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Understanding Prosocial Behavior Requires Understanding Relational Context

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Abstract and Keywords

Prosocial behavior has long been a topic of interest to social psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and others. Moreover, empirical studies on this topic abound. However, most of this research fails to consider how relational context shapes the antecedents, consequences, and frequency of prosocial behaviors as well as things such as the balance between giving and seeking prosocial behavior and what perceivers even consider to be prosocial behavior. Here we define relational context and discuss how it may be captured in terms of relationship type, in individual differences in orientation toward relationships, in relationship stage and history, and in the place of one relationship within a wider set of relationships. Then, using examples drawn from extant literature, we make a case that relational context shapes prosocial behavior in powerful ways and ought to be central to any theoretical analysis of the occurrence and nature of prosocial behavior.

Keywords: Relational context, Prosocial behavior, Relationship type, Relationship character, Relationship history, Relationship stage, Attachment styles

Prosocial behavior is commonly defined as an attempt on the part of one person to promote the welfare of another or to prevent declines in that person's welfare. It encompasses a range of different types of interactions: Behaviors such as taking quick physical action to save a person in the face of a physical threat, mundane tasks such as helping someone move to a new apartment or secure gas when their car has run out, and listening supportively to another person's troubles. Many studies on factors influencing the likelihood of all these types of prosocial acts and others as well have appeared in the literature. Strikingly, however, little attention is paid to the relational context as a factor shaping whether, when, how, and with what consequences such actions are taken on behalf of another person.

That said, consider the following situations:

1. A young mother is about to cross a busy intersection with her toddler. She suddenly notices a car about to hit an unknown middle-aged man crossing the street in front of her. Without thinking, she leaps in front of the vehicle to save his life.
2. Jim has a demanding job and very limited vacation time. Nonetheless, he takes a full day off from work to help a total stranger move across town.
3. Tasha and Elaine have been best friends since childhood, and they often share their most private thoughts and feelings. When Tasha calls Elaine in distress late one evening with an urgent need to talk to her friend, Elaine says, "I'm happy to talk to you Tasha, but could you call back tomorrow, during normal business hours?"
4. Anne runs out of gas on her drive home from work. She calls her sister, who promptly picks her up and brings her to a nearby gas station to buy a canister of gas. Once they've ensured that the car is running again, Anne's sister hands her a bill for her time and labor.

(p. 330) You might be thinking, "Wait a second . . . These scenarios make little sense. Something doesn't add up." How could a mother risk losing her own life and leaving her child an orphan in order to save a stranger? Why would Jim give up work to help move someone he doesn't even know across town? Elaine is just plain weird for making Tasha wait for business hours to talk to her. Why would Anne's sister charge her a fee? If thoughts like these crossed your mind, it simply means your expectations are guided by a set of widely agreed upon social norms for relationships. The above scenarios make little sense as stated, except perhaps as an exercise in counterintuitive thinking, because there is a mismatch between the characters' behavior with respect to each other and the type of relationship the scenarios portray them as having. The scenarios *do* make sense, however, if the relational context is changed as follows: The mother jumps in front of the speeding car to save the life of her *toddler*; Jim takes some of his precious vacation time to help the woman *with whom he's romantically involved* move across town; Elaine is not Tasha's lifelong friend but, rather, her *therapist*; and the person helping the motorist is the *employee* on call that evening for AAA.

The seemingly obvious, but powerful, way in which our expectations shift depending on two people's relationship with each other illustrates the importance of relational context for understanding prosocial behavior. This is the central point of the present chapter: Any theoretically and empirically based science of prosocial behavior *must* incorporate relational context as a core construct. Indeed, if a researcher wishes to account for the greatest amount of variance in prosocial behavior—who gives, seeks, and accepts prosocial treatment, with whom, when, and how—we believe relational context is the *first* variable one should consider.

In what follows, we assert that prosocial behavior is inherently interpersonal, and that the study of prosocial behavior must therefore take into account *all* aspects of a dyadic process, including not only the actor, but also the person with whom he or she is interacting, *and the nature of the existing or desired relationship between them*. Focusing on the influence of the relationship, sheds additional light on existing findings. More importantly, however, it highlights how much we still do not know about interpersonal interactions in general and about prosocial behavior in particular, supporting our argument with examples from the existing empirical literature. Finally, we suggest that taking the dyadic nature—and specifically the idea of the relational context—of prosocial behavior into account will force us to reexamine the way in which we define prosocial behavior in the first place. Whereas the criterion for defining behaviors as prosocial for many psychologists, moral theorists, and economists is that they benefit *others*, a focus on the relational context of our actions makes it clear that prosocial behaviors almost always also have a quantifiable benefit to the self, even in situations in which that benefit has heretofore gone largely unrecognized. This perspective makes it clear that behaviors that have sometimes been questioned as illogical, in that they have a cost but no apparent benefit to the person taking the action, are quite often, in fact, extremely logical.

A Well-Rounded Understanding of Prosocial Behavior Must Take into Account All Aspects of a Dyadic Process

All interpersonal interactions, including prosocial behaviors, are, by definition, dyadic (as the saying goes, it takes two to tango!). This does not mean that interactions can occur only between two individuals (they could take place, for example, between an individual and a group or between two groups), but rather that they *cannot* occur within one person, in isolation. You cannot act in a prosocial way—that is, in a way that benefits another person, or that demonstrates concern for the welfare of that person—without entering that other person into the equation. The other person may be (and typically is) present but need not be; it is possible to act in such a manner as to benefit a person who is not present.

Any interaction between two or more people, furthermore, takes place within the context of a *relationship*. This is true even if that interaction is between people who have never met before, who will never meet again, and who have no acquaintances in common—this is simply *one type* of relationship (one that exists between strangers). A relationship can be defined as existing when two people are interdependent with one another—when each has some impact on the other even if that impact is brief (Kelley et al., 1983). The nature of a relationship is a function not only of the characteristics and motivations of the

individuals (or groups) within it, but also of outside, contextual, factors—for example, was the relationship established within a business environment or an informal social one? Relationships also vary in terms of the functions they serve for the people within them. The same (p. 331) two people could form different types of relationships, for example, treating one another as business partners in one setting and as friends in another. The nature of the relationship between two entities cannot, therefore, be determined based on their individual identities alone.

