumed to generalize to other relational contexts. Yet relationship context often

makes a difference in studies, sometimes profoundly altering the strength or direction of key effects. We turn now to illustrating the importance of taking relational context into account in studying diverse psychological phenomena, several of which, at first, might seem quite non-social in nature.

**Prosocial Behavior Depends upon Relational Context**

Prosocial behavior has long been of interest to social, personality, clinical and developmental psychologists. It is often examined with no reference to relational context, despite the fact that relational context shapes the frequency, nature, causes, and consequences of prosocial behavior. It may even determine whether a given behavior is considered to be prosocial at all.

 **Frequency of prosocial behavior**. Most obviously, perhaps, relational context influences the frequency of prosocial behavior. People provide more non-contingent support to kin than to non-kin (Borgida, Conner & Manteufel, 1992; Burnstein, 2005; Burnstein, Cranndall & Kitayama, 1994; Essock-Vitale & McGuire, 1985; Segal, 1984). People help current and desired friends and romantic partners more than they help strangers and acquaintances (Clark, Ouellette, Powell & Milberg, 1987). This is true even for young children and teens (Costin & Jones, 1992; Barry & Wentzel, 2006). The effects of relationship context often eclipse other predictors of prosocial behavior. For example, Amato (1990) found that levels of friendship were better predictors of helping behavior than personality variables.

 Another, quite different, example of how relational context influences the likelihood of helping comes from the classic literature on bystander intervention. A given individual is more likely to intervene in an emergency situation when that individual is alone than when that individual is with other people (Darley & Latane, 1968; Fischer, Krueger, Greitemeyer, Vogrincic, Kastenmuller, Frey, Heene, Wicher, & Kainbackher, 2011). Indeed, a person is less likely to behave prosocially if that person has has simply been asked to imagine being with other people than if they have not been so instructed (Garcia, Weaver, & Moskowitz, 2002). Moreover, although this effect applies whether the others are strangers or friends, the presence of others who are strangers to a potential helper dampens the likelihood of helping to a greater extent than does the presence of friends (Latane & Darley, 1968; Latane & Rodin, 1969). The relationship bystanders have with victims is also important. People report more frequent intervention to help victims of violence when they are friends with the victims, relative to when victims are strangers (Bennett, Banyard, & Garnhart, 2014).

 **Content of prosocial behavior**. Not only does the frequency of prosocial behavior vary by relationship type, so too does the content of prosocial behavior. Burnstein et al. (1994) studied people’s willingness to provide help in life-threatening versus more mundane settings. When situations were life-threatening, participants were more willing to help kin than non-kin. In contrast, there were no differences in willingness to provide more mundane sorts of help to kin versus non-kin. Many presume this pattern is driven distally by a desire to pass on one’s genes by protecting the lives of those who share one's genes. Breasan, Colarelli, and Cavalieri (2009) extended this work by suggesting that humans evolved to rely on cues of shared genes to infer kinship, and they found that people are more willing to offer life-saving help to siblings with whom they shared more years of co-residence (a cue to genetic relatedness) than to those sharing fewer years of co-residence. Again, this finding did not apply to non-kin. Stewart-Williams (2009) found that, as costs to prosocial behavior increase, people report giving a larger proportion of help to kin than to non-kin, but that people actually give more low-cost support to non-kin than to kin. Clark (1981) reports evidence that, at least across short periods of time, friends give and receive more non-comparable benefits than do non-friends, presumably because the basis for helping is more likely to be the recipient’s need and desire in the former case but repayment in the latter.

 **Antecedents of prosocial behavior**. Situational factors prompting prosocial behavior also vary considerably by relational context. People respond in diverse ways to others’ expressions of emotions, such as sadness or anxiety, including trying to provide help, ignoring the expressions, and trying to create interpersonal distance. Relational context helps determine which response occurs. For instance, Clark et al. (1987) randomly assigned half of their participants to a condition that elicited desire for a communal relationship (i.e., desire for a close relationship characterized by mutual responsiveness to needs) with a peer or to a condition leading them to desire a communal relationship with that same peer. The peer was always in in need of help and either displayed sadness or did not. Sadness elicited increased levels of help only when a communal relationship was desired. In a second study, Clark et al. (1987) measured naturally occurring individual differences in desire for communal relationships and observed the same pattern of results, this time with sadness tending to decrease provision of help when communal desires were low. Suggesting a similar process, Simpson, Rholes and Nelligan (1992) found that increases in a partner’s anxiety were associated with increased helping by securely attached romantic partners (who desire close, intimate relationships) but, in sharp contrast, were associated with decreased helping among avoidant romantic partners (who are uncomfortable with close, intimate relationships).

 The nature of a relational context between two people may also affect the provision of help to third parties, as suggested by the work of Iredale, Van Vugt and Dunbar (2008). These researchers examined effects of desire for mating relationships on public displays of prosocial behavior. These authors theorized that females (but not males) seek mates with resources, and, consequently, the presence of an attractive female would increase males’ visible charitable donations to third parties (relative to those made in the absence of a potential partner), but that the same would not apply to females’ behavior. Their results supported this hypothesis.

 **Consequences of prosocial behavior**. The consequences of prosocial behavior also vary by context. Consider a study by Coan, Schaefer and Davidson (2006). They exposed married women to a stressor—a threat of receiving electric shock while in a fMRI scanner. Prosocial support was provided (or not) in the form of handholding. Capturing relational type, as discussed above, sometimes a stranger provided the handholding; sometime a spouse did. Capturing relational character, as discussed above, the researchers measured martial satisfaction, cohesion, consensus and affection between the women and their spouses. Activation in neural systems known to underlie emotional and behavioral threat responses were highest among women holding no one’s hand, next highest among women holding a stranger’s hand, and least among women holding a spouse’s hand. In addition, threat responses were lower when women had satisfying relationships with the hand-holding spouse than when they did not. In other words, the effectiveness of prosocial behavior (here in the form of hand-holding) depended on the relational context as captured both by relationship type (stranger versus spouse) and relational character (how satisfying spousal relationships were).

