Altruism and egoism: Prosocial motivations for helping depend on relationship context

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Abstract

Findings from the current study suggest that the link between helping and empathic concern—a hypothesized motivator of altruistic behavior—may be more pronounced in the context of kinship relationships than among strangers. Participants expressed their willingness to help a kin-member or stranger in specific need situations. Putative mediators of helping (empathic concern, general negative affect, perceptions of oneness) were measured. Empathic concern appeared to partially mediate effects of relationship context on willingness to help. Moreover, while controlling for egoistic motivators (negative affect, oneness), empathic concern was linked to participants' willingness to help a kin-member but not a stranger. Findings suggest that factors motivating prosocial action in close relationships may be different from those that motivate helping among strangers. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Humans possess a tremendous capacity for prosociality. Whether loaning $20 to a sibling or helping a lost child find her parents, instances abound in which people endeavor to help others (e.g., Burnstein, Crandall, & Kitayama, 1994; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Krebs, 1991; McGuire, 1994; Pearce & Amato, 1980; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005; Schaller & Cialdini, 1990). What motives lead people to perform prosocial acts? Do people ever help out of a truly selfless desire to enhance another person's welfare? These questions have long been the subject of debate among scientists and philosophers. When aid is provided to others in a seemingly selfless fashion, helping can appear to be driven by altruistic motives. However, decades of research (not to mention centuries of philosophical debate) have left many unanswered questions with respect to whether such behaviors are truly altruistic, or whether they are driven by more selfish motives.

In the current research, we investigate the possibility that motivations for helping depend upon the type of relationship that exists between the provider and the recipient of help. Although many previous studies suggest that different motives can drive affiliative behaviors in different relationship contexts (e.g., Kenrick et al., 2002; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000), the extent to which altruistic versus egoistic motives differentially promote helping within different relationship contexts remains relatively unexplored. In the current study, we focused on the extent to which empathic concern—a

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psychological state hypothesized to elicit selfless, altruistic behavior—is associated with willingness to perform prosocial action in different relationship contexts. More specifically, we tested the hypothesis that whereas empathic concern may promote helping among kin, it is less likely to promote helping among strangers.

ALTRUISM OR EGOISM: WHICH MOTIVES LEAD PEOPLE TO HELP?

Observing someone in need of help can evoke a sense of empathic concern for that person (see Batson, 1991, for a review). According to the empathy-altruism hypothesis, empathic concern is associated with an affective focus on the person who is suffering (rather than on oneself), and therefore promotes truly selfless motivation to provide aid. In a long line of research, Batson and colleagues have amassed evidence seeming to support the empathy-altruism hypothesis (e.g., Batson, 1998; Batson, O'Quin, Fultz, Vanderplas, & Isen, 1983, Batson et al., 1997). Such evidence, therefore, paints a magnanimous portrait of human nature—that human beings are capable of truly altruistic behavior—of acting on genuinely selfless motives to enhance another's welfare.

The empathy-altruism hypothesis, however, has not been without its challenges. The veracity of this hypothesis has been disputed on several grounds, each focused on the possibility that prosocial actions seemingly driven by altruistic motives instead may be motivated by more egoistic, self-centered concerns (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1997; Dovidio, Piliavin, Gaertner, Schroeder, & Clark, 1991). Indeed, difficulties in disentangling empathic concern from more egoistic factors have fostered substantial debate over whether empathic concern genuinely drives prosocial action (e.g., Batson et al., 1997; Davis, 1994; Neuberg et al., 1997; Piliavin & Charng, 1990).

One difficulty in distinguishing altruistic from egoistic motives for helping reflects the fact that circumstances leading an observer to feel empathic concern also tend to elicit self-focused emotional states such as personal sadness. Actions designed to help a person in need, therefore, could be motivated by a desire to enhance one's own emotional state rather than a desire to enhance the welfare of the person in need. For example, studies supporting the arousal/cost-reward model (Dovidio et al., 1991; Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981) and the negative-state relief model (Cialdini et al., 1987; Manucia, Baumann, & Cialdini, 1984) suggest that even seemingly altruistic actions may be motivated instead by a desire to enhance one's own affective state or to gain self rewards through helping.