A well-rounded understanding of prosocial behavior must take into account *all* aspects of a dyadic process. In the current chapter, we focus on the influence of the relationship between entities within an interaction on prosocial behavior, and when, if, and how it occurs between them.

The Relational Character of an Interaction Defines the Rules and Norms That Govern When, If, and How We Are Prosocial

The relational context of an interaction defines the rules or norms for that interaction. That this is generally the case is obvious: People act in very specific and distinctive ways that vary depending on the relational context in which they find themselves. With a stranger you may be polite and inquisitive, but you are probably careful not to be *too* inquisitive or *too* intimate; you might chat about the Super Bowl or offer to introduce him to someone with whom you think he might get along. However, asking him about his personal life or inviting him to join your family on vacation would likely be downright awkward and may cause the stranger to flee. Directing the same questions to a friend or a sibling probably would not even raise an eyebrow, and indeed would likely strengthen your relationship.

Prosocial behavior is no exception. If weather forces an evacuation of homes in a certain area and you live in a safe zone, inviting your dear friend to move in with you for a week is a normal behavior; inviting a stranger to do the same would be highly unusual. You almost certainly imagine that the stranger's friends or family will take care of him (if you think about the stranger at all).¹ Indeed, giving and seeking prosocial behavior are actions that not only vary tremendously with relational context, but, as many theorists have argued, different kinds of relationships actually typically are distinguished from one another by examining if, under what circumstances, and how actions are taken to promote members' welfare (cf. Bugental, 2000; Clark & Mills, 1979, 2012; Fiske, 1992; Goffman, 1959; Trivers, 1972; Mills & Clark, 1982). Close relationships, for example, are distinguished from more formal "exchange" relationships in part by the incidence of noncontingently giving benefits that are based on the partner's needs and desires rather

than providing support that is contingent upon the reciprocal receipt of benefits or given to repay debts (Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark, Dubash, & Mills, 1998; Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986).

Why Has Relational Context Been Neglected in the Prosocial Behavior Literature?

Our examples of relationship context influencing prosocial behavior seem obvious. So why has empirical research on prosocial behavior largely (albeit not always) neglected relational context as a factor shaping the nature, likelihood, and consequences of prosocial behavior? Two distinct, but related factors seem to be responsible: First, researchers interested in prosocial behavior (including social and some developmental psychologists, philosophers and psychologists interested in morality, and economists), and, independently, those interested in interpersonal processes in close relationships have tended to conduct their studies exclusively on *one* particular type of relationship. Those studying prosocial behavior have tended to study relationships between strangers; those identifying themselves as close relationship researchers have tended to study romantic relationships or, less frequently, friendships or family relationships. The researchers involved pay scant (if any!) attention to the question of whether results obtained in the context of the type of relationship they are busy studying generalize to other relational contexts. Second, the various literatures on prosocial behavior, and on close relationships, have traditionally been segregated, both within textbooks and within the empirical literature. This segregation works against the need for conceptual integration becoming obvious to the involved researchers or to students of their research (Clark & Boothby, 2013; Reis, 2008, 2009, 2012). Consider each of these points in a bit more detail.

Experimental Paradigms Have Focused Almost Exclusively on Specific Types of Relationships

Social and personality psychologists have long studied prosocial behavior and all social psychology textbooks include a section on this topic. In particular, researchers have focused on the factors that motivate prosocial behavior (Batson, Lishner, Cook, & Sawyer, 2005), the forms prosocial behavior will take (Foa, Converse, & Tornblom, 1993; Cohen, Mermelstein, Kamarck, & Hoberman, (p. 332) 1985; Cutrona & Russell, 1990), the antecedents of prosocial behavior, including variables such as mood (Isen, 1970; Isen & Levin, 1972), the influence of the presence of bystanders (Darley & Latane, 1968), the

costs and rewards for the self of behaving prosocially toward benefactors (Dovidio, Piliavin, Gaertner, Schroeder, & Clark, 1991), the influence of motives on helpfulness (Van Lange & Semin-Goossens, 1998), and the consequences of prosocial behavior for both the donor and the recipient (Bolger & Amarel, 2007). More recently, neuroeconomists have studied prosocial behavior extensively using ultimatum, trust, or prisoners dilemma games (see, for instance, much research reviewed by Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003) and psychologists studying the nature of moral behavior have often studied moral judgments made in hypothetical situations including ones commonly known as “trolley problems” in which a person must make decisions about saving some people at the expense of other people (see, for instance, Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001). Almost all of this research has involved strangers helping one another or judgments about how participants might treat strangers, whom they do not expect to ever see again, and, indeed, whom they may not even believe truly exist (in the trolley problems, for instance).

So, too, have psychologists long studied the nature of relationships. This research has included the patterning of prosocial behavior as it occurs within such relationships (e.g., Beck & Clark, 2009; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992) and how the communal nature of a relationship shapes attention to needs (Clark et al., 1986), responsiveness to partners (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987), and attention to the other’s responsiveness to oneself (Clark et al., 1998). Psychologists whose primary interest has been *relationships*, however, have tended to focus only on *close* relationships—e.g., romantic relationships, friendships, and family relationships. Just as we must question whether results obtained with strangers will generalize to other, more intimate, relationships so too must we question whether results obtained in the context of intimate relationships will generalize to other, less intimate, relationships.

In both cases, the lack of deliberate, systematic variation in relational context in the empirical literatures on these subjects has left researchers unable to state with confidence that the results they have obtained in the type of relationship they have tended to observe (e.g., strangers) will generalize to other relational contexts (e.g., parent-child or best friends). We posit that this lack of deliberate manipulation of and even theoretical consideration of relational context results from a simple lack of thought given to the fact that relational context exists in *any* interpersonal interaction and that it has a sufficiently significant influence on the nature of that interaction so as to make it impossible to truly understand the dynamics of an interaction without taking relational context into account.