Other work too shows that the consequences of prosocial behavior vary by relational context. Aknin, Sandstrom, Dunn, and Norton (2011) found that recalling a time one has helped a close other resulted in positive affect but that recalling a time one has helped a non-close other did not. Kogan, Impett, Oveis, Hui, Gordon, & Keltner (2010) found similar effects for relational character in a diary study of sacrifices made for romantic partners. In particular, communal strength of the relationship (reflecting the degree of felt obligation to attend to members’ needs) was positively correlated with the positivity of emotions experienced when making that sacrifice. Fitting well with these findings, Williamson and Clark (1989) found that voluntarily or non-voluntarily helping a communal partner resulted in boosts in self-esteem and in mood whereas helping a non-communal partner did not and, indeed, actually impaired mood if the help was voluntary

 **Patterns of prosocial behavior**. Relational stage also affects the form that prosocial behavior takes. Beck and her colleagues (Beck & Clark, 2010; Beck, Clark & Olson, 2016) have shown that in the initiation stages of close relationships, people offer more help to their potential partners than they seek from those partners, but that this asymmetry disappears once the relationship is established. Children as young as eight have shown this pattern (Beck et al., 2016). Offering non-contingent help more than one seeks such help may be one way that close relationships are initiated. Simply asking for help when it is needed and offering it when one’s partner needs it (leading to more balanced giving and receiving) seems to be more characteristic of established communal relationships.

 **Perception of prosocial behavior**. Even whether a behavior will be viewed as particularly prosocial in nature or altruistic depends upon relational context. For instance, when a behavior is normative in a relationship, such as feeding one’s own child lunch, it is unlikely to be viewed as especially prosocial and especially unlikely to be labeled as altruistic. However, when the same behavior occurs in a different relational context, such as providing lunch to a homeless child with whom he was not previously acquainted, that behavior is likely be viewed as especially prosocial and altruistic (Wolfe & Clark, 2010). When specific repayments for benefits received are given in the context of an exchange relationship those repayments are likely to be welcomed and viewed as prosocial; yet when they are given in the context of a communal relationship they are not welcomed and may even be seen as insulting (Clark & Mills, 1979). These studies suggest that the same behaviors are less likely to be viewed as prosocial within close relationship contexts. However, the opposite may also sometimes occur: people who want a close relationship may be especially likely to see their partners’ behavior as prosocial. For example, Lemay, Clark, and Feeney (2007) found that people who were high in communal care for their partners tended to perceive their partners as providing more benefits to them over the course of several days, even more than what could be predicted based on partners’ self-reports of benefit provision. These results highlight that close relationship contexts can provide stringent evaluative standards by which prosocial behavior is compared (and often falls short) or as a motivation that encourages the perception of prosocial behavior that would subjectively fulfill desires for closeness.

**Social Influence Depends on Relational Context**

 To any parent who has tried in vain to influence an adolescent child to do something, only to see that same child readily agree to a peer's suggestion to do the same thing, the idea that relationship contexts affect social influence is intuitively compelling. People learn by observing others, and that process of learning, whether implicit or explicit, goes well beyond the collection of facts—one's susceptibility to input from others depends on inferences about the other's knowledgeability and goals (Shafto, Goodman, & Frank, 2012). These inferences, of course, depend on the relationship between the perceiver and the person being perceived. As we describe below, social influence depends critically on relational context.

 **Relationship context determines the strength of influence.** Early research demonstrated higher levels of conformity in groups of friends than groups of strangers (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950; Lott & Lott, 1961). Similar results have been found for persuasion (Simons, Berkowitz, & Moyer, 1970), compliance (Boster, Rodriguez, Cruz, & Marshall, 1995; Cialdini & Trost, 1998), and even indirect influence attempts such as the door-in-the-face technique (Millar, 2002). Similarly, more psychodynamic forms of social influence—for example, internalization of self-regulatory guides about one's ideals and obligations—also show greater influence by close others than by distant others (Moretti & Higgins, 1999).

 **Close partners are more trusted and, thus, persuasive.** Given the ubiquity of such findings, researchers have sought to identify their underlying mechanisms. One key mechanism concerns trustworthiness, an inference that feeds into people's desire to possess an accurate understanding of their circumstances (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). For example, all other things being equal, familiar others are typically assumed to be more trustworthy, which, in the evaluation likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) would increase their effectiveness when persuasion attempts are processed peripherally. The assumption that familiar others are more trustworthy has been shown in children as young as four years of age (Corriveau & Harris, 2009). However, under certain circumstances, more trustworthy sources can also increase message-relevant thinking, a more central route to persuasion (Heesacker, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1983). Trust may also facilitate responsiveness and a pro-relationship orientation when spouses attempt to change each other's behavior (cf., Murray, Holmes & Collins, 2006).

 **Close partners are more attractive and, thus, persuasive.** Another important mechanism for why social influence is greater in some relationships than others stems from the desire to affiliate. Attraction increases people's susceptibility to social influence, whether the target is

another person, a group, or a collective (e.g., Baron, 1970; Kiesler & Corbin, 1965; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Cialdini and Goldstein (2004, p. 598) summarized this literature succinctly in concluding, "the social influence literature is rife with demonstrations of the positive relationship between our fondness for a person and the likelihood of compliance with his or her request."

 Presumably, this process reflects both the conscious attempt to make oneself more acceptable to the other, as well as the activation of affiliation goals outside of awareness, which can trigger approach-oriented behaviors. For example, Karremans and Verwijmeren (2008) showed that potential attraction could prompt higher levels of nonconscious behavioral mimicry in potentially romantic dyads. It therefore follows that emotional contagion should be greater to the extent that people are attracted to a given relationship, a proposition that has received at least indirect support (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994).

 **Close partners are more assertive and thus, persuasive.** A third mechanism may involve pressure to converge with close partners. According to research on attitude alignment in close relationships (Davis & Rusbult, 2001), people become uncomfortable when they learn that their attitudes diverge from those held by close partners, both because these discrepancies are not cognitively harmonious (Heider, 1958) and because they signal non-corresponding goals that may produce friction (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Hence, the attitudes of close partners tend to align after discussing disagreements, especially when the relationship is high in relationship quality (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). Exerting pressure on close partners to change their attitudes, with less politeness and more blatant emotional appeals to change, appears to be one mechanism that explains this effect, something that appears less common when discussing disagreements with strangers (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). People may be more influenced by a close partner because they want to be similar to them, related to the desire to affiliate, and because they are subject to more pressure from close partners to change.

 **Social influence over social networks.** One of the most impressive lines of evidence regarding relationship context and social influence concerns the role of social networks in shaping health-related behaviors. Peers seem to affect the prevalence of a variety of risky behaviors among adolescents (e.g., Maxwell, 2002) and young adults (e.g., Etcheverry & Agnew, 2008), especially when peers are close. Furthermore, having regular social contact with someone who is happy increases the likelihood that one will be happy by 16% (Fowler & Christakis, 2008), while, on the other hand, regular social contact with someone who is lonely increases the likelihood of one's being lonely by 52% (Cacioppo, Fowler, & Christakis, 2009). Similar patterns of behavior spreading through social networks have been documented for obesity and smoking (Christakis & Fowler, 2007; 2008). A particularly striking demonstration of the significance of relationship contexts was provided by Harden and Mendle (2011). Using a large and representative longitudinal national sample, they investigated the impact of adolescent sexuality (age 16-18) on delinquency during adolescence and later in early adulthood. Sexual activity predicted higher rates of delinquency when it occurred outside of a "special romantic relationship." However, when that sexual activity occurred in a loving relationship, it predicted significantly lower rates of delinquency.

 In conclusion, the impact of social influence processes depends on their relationship context for a straightforward reason: the fulfillment of most important goals requires coordination of one's behavior with the behavior of relevant others. Just how that coordination should take place—whether it is cooperative or competitive, whether it is equal-status or hierarchical, whether future interaction is expected or unlikely, whether people feel accepted or worry about rejection, and so on—hinges on the nature of the relationship between the source and target of influence.

 **Person Perception Depends upon Relational Context**

 It is commonly believed that processes of person perception operate for the purpose of facilitating adaptive action (Fiske, 1992; Smith & Semin, 2007). This is because, throughout human evolution, adaptive action depended on coordinating one's behavior with relevant others (Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Krebs & Denton, 1997). Determining whether these relevant others are friend or foe, an automatic process that typically occurs within the first 150 ms. or so of becoming aware of the presence of another person (Cacioppo & Bernston, 1999), is only part of this process. Perceivers also must determine which actions are most likely to produce desired outcomes, given expectations about the other's capabilities and intentions (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & van Dellen, 2015), and this determination depends on a more complex set of inferences. For example, people would likely respond differently to a drowning person in the presence of a young child or a trained lifeguard. It follows, therefore, that the effect of the relationship context on person perception begins with categorization and extends to other judgments once a categorization has been made. At least four popular research areas in social psychology demonstrate the importance of relationship context for understanding person perception.

**Relationship context shapes prejudice toward outgroups.** The first refers to whether the target of perception is a member of one's ingroup or an outgroup. Relative to members of one's ingroup, outgroup members are seen as more homogenous and less diverse (Linville, Fisher

& Salovey, 1989; Park & Rothbart, 1982), less similar to onself (Miller & Brewer, 1986), less capable of humanlike mental self-awareness (Waytz & Epley, 2012), and more responsible for negative outcomes but less responsible for positive outcomes (Pettigrew, 1979). These differing perceptions are associated with different action consequences, such as a greater tendency to dislike the others who are outgroup members (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992) and a greater tendency to discriminate against outgroup members (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). Consistent with the theme of this chapter, however, when the relationship context is altered, such as through cross-group friendships or experimental manipulations of equal-status contact, intergroup prejudice is reduced (Pettigrew, 1998; Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Paolini, & Christ, 2007). Even knowing that an ingroup member has a close friendship with an outgroup member can foster more positive attitudes toward outgroups (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997).

**Relationship context shapes person perception accuracy.** A second example comes from research examining differences in people's processing of information about strangers relative to friends. All other things being equal, perceivers tend to be more accurate predicting the thoughts or personality traits of friends than strangers (e.g., Funder & Colvin, 1988; Funder, Kolar, & Blackman, 1995; Stinson & Ickes, 1992; Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). Existing evidence indicates that this difference reflects the quantity and quality of information that people have about others. Concerning quantity, Funder et al. (1995) showed that this difference was mediated by the greater availability of accumulated information that friends have compared to strangers. As for quality, a meta-analysis by Connelly and Ones (2010) concluded that this difference should be attributed to the greater visibility of certain important types of personal information in intimate compared to less open relationships. On the other hand, people are generally more highly motivated to see their friends and romantic partners in desired ways than they are to see strangers, and this factor may undermine the accuracy of friends' predictions, especially when those judgments pose threats to relational or personal security for the perceiver (Gagné & Lydon, 2004; Ickes & Simpson, 1997; Lemay & Clark, 2015; Murray, 1999).

 **Relationship context shapes operation of biases in person perception.** Levels of acquaintanceship also have been shown to influence a diverse array of key social-perception processes. In a meta-analysis of 173 studies, Malle (2006) found that the widely cited actor-observer difference—that people tend to cite situational explanations for their own behavior but dispositional causes for other people's behavior—held true when the actor and observer were intimates but not when they were strangers or new acquaintances. Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, and Elliot (1998) demonstrated that the well-known tendency toward self-serving bias in comparing attributions for personal outcomes compared to the outcomes of others—that is, taking more credit for success but denying responsibility for failure—disappeared after an experimental task designed to create closeness with the other. Clark, Mills and Corcoran (1989) found that friends engaging in an interactive task were more likely to keep track of each other's need for help, whereas strangers performing the same task were more likely to keep track of each other's contributions to their joint performance. And Reis, Caprariello, and Velickovic (2011) showed that people's tendency to describe their relationships as better than other people's relationships—the so-called perceived superiority effect—was attenuated when the others in question were close friends.