To be sure, this gap is not unique to the prosocial literature. Social psychology, and for that matter psychology in general, has tended in its theorizing and empirical work to ignore the relational context in which behavior occurs (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). This omission has led to theoretical underspecification, that is, theories that omit consideration of relational context fail to address a key circumstance that influences when and how a given effect may emerge in everyday life. Thus, the call for theoretical integration of relationship context into research and theorizing on prosocial behavior is one that might also be applied elsewhere in our field.

The Prosocial and Relationship Literatures Have Remained Largely Segregated, Despite Being Conceptually Intertwined

Even if researchers study one type of relationship at a time for reasons of interest or methodology (e.g., maintaining experimental control, reducing error variance), we might still ask: Why they do not more frequently step back, examining the literature on prosocial behavior as a whole, and place their own and others' work within that context to develop new theories as to how the work all fits together (or does not!)?

A large part of the answer to this, we believe, is that the many groups of researchers that study prosocial behavior (developmental psychologists, social psychologists interested in prosocial behavior, social and other psychologists interested in processes characterizing close relationships, economists and psychologists and experimental philosophers interested in moral behavior) rarely communicate with one another or read one another's work. They may reside in different academic departments. They go to different conventions, publish in and read different journals, and review papers primarily by other people within their own groups. Some segregation of work on prosocial (p. 333) behavior has happened even within the single discipline of social psychology. For instance, in the 1998 edition of Gilbert, Fiske, and Lindzey's classic *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Gilbert et al., 1998) the chapter on close relationships included much work on responsiveness (Berscheid & Reis, 1998) but was presented independently of the chapter on prosocial and antisocial behavior (Batson, 1998) with the authors describing largely nonoverlapping empirical work. In the latest edition of the same handbook (Fiske, Gilbert, & Gardner, 2010), work on morality (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010) and work on responsiveness to partner welfare in close relationships (Clark & Lemay, 2010) also appear in different chapters and, again, each cites largely nonoverlapping empirical literature. Even single textbooks in the discipline of social psychology segregate work on prosocial behavior from that on responsiveness to partners in close relationships (e.g., Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2013; Gilovich, Keltner, Chen, & Nisbett, 2013).

Clearly it *is* time to integrate this work. One way to do so is to highlight the many roles that relational context plays in determining the antecedents, nature of, and consequences of prosocial behavior.

In the sections that follow, we define relational context and review some dimensions along which it can vary. Then, we describe the ways in which variations in relational context have been shown to influence the nature of prosocial behavior—the extent of prosocial behavior, the form it takes (with different actions considered prosocial or not in different contexts), as well as its antecedents and consequences. We also describe the ways in which relational context can influence the relative balance of prosocial actions within an interaction, on the part of one entity or another. We support our assertions with empirical examples from the literature. Finally, we conclude by describing some ways in which researchers can integrate knowledge of relationships and their dynamics into research on prosocial behavior.

Relational Context Defined

We define *relational context* as including the following six dimensions:

1. Relationship Type

First, our relationships with other people can be characterized in part by the norms, both implicit and explicit, that govern our interactions with them (Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993, 2012; Fiske, 1992). These norms can arise from the social function(s) people play in each other's lives (Bugental, 2000; Clark & Mills, 2012). These social functions can be conceptualized as the goals that people pursue, ultimately or proximately, in a given relationship. For example, from an evolutionary perspective, a mating relationship serves the (ultimate) function of preserving our genes by helping people (proximately) achieve their goal to reproduce and raise children to the point of sexual maturity and reproduction themselves. Likewise, a friendship with another person can serve the function of providing both people with a sense of security based on each following an implicit rule to provide the other with noncontingent support aimed at maintaining and promoting one another's welfare. We may form a business relationship with someone else to facilitate our economic success. Each of these relationships is defined by a different set of norms with respect to the way we interact with the people involved.

These norms are an important—indeed the *most* important—part of what we mean by relational context. These norms almost always dictate when it is appropriate, or even

required, to give, seek, or accept benefits to or from another person.² Parents, for instance, must feed their young children whereas those children need not feed their parents. A clothing store owner and her hired salesperson have no obligation to feed one another and are unlikely to do so, but the owner must pay the salesperson for her work. Friends are far more likely to behave prosocially toward one another than are acquaintances.

Yet these *relationship types* do not capture all of what we mean by relational context.

2. Relational Character

The second dimension of relational context addresses characteristics that vary *within* a single relationship type (e.g., within parental or spousal or business relationships). For instance, people vary in how *certain* they are that they and another person have a particular type of relationship, or how *committed* they are to maintaining a certain kind of relationship with someone across time, or how much they trust a particular other person. These sorts of variables (in combination with relationship type as discussed above) constitute a dyad or group's *relational character*. The term *relational character* might be thought of as the relationship's personality. That is, relational character is to a dyad as personality is to an individual. It makes no sense to talk of relational character outside the context (p. 334) of a particular relationship. We are certain that we have a friendship with a particular other. We are committed to a particular business relationship. We distrust one particular neighbor, but trust another.

Some aspects of relational character may vary only or primarily within one type of relationship. For instance, within the category of communal relationships (those in which people assume a special responsibility for another's welfare and give benefits noncontingently in response to needs and desires), relationships vary in terms of communal strength or, in other words, the degree to which one person assumes responsibility for the other person's welfare (Mills & Clark, 1982; Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004; Clark & Mills, 2012). This aspect of relational character can be captured in terms of the amount of effort, time, and cost we are willing to accept to noncontingently promote the partner's welfare and in terms of the priority we give to support a particular person's welfare relative to that of other people in our social network (Clark & Mills, 2012; Mills et al., 2004). Precisely because it deals with the degree to which one person assumes responsibility for another, communal relationship strength is one of the most important determinants of the offering and acceptance of prosocial behavior between friends, family members, and romantic partners.