 **Relationship context alters whether person perception is like self-perception.** A final example concerns closeness between interacting persons, which Aron, Aron, Tudor and Nelson (1991) conceptualized as "including other in the self." In a series of programmatic experiments, Aron and colleagues have shown that cognition about close others but not about more distant acquaintances tends to resemble cognition about the self (see Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013, for a review). For example, partners in close, romantic relationships are more likely to think about themselves in a collective ("we") than an individualistic ("you and I") sense (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). This point has wide generality in perceptions of close others. To the extent that others are familiar, representations of them tend to be more similar in substance and organization to self-representations (Prentice, 1990). Also, Symons and Johnson's meta-analysis (1997) showed that the self-reference effect—the tendency to better remember information encoded with regard to self than with regard to others—was reduced by roughly half when the other was close to the self. Aron et al. (2013) propose that this linkage is not metaphorical but rather may reflect the strengthening of neural connections between self- and other-representations when a relationship is close, a proposition supported by fMRI studies (e.g., Beckes, Coan, & Hasselmo, 2013).

 The idea that closeness would produce overlap between neural systems that regulate self-relevant and other-relevant processing has considerable relevance beyond the close relationships literature. For example, a similar process of self-other overlap may help explain various social-cognitive phenomena associated with identification with one's ingroup (e.g., Coats, Smith, Claypool & Banner, 2000; Otten & Epstude, 2006). Self-other overlap also may confer adaptive advantages in social behavior. Friends and close others tend to share idiosyncratic viewpoints that facilitate coordinated activity (e.g., Kenny & Kashy, 1994), and they tend to use distributed social knowledge more effectively than strangers do (e.g., Thompson & Fine, 1999; Wegner, Erber & Raymond, 1991). Even the implicit activation of close-other representations can facilitate the development of shared reality between interacting individuals (Przybylinski & Andersen, 2015). Also, Galinsky, Ku, and Wang (2005) see heightened self-other overlap as an explanation for why perspective-taking facilitates social coordination in groups. In short, the processes that govern person perception may be more contextually dependent, particularly on the nature of the relationship between perceiver and target.

**Self-Concept Depends on Relational Context**

Self-concept includes the constellation of global and specific cognitive representations of the self, along with affect-laden evaluations of the self. Rather than serving as a static reflection of prior behavior, the self-concept is thought to serve as a regulator of future behavior, and to dynamically shift from one situation to the next (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Several lines of research suggest that relationship context is a key situational factor that shapes the self-concept.

 **Self-definition varies across relational contexts.** William James famously noted that people have as many definitions of self as there are others who recognize them (James, 1890). This assertion implies that people’s self-definitions vary across relational contexts. Modern research on self-with-other representations and the relational self builds on this perspective and provides empirical support for the importance of relational context in shaping self-definition. Self-with-other representations are mental representations of the personal qualities, such as traits and feelings, that people believe characterize themselves when they are with a particular person (Ogilvie & Ashmore, 1991). These self-with-other representations are an important feature of personality; most people’s self-descriptions contain characteristics that they associate with the presence of particular relationship partners (Ogilvie & Ashmore, 1991), suggesting that people indeed recognize that who they are depends on with whom who they are interacting.

 Andersen and Chen’s theorizing on the relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002; see also Baldwin, 1992; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006) similarly posits that significant others – familiar, important, and influential people – impact self-definition and personality. Furthermore, they have provocatively claimed that this influence can occur even when significant others are not physically present. They proposed that representations of the self, behavior, and motivation become cognitively linked to representations of significant others in memory. Encountering new people who resemble significant others activates these representations of significant others, a processed termed *transference*, which spreads to associated representations, such as self-definitions and behavior when with those others (Andersen & Baum, 1994; Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995; Berk & Andersen, 2000). Through this process, people may exhibit self-definitions and personalities with new others that resemble those typically experienced with significant others. For example, someone who is usually extraverted and trusting around their best friend may become extraverted and trusting when encountering a new person resembling their best friend. The experience of the self in the moment, or the working self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987), may adjust accordingly. Experimental evidence supports this view. Participants who learned of strangers who resembled a significant other experienced shifts in their working self-concepts in a direction more consistent with their ideographic representations of themselves with their significant other (Hinkley & Andersen, 1996). Other findings suggest that people anticipate more acceptance and express more positive affect when a new partner resembled a positively versus negatively valenced significant other (Andersen et al., 1996; Berk & Andersen, 2000; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006). Andersen and Chen (2002) have further proposed that some significant others readily come to mind (i.e., they are chronically accessible), which should result in frequent activation of representations associated with those significant others. This chronic accessibility could provide a means for stability in self-definition and personality across time – if particular partners readily come to mind, then people may exhibit some consistency over time in their self-concept and personality because their self-concept and personality when with those partners are frequently active in memory. Hence, relational context may provide an explanation for both change and stability in self-definitions. Importantly, this theoretical perspective underscores that relational context need not involve the immediate physical presence of a relationship partner; even physically absent partners can serve as a context that influences psychological functioning when those partners become psychologically present.

 **Relationship maintenance goals produce variability in self-definition.** Why should people develop different concepts of self as a function of relational context? Goals to maintain partner satisfaction and positive regard may be one important mechanism that creates relationship-specific variability. People may strive to maintain their significant others’ positive regard and satisfaction, given the importance of these sentiments for relationship maintenance (Murray et al. 2006; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), and this maintenance may often entail the enactment of particular behaviors along with the activation and expression of particular aspects of self. Several lines of research suggest that this is the case. For example, research on circumscribed self-verification (Swann, Bosson, & Pelham, 2002) suggests that people want their relationship partners to see them positively in the specific domains most relevant to their partner’s positive regard or relationship functioning, such as physical attractiveness in dating relationships, athletic ability in player-coach relationships, and artistic ability in student-art teacher relationships. Furthermore, people tend to present themselves in ways that elicit positive evaluations from their partners in these relationship-relevant domains (Swann et al., 2002). Similarly, people attempt to present themselves in ways that strangers would find desirable when they are motivated to form a bond with those strangers (e.g., Zanna & Pack, 1975).

 **Partners’ evaluative standards become self-evaluative standards.** Also suggesting a desire to please close partners, people tend to evaluate themselves according to the standards imposed by close relationship partners (Higgins, 1987; Moretti & Higgins, 1999). For example, thinking about older family members reduced college student participants’ enjoyment of sexually permissive writing, suggesting that they temporarily adopted the values of these salient significant others (Baldwin & Holmes, 1987; see also Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990). Contingencies of self-worth also depend on relational context. Contingencies of self-worth are the domains of performance that determine feelings of self-worth, which vary across individuals (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). For example, a person with an academic contingency of self-worth feels good about the self after succeeding in academics and bad about the self after failing. A person lacking this contingency would not show this self-worth reactivity to academic performance. Suggesting the importance of relational context, people adopt contingencies of self-worth that reflect the desires of salient relationship partners (Horberg & Chen, 2010). In one investigation of this phenomenon, participants who wanted to be close to their fathers and believed their fathers wanted them to excel at academics responded to a reminder of their fathers with greater reports that their self-worth was contingent on academic performance (Horberg & Chen, 2010). This finding along with some others reported by Horberg and Chen (2010) suggest that feelings of self-worth become tied to domains relevant to the approval of whatever close relationship partner is cognitively activated if people have a goal of seeking that partner’s approval. Collectively, this research suggests that the working self-concept may shift across relational contexts because people adopt goals to maintain their relationships, such as pleasing their relationship partners and performing well in important relationship domains, and they strategically present and construe themselves in ways that will accomplish these goals. Once again, these findings also suggest that relationship partners need not be physically present to have an influence on the self-concept; situations that merely activate thoughts about a desired relationship partner can exert this effect.

 **Relationship context modifies positivity biases.** Goals to maintain satisfaction and intimacy in relationships also appear to curtail the operation of self-enhancement biases and overly positive self-presentations that could elicit negative reactions in partners. For example, as described in the section above on person perception, the tendency to take credit for successful joint tasks and blame unsuccessful joint tasks on coworkers, termed the *self-serving bias*, does not emerge when coworkers are close relationship partners (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, 2000; Sedikides et al., 1998). This phenomenon suggests that relational context shapes both person perception and how people evaluate themselves relative to others. Similarly, the tendency to view the self as superior to others is reduced when the others are close relationship partners (Suls, Lemos, & Stewart, 2002), and this extends to even implicit comparisons of self and others (Karpinski, 2004). People are sensitive to their close partners’ reactions in performance situations and attempt to avoid directly competing with them by establishing different performance niches that preclude direct comparisons (Beach & Tesser, 1995). In situations requiring explicit descriptions of self to close partners, people tend to behave modestly (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). These findings suggest that positivity biases in self-evaluation and self-presentation are fundamentally altered by relational context and associated goals to maintain partners’ satisfaction and emotional welfare.

 **Partners’ views of the self are internalized.** In addition, relational context may influence the self-concept through a process of incorporating significant others’ views of the self into one’s own views of the self. This process of internalizing others’ views has been described in early symbolic interaction approaches to the self (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Interpersonal approaches to self-esteem, such as sociometer theory, similarly posit that self-evaluation depends on feedback from others, particularly feedback relevant to social acceptance and inclusion (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Longitudinal research suggests that people incorporate perceptions of their romantic partner’s regard for them into their self-definitions, such that people who feel more positively regarded by their partner feel more positively about their interpersonal qualities over time (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Similarly, longitudinal studies of roommate relationships revealed that participants’ views of their abilities shifted over time to become more congruent with how they were viewed by their roommates (McNulty & Swann, 1994). A more transient version of this process could explain variability in self-definitions across situations. Working self-concepts may align with how people believe they are viewed by their current interaction partners. Reflecting just this process, research on social tuning of the self (Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko, & Hardin, 2005) suggests that, when people want to affiliate with others, they shift their self-definitions to conform to the views of the self ostensibly held by those others. For example, women shifted their self-definitions on masculine and feminine traits in a more stereotypical direction when they felt similar to an interaction partner who had traditional views of women. By the same token, stability in self-definition across situations may be produced as a result of receiving consistent feedback from interaction partners over those situations (Secord & Backman, 1961).

 **Partners’ qualities are incorporated into self-definition.** Including qualities of relationship partners in self-definition may function as yet another mechanism through which the self-concept is dependent on relational context. According to Aron’s self-expansion theory, interdependence, identification, and intimacy with close partners lead people to view these partners as aspects of themselves, including their resources, perspectives on the world, and personal attributes (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Consistent with this view, people are slower at recognizing traits that differentiate themselves from their partners as characteristic of themselves than they are at recognizing traits that characterize both themselves and their partner as characteristic of themselves (Aron et al., 1991). Furthermore, they tend to confuse themselves with their partners (Aron et al., 1991; Mashek, Aron, & Boncimino, 2003). Not only does this process have implications for how people perceive others, as described in the person perception section above, but it has implications for the content of the self-concept. Forming new romantic relationships has been associated with change and increased diversity in self-descriptions (Aron, Paris & Aron,1995), and relationship breakup has been associated with a reduction in both the diversity of self-descriptions and clarity of one’s identity (Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010), suggesting that people’s self-concepts expand and contract along with the acquisition and loss of close partners. Although this research has focused on long-term changes to self-definition, it is possible that the inclusion of others in the self contributes to short-term variations in working self-concepts as people move across relational contexts. People may temporarily incorporate qualities of their partners into the working self-concept, and these qualities may change as people interact with different partners and learn about them (Chen et al., 2006). For example, some research suggests that people assimilate their self-definitions to the qualities of strangers when feelings of closeness to those strangers are induced (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992) and exhibit shifts in self-definition when they learn new information about their close partners’ qualities (McFarland, Buchler, & MacKay, 2001; Tiedens & Jimenez, 2003). Taken together, this research highlights several mechanisms through which the presence of relationship partners and mere thoughts of those partners act as situational features that influence the self-concept. Fluctuation in these relational features may explain situational instability in the self-concept, whereas consistency in these features across situations may explain self-concept durability.