3. Individual Differences

The third dimension of relational context concerns the *chronic relational individual differences* that people bring to their relationships. Most directly applicable to the topic of this chapter, people vary in their “prosocial orientation” (e.g., Batson & Shaw, 1991; Grant & Mayer, 2009). However, they also vary in their chronic levels of a variety of other characteristics, such as anxious and avoidant attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996), empathic self-efficacy beliefs (Alessandri, Caprara, Eisenberg, & Steca, 2009), communal orientation (Clark et al., 1987), and self-esteem (Leary & Downs, 1995). These chronic individual differences manifest themselves in the ways a particular person relates to his or her relationship partners generally. They also often interact with situational factors, including relationship types, to determine attention to others’ feelings, needs and desires, and reactions to receiving support. They cross cut relationships and may capture the cross-situational extent to which people have adopted a particular norm for relating to others and/or whether they have the fortitude and abilities to apply relevant relationship type norms to those relationships.

These individual differences also constitute a part of what we mean by relational context. Individual differences should be thought of as conceptually distinct from both the relationship type and the relational character of specific relationships within relational types. These individual differences seem most likely to influence prosocial behavior if situational dictates are weak rather than strong (cf. Mischel, 1977, but see also Cooper & Withey, 2009). For instance, the extent to which a person is communally oriented likely has a greater influence on whether a person will help a stranger in need (cf. Clark et al., 1987) than on whether a mother feeds her infant child. However, this is an issue that requires much more research. We can think, for instance, of situations in which individual differences have a greater impact in situations in which norms are strong rather weak. For example, psychologists who study attachment theorize and have shown that individual differences in attachment styles manifest themselves and have their greatest impact in relationships with attachment figures who are, normatively, expected to be extremely responsive to our needs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

4. Relationship History

Fourth, partners in existing relationships have a history and imagined futures with each other. These play a role in shaping partners’ behavior, their perceptions of events, and their reactions to those events. For example, interaction patterns (e.g., habitual styles of dealing with conflict that often capture being prosocial or failing to do so) are often

repeated in a given relationship but do not necessarily extend to other relationships. Furthermore, a past history with a partner creates expectations, and these expectations can influence how we behave toward a partner (Baldwin, 1992). For example, we are more likely to be forgiving of a partner's first transgression (and thus more willing to continue to behave in prosocial ways and to accept care from that partner) than of repeated instances of the same transgression, for which more negative attributions may be made (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). Similarly, expecting to interact in the future may also lead partners to be more forgiving. So too, expecting and desiring future interaction may be a powerful determinant of providing noncontingent support to a partner in order to foster the development of the desired relationship.

(p. 335) 5. Developmental Stage of Relationships

The fifth dimension of relational context is the developmental stage of the relationship, a principle that is well-established in the literature on relationship initiation and maintenance. This general principle likely applies to prosocial behavior in particular. A smitten young man courting a woman in his class might offer to carry her stack of textbooks to increase her desire for a strong communal relationship with him; however, after having dated her for 2 years he may not be nearly as eager to do so. For instance, Beck and Clark (2009) report evidence that we give more support to partners than we seek as relationships are forming and that the balance evens out across time. Clark, Graham, Williams, and Lemay (2008) have found that adherence to communal norms in marriage drops off a bit over the first 2 years presumably because people no longer feel a need to try to "win one another over."

6. People's Wider Relationship Networks

The sixth and final dimension concerns the placement of a particular relationship within each person's larger set of relationships, that is, their social network. People have many relationships with other people. Opportunities or demands to respond prosocially to more than one person often occur simultaneously. Similarly, people who find themselves needing or desiring support are usually in the position to choose the person from whom they would like support. A person's larger network of relationships and the emotional state, personality, and availability of partners in that larger network can and often does influence prosocial behavior in relation to a particular partner. For instance, a woman might routinely be willing to give her friend a ride to work. However, if the woman's child is sick on a day when her friend needs a ride, she is likely to decline her friend's request.

In sum, relational context comprises differences in the following: (1) normative types of relationships, (2) relational character as it occurs within different types of relationships,

(3) chronic individual differences in people's approaches to relationships, (4) relationship history, (5) relationship stage, and (6) a person's network of relationships. All these factors will act, in concert, to determine the antecedents, nature, and consequences of prosocial behavior. We assert that researchers cannot truly understand prosocial behavior without taking all these features into account. We turn now to existing empirical evidence for this claim.

Evidence Demonstrating That Relational Context Influences Prosocial Behavior

The Amount of Prosocial Behavior Varies with Relational Context

That relationship type shapes prosocial behavior is obvious, and, notably, is the only way relational context actually has been emphasized as shaping prosocial behavior in most textbooks. The finding is this: People act more prosocially toward people in some types of relationships than others. For instance, textbook authors often point out that people provide more support to kin than to others (Borgida, Conner, & Manteufel, 1992; Burnstein, 2005; Burnstein, Crandall, & Kitayama, 1994; Essock-Vitale & McGuire, 1985; Segal, 1984). In fact, authors often state that preferential treatment of kin is true not just of humans but of a variety of other species including mockingbirds (Curry, 1988) and squirrels (Sherman, 1985). Many texts also acknowledge that people help friends and romantic partners or those with whom they desire friendships and romantic relationships more than they help strangers or acquaintances (Clark et al., 1987) and that this is true cross-culturally, especially when the costs of providing support are high (Burnstein et al., 1994), and even in young children (e.g., Costin & Jones, 1992) and teenagers (e.g., Barry & Wentzel, 2006). Yet the fact that we help some people in some types of relationships more than others is only the most basic point to be made with regard to how relational context shapes prosocial behavior. The story of how relational context shapes prosocial behavior is far more complex and must reference all six of the factors we outlined rather than just a single one to fully explain the phenomenon in question.

The very nature of the prosocial behavior that occurs, the antecedent social cues and situations that propel us toward supporting others, the nature of the processes involved in offering and seeking support, and the consequences of having provided prosocial behavior are all crucially dependent upon relational context. This is because the goals and social functions of relationships vary and prosocial behavior is sought, accepted, or rejected in the service of these goals. However, the implicit message conveyed by the literature seems to be that there is simply a main effect of relationship type and that

whatever science of prosocial behavior we develop will apply in all relational contexts. We next review evidence illustrating this complexity.