**Self-Regulation Depends on Relational Context**

 Several lines of research suggest that relational context shapes self-regulation and the pursuit of goals (see also Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010; Fitzsimons, Finkel, & Vandellen, 2015). Here we describe research suggesting that relational context determines what goals are valued, whether people expect to achieve their goals, the resources that people have to pursue their goals, and, consequently, the goals people pursue.

 **Relational context shapes what goals are valued**. Relational context shapes the types of goals that people value and, therefore, pursue. For example, as described earlier, people in close relationships often adhere to communal norms in which they respond supportively to each other’s welfare, whereas more distant relationship partners often follow other principles, such as those based on exchange and equity (Clark & Mills, 2012). These relationship norms can guide the selection of goals during interactions. For example, in a communal relationship context, people often have the goal of helping their partners (Clark et al., 1987). This goal may become activated even when partners are not physically present. According to Fitzsimons and Bargh (2003), representations of goals pursued with specific relationship partners are components of the mental representations of relationship partners. Hence, when situations activate representations of relationship partners, goals typically enacted with those partners are automatically activated and pursued, often without the actor’s awareness. Consistent with this assertion, Fitzsimons and Bargh, (2003) found that participants who, as part of an experimental task, simply had been asked to describe a friend were more willing to help an experimenter relative to those who described a coworker. Research examining automatic activation of attachment-related goals similarly has revealed that subliminal exposure to names of attachment figures (i.e., people who usually provide comfort and support) heightened participants’ self-disclosure and support-seeking goals (Gillath et al., 2006). Similarly, activating thoughts of close relationship partners leads people to pursue the goal of being understood by others (i.e., self-verification goals; Kraus & Chen, 2009). These results underscore that relationship partners need not be present to affect goal pursuit; merely activating thoughts about relationship partners appears to be effective at eliciting goals that are typically enacted with those partners.

 Personal goals that do not directly involve interaction with partners may be valued or devalued as a function of whether they support or conflict with relationship functioning or a partner’s wishes. For example, partners may disagree regarding their desires to have children. When a person’s goals conflict with a partner’s goals and this goal conflict is perceived to threaten the relationship, individuals who strongly desire to maintain the relationship report a greater willingness to forego their personal goals or adopt the partner’s goals, which, in turn, is associated with more positive relationship functioning (Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher & Cox,1997). This tendency to pursue goals for the partner may be activated even in the physical absence of the partner. Shah (2003a) demonstrated that activating thoughts about a relationship partner automatically activates intentions to pursue goals that partner has for the self when participants feel close to the partner. For example, people become more committed to an academic goal after being exposed to the names of their mothers, but only if they feel close to their mothers and believe that their mothers want them to excel in academics (Shah, 2003a).

 People also automatically devalue or abandon goals in situations that activate thoughts of relationship partners. For example, being reminded of a partner who does not value performance on a task reduces performance on the task when participants feel close to that partner (Shah, 2003a), suggesting that people tend to adopt their close partner’s lack of interest in a goal (see also Leander, Shah, & Sanders, 2014). Related to this phenomenon, activating goals to be romantically desirable decreases women’s goal to pursue a math or science major, perhaps because women believe that romantic partners do not value their performance in math and science domains (Park, Young, Troisi, & Pinkus, 2011). In addition, in response to activating thoughts of a controlling significant other, people often pursue goals that directly oppose the significant other’s wishes, suggesting an automatic reactance effect in response to activation of controlling partners (Chartrand, Dalton, & Fitzsimons, 2007). These results suggest that situations activate relationship partner representations, which can help or hinder goal pursuit, depending on the partner’s goals for the self and whether one is motivated to satisfy the partner’s goals.

 Although many situational features could activate representations of significant others, research on transference suggests that interaction partners who resemble significant others often have this effect (Andersen & Baum, 1994; Andersen & Chen, 2002). According to this research, goals typically pursued with significant others may become activated when people encounter new individuals who resemble those significant others. For example, Andersen and colleagues found that participants had a stronger goal to establish closeness with a new interaction partner who resembled a positively valenced significant other, relative to new interaction partners who resembled a negatively valenced significant other (Andersen et al., 1996; Berk & Andersen, 2000). Similarly, Kraus and Chen (2009) found that people pursued a goal to be understood when a new interaction partner resembled a close other.

 **Relational context shapes expectancy for goal pursuit**. According to expectancy-value theories of self-regulation (Atkinson, 1964; Shah & Higgins, 1997), appraisals of the difficulty of goal pursuit and expectations for success determine goal commitment and pursuit. Relational context appears to shape these expectations. When people have partners who support their goal strivings and have confidence in their ability to succeed, they experience more self-efficacy, more confidence in perceptions of their ability to achieve their goals, and, in turn, more goal progress (Feeney, 2004; 2007; Feeney & Collins, 2014)

. Once again, partners need not be physically present for these effects to occur. When thoughts about a partner are activated, people’s confidence in attaining a goal shift in the direction of their perceptions of their partner’s expectations. They feel more confident in their ability to complete a task after exposure to the name of a relationship partner who has high expectations for their performance, and less confident following exposure to a more pessimistic partner (Shah, 2003b).

 Expectations for goal performance also may depend more directly on the performance of relationship partners. When people are exposed to positive role models, those who exemplify successful completion of a goal, they often feel more capable of pursuing the goal themselves, particularly if they believe their abilities are malleable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Interpersonal closeness with the role model may also be an important consideration. As described previously, people tend to assimilate their self-perceptions of their own abilities to those of close others (Brown et al., 1992; McFarland, Buchler, & MacKay, 2001) and have more positive responses when they are outperformed by close partners than when they are outperformed by friends (Pinkus et al., 2008). Hence, close partners may be particularly likely to serve as inspiring role models rather than sources of envy.