(p. 336) **The *Content* of Prosocial Behavior Varies with Relational Context**

Prosocial behaviors take many forms. They can consist of giving others tangible or informational support, affection, or affirmation. They can vary in the magnitude of costs to donors relative to benefits to recipients. They can be symbolic in nature, and even visible or invisible to the recipient (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). Not only does the amount of prosocial behavior given to others vary by relational context, so too does its content.

A study reported by Burnstein et al. (1994) illustrates this well. These researchers investigated people's willingness to provide help in situations that were either life-threatening or more mundane in nature to other people who varied in genetic relatedness to the potential donor. Concerning situations that were life-threatening, participants reported greater willingness to provide help to kin than to nonkin, whereas there were no differences in willingness to provide more mundane types of support to kin versus nonkin.

Bressan, Colarelli, and Cavalieri (2009) extended this work. They suggested that humans evolved to rely on cues that historically indicated shared genes to indicate kinship. Bressan et al. found that people were more willing to offer life-saving help to siblings with whom they had shared more years of coresidence (a cue to genetic linkage), whereas years of coresidence had no impact on willingness to provide non-life-saving (and potentially self-harming) help. In other words, relationship context shaped the type of prosocial behaviors individuals were willing to provide. Consistent with this finding, Stewart-Williams (2009) found that as costs of helping increased people reported giving a larger proportion of support to kin than to nonkin. However, people reported giving more low-cost help to friends than to siblings.

The *Antecedents* of Prosocial Behavior Vary with Relational Context

The situational factors that *prompt* a person to behave prosocially toward others vary widely by relational context. Iredale, Van Vugt, and Dunbar (2008) examined charitable donations as a function of normative relationship type. They varied regardless of whether potential helpers were motivated to form a mating relationship with a particular observer of their behavior or not. To create situations in which people would (or would not) desire and strive toward a mating relationship, they recruited male and female heterosexuals to

participate in a study either alone (in the no observer condition) or along with an available, attractive, other-sex individual (in the desirable mate condition) or with a same-sex individual (in a same-sex control condition). Based on theory suggesting that females (but not males) seek mates with resources and, therefore, that males (but not females) engage in prosocial behavior with a goal of attracting female mates, they hypothesized that the presence of an attractive potential female mate would increase males' charitable donations. In contrast, they did not expect the presence of an attractive potential male mate to increase females' charitable donations. Their observations supported their hypotheses. For men, the presence of an attractive observer of the desired sex resulted in donations equivalent to 57% of their experimental earnings to charity (versus about 29% in the no observer condition and about 28% in the same-sex condition). Women exhibited no such differences. No such differences were observed in the control conditions.

Clark et al. (1987) provide an additional example of how the antecedents of prosocial behavior will vary by relational context. In the first of two studies that illustrate this point, the prosocial behavior of interest was helping prepare materials for an assigned task--creating a balloon sculpture. Desired relationship type was manipulated to be either communal in nature (by having the other participant be an attractive, other-sex person who indicated that he or she was interested in forming new relationships) or exchange in nature (in this case the other person was clearly unavailable for such a relationship). The mood of the potential recipient was also varied to be neutral or sad, and the opportunity to be prosocial was exactly the same for all participants. The hypothesis was that participants would offer more help in the communal condition than in the exchange condition and that they would respond positively (by offering more help) to the potential recipient's sad mood in the communal but not in the exchange condition. The reasoning was that when a communal relationship is desired people want to be noncontingently responsive to the partner's needs by offering help that, if accepted, would provide a gateway into a close relationship (cf. Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2008). Another's sadness should be (and was) a welcome sign suggesting that such help was desired and needed by the partner. It significantly increased helping in that condition. In contrast, when a communal relationship was not desired and motivation to help was (p. 337) presumably low, another person's display of sadness in this nonemergency situation was pretty much ignored. It had no impact on helping.

It is possible that in other relational contexts sad moods may even decrease helping, since people do not want to get involved with certain others; however, in this study a floor effect was obtained in the exchange condition. That is, so little prosocial behavior occurred in the exchange-control condition that there was no room for it to dip lower in the exchange-sad mood condition.

In a second study reported in the same article, instead of varying the type of relationship desired, individual differences in chronic communal orientation toward relationships were measured in a pretest. This time the prosocial behavior measured was the number of index cards participants were willing to put into alphabetical order for an experimenter, whose mood was manipulated to be neutral or sad. The results paralleled those of the first study. People high in communal orientation both helped a person in need more and were more positively responsive to that person's sadness than were those low in communal orientation (who tended to help less when the experimenter was sad). Again, this suggests that relational orientation will influence whether sad mood will be an antecedent condition that increases prosocial behavior or not.

Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, and Garcia (1990) reported other evidence suggesting that desired relationship type can impact prosocial behavior not only with regard to the desired relationship partner, but also with regard to the ability to *perceive* the desired partner's internal states (i.e., need-state, sadness, and so on), which are, of course, important indices of when help is needed. These researchers conducted a study of mixed-sex dyads and found that interest in an interaction partner predicted a person's ability to perceive the target's emotions. Those with a higher interest in the relationship were better able to perceive a partner's emotions and needs. Insofar as perceiving someone's need is a first step in addressing that person's need, the motivation to form a relationship is an important precursor to acting prosocially.

Maner and Gailliot (2007) conducted further work demonstrating that the antecedents of prosocial behavior almost certainly vary by relational context. They measured self-reports of willingness to offer various levels of aid to a person who had been evicted from an apartment and had no place to stay. Participants had the option of indicating they would do nothing; offer an apartment guide; help the person find an apartment by driving him around; or let the person stay at their own place for a couple of days, a week, until a place was found, or indefinitely. In another set of questions, they were also given the option to report their willingness to provide various levels of aid to children whose parents had been killed in a car accident and who had been left with no one to care for them. They could do nothing, donate \$10, \$25, or \$50, start a fund-raising campaign, invite the children to live with them for a period, or raise the children as their own. Relational context was varied by having participants identify a close relative (communal condition) or unfamiliar classmate (exchange condition) of a similar age as the scenario target. Then participants imagined being in a position to help the other and reported on their feelings of empathy, oneness, negative affect in response to the targets' unfortunate situations, and willingness to provide help.

Consistent with other research described above regarding how relationship type influences prosocial behavior, people reported they would help their kin more than a

stranger. More relevant to the present point, participants were more likely to report that they would feel more empathy (sympathy, compassion, soft-heartedness) for their kin than for the stranger in both scenarios. Moreover, after controlling for feelings of oneness and negative affect, feelings of empathy predicted *only* stated willingness to help kin; they did not predict willingness to help the stranger. Schlenker and Britt (2001) have reported similar findings, that individual differences in empathic tendencies predict the willingness to help a friend but not the willingness to help a stranger. Together these findings suggest that situationally elicited empathy is a more powerful determinant of willingness to help in close relationships (kin relationships and close friendships) than it is in relationships with strangers.

The Consequences of Prosocial Behavior, for Donor and Recipients Alike, Vary by Relational Context

Here we describe studies that demonstrate that relational context (normative relationship type, relational character, and individual differences in approaches to relationships) may often result in different *consequences* of what would seem to be objectively the same type of prosocial behavior.

Coan, Schaefer, and Davidson (2006) conducted a study that demonstrates this point well for recipients of prosocial behavior. In their (p. 338) experiment, married female participants were exposed to a stressor—being at risk for receiving electrical shocks while in an fMRI scanner. The specific prosocial behavior under examination was handholding—literally offering a hand to another person experiencing stress. Relational context was varied in two ways that are captured by our categories *relationship type* and *relational character*. Sometimes participants held a stranger’s hand, sometimes they held their spouse’s hand, and in the control trials they held no one’s hand. Furthermore, the women reported the relational character of their marriage by filling out the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976), a measure of marital satisfaction, cohesion, consensus, and spousal affection.

Results revealed a significant impact of both relationship type and relational character on the women’s neural responses to the prosocial behavior of handholding while under stress. Activation in the neural systems known to underlie emotional and behavioral threat responses was most attenuated when the women held their husbands’ hands. A similar but less attenuated neural response was observed when they held the hand of a stranger compared to holding no one’s hand. Finally, attesting to the impact of relational character, among these women (all of whom had been found to be satisfied in their

marriages during pretesting), the higher their DAS score, the less these neural areas were activated when their husbands held their hand.

Other compelling evidence that relationship type shapes the consequences of prosocial behavior comes from research demonstrating that objectively identical behavior can elicit very different outcomes depending on the type of relationship (Clark & Mills, 1979; Williamson & Clark, 1989, 1992). In these studies, college students were randomly assigned to be led to expect and desire a communal or exchange relationship with an attractive, friendly partner who was either introduced as available for and anxious to form new close relationships (in the communal condition) or as unavailable and likely uninterested in forming new close relationships (in the exchange condition).

Clark and Mills (1979) found that participants assigned to the communal condition liked a person they helped more when the recipient did not offer to repay them for the help (following communal norms) than when they did (following exchange norms). However, behaving prosocially toward an exchange partner reversed this pattern of results, reducing the helper's liking of the recipient. Williamson and Clark (1989) further showed that behaving prosocially toward a person with whom you desire a communal relationship results in increases in both mood and self-esteem, regardless of whether the prosocial behavior was required or given of their own volition. In contrast, behaving prosocially toward a person with whom you do not desire a communal relationship had no such effects. People's mood and self-esteem did not change when they were forced to help another person with whom they did not desire a communal relationship, and a subsequent study (Williamson & Clark, 1992) showed that their mood actually *dropped* if they freely chose to help them. It appears that people react positively to their own prosocial acts, as indicated by a boost in mood and self-esteem, only if those acts align with the kind of relationship they desire.

More recent work provides confirmatory evidence that providing help is especially likely to improve your mood when it occurs within a desired close relationship (Aknin, Sandstrom, Dunn, & Norton, 2011). Following a report of two earlier studies providing both correlational and experimental evidence that spending money on people promotes happiness (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2009), Aknin et al. addressed the question of whether this effect might be dependent upon relationship type. They asked people to recall a time that they had spent approximately \$20 on someone. Each participant randomly was assigned to recall having done this for a very close relationship partner (e.g., a good friend, close family member, or romantic partner) or for someone with whom they were not close (e.g., an acquaintance, co-worker, classmate, or friend of a friend). Participants then rated the extent to which they felt each of 10 positive emotions and 10 negative emotions drawn from the PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) plus happiness. Recalling a time they helped a close other resulted in more positive affect than did

recalling a time they helped a nonclose other.³ Kogan et al. (2010) found results in a 2-week experience-sampling study designed to examine people's emotions while making a sacrifice for their romantic partners that further support the idea that relational context influences reactions to behaving prosocially toward others. They found a positive correlation between communal strength, an aspect of relational character, and the positivity of emotions experienced while making a sacrifice for your own romantic partner.

(p. 339) Finally, relationship context has also been found to influence affective reactions to having refused to help (Williamson, Clark, Pegalis, & Behan (1996). In a first study, participants received an unreasonably large request to help another person with whom they had been led to desire either a communal or an exchange relationship. Refusing to help led to declines in positive affect when a communal relationship but not when an exchange relationship was desired. In a second study, being asked to recall a time you had refused to help in a close, communal relationship led to declines in positive affect whereas recalling a time when you had refused to help an exchange partner or recalling someone else refusing to help your own communal partner did not.