 **Relational context shapes resource availability**. Relational contexts may affect self-regulation by modifying the resources available for goal pursuit. According to research on outsourcing self-regulation (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011), people sometimes become less motivated to invest personal resources into pursuing a goal if they believe that a relationship partner will pursue the goal for them. For example, bringing to mind how partners are willing to help with a fitness goal has been shown to reduce intentions to pursue the goal (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011). However, other studies suggest that supportive partners facilitate pursuit of goals (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996; Feeney, 2007). Similarly, research on the Michelangelo phenomenon suggests that people are more likely to successfully pursue goals important to achieving their ideal selves when they have relationship partners who facilitated those goals through supportive behaviors such as clarifying plans, offering assistance, and praising goal pursuits (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009).

 Partners also may consume self-regulatory resources needed for goal pursuit. Research on high-maintenance interactions – those that are inefficient and effortful due to poor social coordination – suggests that these interactions consume self-regulatory resources needed for goal pursuit. In several studies, participants who experienced these interactions performed worse on subsequent tasks (Finkel, Campbell, Brunell, Dalton, Scarbeck & Chartrand, 2006). Hence, it seems clear that relational context can amplify or diminish the resources people have available for self-regulation.

 **Relational context elicits goal contagion**. People readily infer the goals of others from observing their behavior (Hassin, Aarts, & Ferguson, 2005), which may activate these goals in observers’ memory and automatically elicit goal-directed behavior of their own, a process referred to as goal contagion (Aarts, Gollwitzer, & Hassin, 2004). For example, simply observing someone else engaged in the goal of earning money can lead people into trying hard to earn money themselves, despite being unaware that they have acquired this goal (Aarts et al., 2004). Simlarly, observing people blame others for their mistakes can lead people to blame others as well (Fast & Tiedens, 2010). These effects may readily occur within close interpersonal relationships. People may adopt the goals of their relationship partners, although this effect is more likely to occur for people lower in power (Laurin, Fitzsimons, Finkel, Carswell VanDellen, Hoffman….Brown, 2016).

 Altogether, contemporary research on self-regulation suggests a pervasive influence of relational context; relational context shapes the goals people value, their expectancies for goal pursuit, the resources available for goal pursuit and, ultimately, goal persistence and performance. Once again, the findings suggest that these effects may arise when people enter situations characterized by the physical presence of relationship partners, or in situations in which relationship partners become psychologically present.

 **Evaluative Judgments of Non-social Entities Depend on Relationship Context**

 To this point we have discussed evidence that many social phenomena and processes depend upon relational context. Strikingly, some phenomena that do not seem very social in nature, at least upon first consideration, also are shaped by relational context. Specifically, judgments of the threat in one’s environment, the quality of tastes, the painfulness of cold water, and the attractiveness of images all appear dependent on relational context. Moreover, the magnitude of these effects appears dependent on the quality of the relationship with others in the situation.

 **By-standing romantic partners or friends attenuate judgments of environmental threats**. Consider first reactions to and judgments of physical threats to an individuals’ well-being. As already mentioned in our section on prosocial behavior, Coan and his colleagues (Coan et al., 2006) found that women who expected to be shocked (and thus to experience pain) while in a fMRI scanner showed lower neural threat responses when holding a stranger’s hand than when holding no one’s hand and lower neural threat responses when holding a spouse’s hand than when holding a stranger’s hand. Coan et al. (2013) found a similar effect for young adults holding the hand of a opposite-sex platonic friend. Similarly, Conner, Siegle, McFarland et al. (2012) have found that anxious children and adolescents who elected to have a caregiver present during exposure to threat words showed lower neural stress responses than did those without their caregiver in the room. Krahe, Paloyelis, Condon, Jenkinson, Williams, & Fotopulou

 (2015) found lower subjective pain and EEG amplitude responses following noxious laser exposure (simulating the feel of a pin prick) when participants’ romantic partners were present as opposed to absent. Furthermore, the effectiveness of partner presence was weaker for participants who were high in attachment avoidance (i.e., discomfort with intimacy) than for those who were low in attachment avoidance, suggesting that the buffering effect of romantic partners on pain responses depends on comfort with being close to those partners.

 Schnall, Harber, Stefanucci and Profitt (2008) found evidence of relational context influencing judgments of a different type of environmental threat, namely verbal judgments of steepness as of hills. Participants in a first study estimated the steepness of a hill to be greater when they were alone relative to when accompanied by a friend. Participants in a second study perceived a hill to be less steep after vividly visualizing a close friend, relative to participants who visualized a neutral person or someone whom they disliked. In this second study, feeling especially high closeness, warmth and happiness toward the particular person who was imagined was associated with especially large drops in the perceived steepness of the hill (although neutral and negative feelings were unrelated to the verbal or visual measures). Lee and Schnall (2014) found evidence linking having a sense of power over others to reduced judgments of the weight of boxes filled with books.

 Apparently people derive a sense of safety from close relationship partners and from having power over others. This appears to translate to seeing the world as a less threatening, scary place when those partners are physically or psychologically present.

**The presence of helpless partners can exacerbate judgments of threat.** In addition to studies showing that the real or psychological presence of close, responsive romantic partners or friends (and of others over whom one has power) attenuate perceptions of threat, other research shows that the presence of relatively helpless relationship partners (infants) actually heightens rather than reduces judgments of threat. These effects were first hinted at by Drottz-Sjoberg and Sjoberg (1990). They found that parents judge nuclear energy to be more dangerous than do non-parents. Later, similar effects were reported by Eibach and his colleagues, who found that parents came to perceive society as more dangerous during the year their child was born (Eibach, Libby & Gilovich, 2003). Eibach and his colleagues also found that simply reminding individuals that they are parents leads them to see more danger and risk in extreme sports, criminal victimization, and the trustworthiness of strangers and leads them to make safer or less risky decisions in economic games (Eibach & Mock, 2011; Eibach et al., 2011). Finally, Fessler, Holbrook, Pollack and Hahn-Holbrook (2014), in two different studies, found that parents who read or viewed vignettes about a potential aggressive person judged the person to be more formidable than did non-parents.

 The fact that merely being a parent or being reminded that one is a parent enhances perceived threats is explained by assuming that hen one becomes a parent, one assumes responsibility not just for oneself but also for another, in this case a helpless, individual who cannot support and protect himself or herself. This responsibility appears to motivate parents to detect and be vigilent to environmental threats and challenges, leading to enhanced perception of these features.