The Balance between Giving and Seeking or Accepting Prosocial Behavior Varies by Relational Context

Relational context also exerts an impact on the patterning of giving and seeking prosocial behavior within a dyad. For instance, in a study reported by Beck and Clark (2009), mentioned briefly above, the stage of a communal relationship was found to make a difference in people's reports of the *balance* of giving and seeking prosocial behavior within their relationship. In early-stage relationships, people who desire a communal relationship face two tasks. They must indicate their desire by following the rules for giving and seeking prosocial behavior from others (i.e., they must offer support without requiring or suggesting they desire or expect repayment) and, simultaneously, they need to signal that they will be a good communal partner by not placing too many demands on the partner or seeming too needy. Beck and Clark (2009) suggest that people striving to form communal relationships should offer more prosocial behavior to the potential partner than they seek, thereby signaling their attentiveness to the partner's needs and desires without seeming too needy or appearing to seek repayment. Indeed, when asked in a survey about offering support to and seeking support from people who they did not know well but wished to get to know better, people reported that they would skew their behaviors toward offering (vs. requesting) help. For instance, they were more likely to offer a potential friend a ride to the airport than ask for an analogous ride.

Critically, this effect had a time course: Once relationships were firmly established, the effect disappeared. When answering the identical questions about well-established, committed relationships, people reported being as likely to seek needed help as they would be to give it within relationships. In other words, relationship stage appears to moderate the overall patterning of prosocial behavior in the relationship.

Evidence That Whether Perceivers View Behavior as Altruistic or Even Prosocial Varies by Relational Context

Relationship context also influences whether behavior that benefits another person will be labeled as altruistic or selfish. Research conducted by Wolfe and Clark (2010) supports this. Participants in one study read about one person who gave help to another—either by taking an injured soccer player to the doctor and picking up a prescription for her or by carrying a student's heavy books and treating her to coffee. The person helping the soccer player was either her own mother or someone else's mother; the person helping carry books and treating the student to coffee was either her boyfriend or an acquaintance. After reading the scenarios participants judged how altruistic the helper was as well as how much gratitude the recipient would feel. The results were clear: When the prosocial acts were performed in the context of a close relationship, the helper was perceived as less altruistic and the recipient was predicted to feel less gratitude than when they occurred within the context of a less close relationship. Moreover, in additional conditions in which the potential helpers were described as having *declined* to act prosocially, they were judged to have been more selfish and the potential recipient was predicted to have felt more hurt in the context of the close relationships than in the context of the more distant relationships. Similar results were obtained in a second study in which participants imagined themselves in scenarios and judged their own altruism and selfishness.

This research further suggests that motivations to behave prosocially may often vary by relational context. Behaving in a manner that benefits another will likely garner more public admiration if someone helps strangers than if they help family or romantic partners. Thus, a desire for recognition and kudos may be a more important determinant of directing public prosocial behavior toward strangers than it is of directing public prosocial behavior toward friends, family, and romantic partners. (Paying the college tuition of a stranger will gain you more praise from those at the college than will paying the college tuition of your own (p. 340) child.) Empathy and true concern for the other's welfare and a sense of duty and or a desire to avoid criticism are likely to be more important forces driving prosocial behavior within the context of established close relationships. (Parents likely pay college tuition, for instance, because they care for their

particular child, feel a sense of duty to do so, and/or do not wish to be criticized. Whereas those donating scholarships may also care, they likely are not doing so because they feel they have an obligation to do so or would be criticized if they did not.)

The relational context of prosocial behavior, then, may help reconcile the surface-level paradox of why a major philanthropist may treat his family terribly or why someone who appears to be totally devoted to his or her family may not be a large contributor to public causes in terms of donations of finances or time. Beyond individual differences in character and interests, relational context is a major predictor of people's motivations for their behavior toward the people in their lives.

Relational Context *Interacts* with Antecedent Conditions to Determine Prosocial Behavior

Relational context often interacts with other variables in determining whether prosocial behavior occurs as well as how people react to prosocial acts. Examples of this abound in research designed to examine the impact of individual differences on people's approaches to relationships.

Consider a classic study by Simpson et al. (1992). These researchers recruited participants who were in established heterosexual romantic relationships. In the laboratory, the experimenter threatened the female member of each dyad by telling her she would be experiencing an unspecified anxiety-producing task. The experimenter then left the couple alone, and the couple's interactions were taped. Among men low in attachment avoidance, the more anxiety their female partners displayed the more support they gave her both physically and by offering comforting words. However, just the opposite pattern of results was observed among avoidantly attached men. The *more* anxiety their partners displayed the *less* support they gave.

Women's chronic level of avoidance was also linked with the process of obtaining (or failing to obtain) support. Among women low in avoidant attachment, the more anxious they were the more support they sought. That makes good sense; by displaying their feelings of anxiety to their partners they could solicit and receive the comfort necessary to allay their anxieties. However, women who were chronically high in avoidance displayed the opposite pattern: The more anxious they were, the less support they sought. These women were unable to seek and receive the support from their partners that could help relieve their anxiety and perhaps strengthen their relationship bond.

Returning to the question raised at the beginning of this section, does target anxiety increase or decrease support giving and seeking? The answer depends on the interaction

between relational context (in this case captured by individual differences) and situational factors (e.g., anticipation of an anxiety-provoking task).

Another good example of how relational context (again captured in individual differences in approaches to relationships) interacts with situational factors is provided by Anderson (2012) in a recent dissertation conducted at the University of Waterloo. She, like Leary (Leary & Downs, 1995; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) and others (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001), conceptualized self-esteem as a relational construct the measure of which indicates individual differences in how people believe they are regarded by others in their social environment. She knew from prior research that people low in self-esteem often have partners who are as loving and generous toward them as do people with high self-esteem (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005); however, they tend not to believe they do (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Anderson conducted a series of studies examining how people with low versus high self-esteem react to increases in the magnitude of the prosocial sacrifices their partners make for them. As might be expected, people high in self-esteem react more positively to larger prosocial acts taken by relational partners. Yet the responses of low self-esteem individuals offered a surprise. For them, the greater the prosocial sacrifices made for them by their partners, the *more* anxiety they experienced. In other words, the *consequences* of prosocial behavior varied as a result of the interactive effects of recipient self-esteem and the magnitude of the prosocial act.

Finally, perhaps the most dramatic evidence for our point comes from recent work on the impact of exogenous administration of oxytocin on prosocial behavior. Oxytocin has received a great deal of attention in the popular press as a substance that, when administered exogenously, increases prosocial behavior (e.g., Kosfeld, Heinrichs, Zak, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2005; Zak, Stanon, & Ahmadi, 2007).

(p. 341) However, according to a recent review by Bartz, Zaki, Bolger, and Ochsner (2011) in about 20% of relevant studies published to date the administration of oxytocin actually increased *antisocial* behavior, *mistrust*, and *envy* of others—findings that go against the popular conception of oxytocin and have not been emphasized in the media. How can a single substance be responsible for both prosocial and antisocial behavior? Perhaps analyzing these conflicting findings in the framework of relational context can elucidate and reconcile this apparent contradiction. Indeed, as it turns out, qualities inherent to relational character (i.e., trust) do predict whether oxytocin elicits prosocial behavior or its opposite. People who have reason to trust others seem to react to the administration of exogenous oxytocin with increased prosociality. But if the relational context is one of distrust, oxytocin's effect is reversed. As Bartz et al. (2011) state: "studies have shown that the positive effects of oxytocin on trust-related behaviors and/or

cognitions disappear if the potentially trusted other is portrayed as untrustworthy (Mikolajczak, 2010), is unknown (Declerck, Boone, & Kiyonari, 2010) or is a member of a social out-group (and out-group threat is high) (De Dreu et al., 2010).” In the latter two examples, oxytocin caused a marked decline in cooperative behavior. Similarly, oxytocin was recently shown to decrease trust perceptions and the likelihood of cooperation in those who are highly rejection sensitive (i.e., those with borderline personality disorder) (Bartz et al., 2011). Why do these effects reverse with relationship context? We do not yet know, but the fact that effects do reverse based on relational context provides some cues regarding where to look for answers. Perhaps oxytocin makes us pay more attention to cues of another’s trustworthiness, drawing us closer to those who do care for us and causing us to distance ourselves from those who do not. Whatever the answer is, it is clear that oxytocin does not simply make us like and care for others more.

Conclusions and Implications

We are firmly convinced that it is essential to take relational context into account to develop a comprehensive theory of prosocial behavior and to integrate findings across fields. We have explained why we believe researchers to date have neglected relational context in theories of prosocial behavior, and we have provided examples of studies supporting the claim that relational context influences the nature of and sequence of events preceding and following prosocial behavior. Yet such studies remain rare among the larger pool of studies on prosocial behavior, including research hailing from many quarters—developmental and cognitive psychology, experimental philosophy of morality, economics, and traditional social psychology.

How might the issue be addressed? First, we think that psychologists interested in prosocial behavior, regardless of the particular type of relational context within which they typically study prosocial behavior, would benefit from paying more attention to existing theory on the nature and implications of relational context for understanding social interaction. There is likely much to gain by asking whether their findings would generalize to other relationship contexts given what scholars have already discovered and theorized about relational context. This applies to *all* researchers in the field, of course. Those who work with strangers ought to consider whether their results will apply to interactions between close others and business partners. Those who study close relational partners too ought to consider the possible boundary conditions of their findings as well.

There is also plenty of room for additional theory development regarding the ways in which relational context influences prosocial behavior—and we strongly encourage

further efforts in this regard. Researchers interested in prosocial behavior ought to carefully consider the functions relationships serve for people, perhaps using the dimensions of relationships discussed in this chapter as a guide. They can explicitly ask themselves how they would answer the following question: How will variation in [*relational type, relationship character, relational stage, relationship histories, relationship network, and individual differences* in approaches to relationships] influence prosocial behavior? In ongoing relationships, what are the trajectories of giving and accepting benefits and of reactions to benefits across time. Indeed, how might the very intrapersonal and interpersonal processes involved in prosocial behavior and the functions that prosocial behavior serve change across time. We believe that striving to answer all these questions will give rise to important advances.

We began our chapter with hypothetical examples of prosocial acts intentionally chosen to seem unlikely and even absurd until put in a different relational context. We end this chapter with a different sort of thought experiment. Consider how some classic findings on prosocial behavior might change with changes in relational (p. 342) context. Think, for instance, about the classic findings by Cialdini and his colleagues demonstrating negative state relief. The phenomenon of negative state relief refers to these researchers' observations that adults who are made to feel sad when given a chance help another person typically help significantly more than do those who have not been made to feel sad. Presumably they do so to relieve their sadness. Presumably this is effective because by the time we are adults helping others makes us feel better (Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973). The people who were helped in these classic studies, however, were always strangers to the research participants. Does feeling sad cause us to help close relationship partners more? Perhaps not. In this chapter we have reviewed evidence showing that we may get more credit and be seen as more altruistic for helping a stranger than a friend (Wolfe & Clark, 2010). Moreover, close relationship partners have assumed far more responsibility for their welfare than strangers have assumed and they may not be embarrassed to reveal their sadness to close partners because they are more likely than others to be responsive to that sadness (Clark et al., 1987). Those who are sad may well seek help from a partner rather than give it. This may simply not seem to be a viable option when we are with strangers. Thus, perhaps the negative state relief model of providing help to relationship partners may not generalize well to close relationships.

Or what about the often replicated finding that when we feel good we help others more (Isen, 1970; Isen & Levin, 1972; Carlson, Charlin, & Miller, 1988). When we are feeling great and are with a close relationship partner maybe we do help more but maybe not. Work on capitalization (e.g., Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004) suggests that we may simply share the nature of our good fortune with others confidently expecting that they

will celebrate it with us. Again, in an established relationship the results may be different. It is worth some thought. Better yet, it is worth some experimentation.

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Notes:

(1.) Exceptions would occur when you know that a person has no close others available to take care of them and the situation is an emergency. This happened, for example, on 9/11/2001 when planes were forced to land in Newfoundland and residents took strangers into their homes.

(2.) These norms can and often do dictate other content as well.

(3.) Although these authors collected data on negative affect they did not report the results for negative emotion in their published manuscript.

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