Threats and challenges are not the only seemingly non-social judgments that have been shown to be influenced by relational context. Boothby and her colleagues have recently demonstrated that judgments of tastes, and the pleasantness (or lack thereof) of stimuli in our environments, also may be altered by relational context. In one set of studies, participants rated pleasant chocolates to be better and more flavorful when they were co-experienced with a friend or familiar other, even without communicating with that other, than when they were tasted alone while the familiar other was otherwise engaged. In contrast, unpleasant, bitter chocolates were rated as more unpleasant when co-experienced than when tasted while the partner was otherwise engaged (Boothby, Clark & Bargh, 2014). In another study visual scenes appeared more pleasant with co-viewed with a friend than when viewed alone (Boothby, Smith, Clark & Bargh, 2017). Yet other research led by Boothby showed that amplification effects disappeared, however, if the co-experiencers were strangers with whom participants are not given a chance to become acquainted or if co-experiencers are located in separate rooms (Boothby, Smith, Clark & Bargh, 2016; 2017). Similarly, Martin, Hathaway, Labester Mirali, Acland, Niederstrasser,…..Mogil (2015) showed that the pain associated with a cold-pressor task was judged to be greater when the task was co-experienced with a friend than when it was experienced alone.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although these findings may seem discrepant with those reviewed above (in which having a partner nearby or imagining a partner attenuated judgments of threats), those studies concerned a partner who was present but not co-experiencing what the subject was experiencing. In these cases, the partner may be viewed as a source of support. In contrast, a co-experiencer of threat may be less likely to be perceived as a source of support.

 Additional reports of situations in which co-experiencing stimuli with partners seems to amplify the impact of those stimuli on people also have been reported by Reis, O'Keefe and Lane (2017) who found that a fun game was experienced as more fun when played with a friend than with a stranger or alone, and by Shteynberg, Hirsh, Apfelbaum, et al. (2014) who observed that classmates viewing sad videos and images together were unhappier than when they viewed the videos and images alone.

 In sum, when people are with familiar others and co-experience stimuli, their reactions to those stimuli are amplified. This may be the case because co-experiencing stimuli with familiar others leads people to empathize with those others’ experiences, amplifying responses to stimuli (Beckes et al., 2013; Bouchard et al., 2013; Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt & Ortiz, 2007) and/or because people are more comfortable and therefore able to focus more intently on their experiences when they are surrounded by comfortable and familiar co-actors.

**Concluding Comments**

 Humans are fundamentally social. They live their lives embedded within relationships, relationships which, themselves, are embedded in groups and cultures. As a result, relational context alone and in interaction with other situational factors may well be the most important situational factor that driving their thoughts, feelings and behavior.

 Yet, in studying psychological phenomena, psychologists often have failed to consider how relational context shapes psychological phenomena (Clark, 2002; Fischer & Van Kleef, 2010; Reis et al., 2000). They study people’s judgments of stimuli, reactions to stimuli and behaviors while they are alone or they study them in only a single relational context (most typically when interacting with strangers) without considering how the resultant findings might depend upon that one particular relational context (cf. Clark & Boothby, 2013).

 Yet the work reviewed in this chapter in six broad substantive areas– prosocial behavior, social influence, person perception, self-concept, self-regulation, and judgments of pain, taste, beauty, and risk– shows that when relational context *is* taken into account in studies, it matters. Effects appear or disappear, change in size, and even reverse in direction as a function of relational context. We have chosen to review work in just six content areas to illustrate our points. Reviews of work in many other substantive areas of research might have been chosen to make the same point (see for instance Clark, Arrmentano, Boothby & Hirsch, 2017, for a discussion of how relational context shapes emotion.)

 A reader might wonder how the effects of relationships described in this chapter constitute effects of situations. We see situations in much the same way that Lewin (1943) saw them: as a representation of all of the causal forces that exist outside the person. The forces exerted on the individual are different when situations involve the physical presence or psychological activation of an intimate partner, compared to a stranger, an enemy, or no one else. Even if all other facets of the situation are identical, an intimate partner might make salient to a person expectations about helping each other, a stranger might highlight impression management for the person, an enemy may heighten wariness, and, when no one else is present, self-reliance might predominate. The important point of this example is this: each of these "situations" is a different situation, by sole virtue of variations in whom else is present or whom one is thinking about or what relational histories or expectations are brought to the situation.

 Many of the examples we have cited in this chapter have contrasted what occurs within close, intimate, safe, relational contexts relative to other types of relational contexts. This is simply a function of the fact that the three authors of this chapter all study close, personal relationships and that research on close personal relationships has blossomed in the last three decades, providing many findings that illustrate the substantive influence of relational context. Yet, there are other types of relational context variations that are also important. For instance, many relationship contexts are defined by the specific roles people occupy. Role differences are relational context effects, in our thinking, because they prescribe specific norms about how people ought to relate to each other. For instance, many relationships in business and government involve power differences. One’s status or power in a business relationship relative to a partner has been shown to shape what emotions one is likely to feel after having behaved in an identical way in a relationship (Tiedens, 2000). Power differences also shape how other people react to the emotions another person displays (Tiedens, 2001) and whether one is likely to stereotype versus individuate person with whom one works (Fiske, 1993). Thus, the questions we urge all behavioral researchers to ask themselves, no matter their substantive domain, are these: What is the relational context in which I am conducting my research? Are the results I have obtained likely to generalize to other relational contexts? How might my results be different if the relational context was altered? At minimum, asking such questions may lead to acknowledging likely limitations or boundary conditions of results. At most, they will lead to better specification of our theories and empirical findings. Our hope is that these questions also will lead to new research that takes relational context into account, which, in turn, will enrich our knowledge of these psychological phenomena as well as of relationships per se.

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1. Martin et al. (2015) also included a condition in which friends were by-standers watching the participant engage in the cold pressor task. Fitting with the overall patterning of results covered here, by-standing partners did not result in amplification of felt pain but, rather, tended to reduce participant reports of pain (albeit not significantly in this case.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)