The empathy-altruism hypothesis has been challenged on additional grounds, as well. Researchers have argued that a sense of shared self can account for actions that are seemingly driven by empathic concern. People have the capacity for experiencing a sense of 'oneness' with another person—a sense that another person is part of one's own identity (e.g., Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996). Several of the same factors that elicit empathic concern have also been shown to evoke a sense of oneness: kinship (Hamilton, 1964), relationship closeness (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Aron et al., 1991), and shared group identity (Smith, Coats, & Walling, 1999). Moreover, evidence suggests that seemingly altruistic actions may instead be driven by the experience of oneness, rather than by empathic concern (Cialdini et al., 1997). In turn, researchers have argued that such actions should be viewed as egoistically, rather than altruistically, motivated (Cialdini et al., 1997). That is, if one helps another because one experiences a sense of shared self with that person, then that action should not be viewed as truly selfless, because helping that person would, in an important psychological sense, also be helping oneself. Therefore, perceptions of oneness must be sufficiently disentangled from the experience of empathic concern before the motivators of helping can be adequately specified (e.g., Neuberg et al., 1997).

DO MOTIVATIONS FOR HELPING DEPEND ON RELATIONSHIP CONTEXT?

A large body of theory and research suggests that different motives often guide affiliative behaviors within different relationship contexts (e.g., Reis et al., 2000; Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Although several studies demonstrate that mean levels of helping increase with increasing relational closeness (e.g., Burnstein et al., 1994; Neyer & Lang, 2003), few studies have directly examined the possibility that different motivating factors underlie helping in close versus distant relationships. In the current research, we propose that although empathic concern may promote helping among close relationship partners, the link between empathic concern and helping is less likely to be observed among strangers, once egoistic motivators (e.g., negative affect, perceptions of oneness) have been taken into account.

Although previous theorists have suggested forms of this hypothesis (e.g., Neuberg et al., 1997), surprisingly few studies have been designed to test it. Several research findings, however, lend credibility to this hypothesis. Compared with distant social relationships (e.g., strangers, acquaintances), close relationships are generally characterized by higher levels of empathic concern and genuine regard for another person's welfare (Aron et al., 1992; Clark & Reis, 1988; Krebs, 1975). Empathy is often experienced most powerfully for members of one's immediate family (e.g., Aron et al., 1991), although high levels of empathy have also been documented in other types of close relationships such as romantic partnerships (Goodman & Ofshe, 1968). While such evidence suggests high levels of empathy in close relationships, however, the extent to which such empathy might actually promote greater prosocial behavior remains unknown.

Other research suggests that friendship and perceived interpersonal similarity can moderate the link between empathic concern and helping. Schlenker and Britt (2001) observed that participants' level of dispositional empathy was associated with greater willingness to help a friend but not a stranger. However, empathic concern directed specifically toward the recipient of help was not assessed in this study; nor were alternative mediators (e.g., perceptions of oneness, negative affect) ruled out. Thus, the extent to which helping was driven by empathic concern versus other, egoistic factors, remains unclear. Stürmer, Snyder, and Omoto (2005) provided evidence that empathic concern promotes helping when perceived interpersonal similarity with the recipient of help is high, but not when it is low (see also Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). However, the recipients of help in those studies were all strangers. Thus, the extent to which relationship closeness influences the link between empathic concern and helping remains unknown. Still, people are likely to feel similar to close relationship partners, suggesting that empathic concern might be especially likely to promote helping in close relationships.

Indirect evidence suggesting that relationship context might shape motivations for helping is found in previous research on social exchange. Among strangers, people often exchange resources based on a relatively selfish desire to maximize the ratio of one's benefits to one's costs (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). In contrast, rules governing exchange in close relationships tend to be less self-serving (Fiske, 1992; Haslam & Fiske, 1999). In long-term relationships (e.g., kinship relationships), people often share communally with one another, giving aid to one another based on regard to what would most benefit the other (Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1989; Mills & Clark, 1982). Though suggestive, such studies do not speak directly to the specific motives that underlie helping, because they have not generally been designed to disambiguate altruistic (e.g., empathy) from egoistic (e.g., desire to enhance one's mood) motives.

In sum, several bodies of evidence suggest that the link between empathic concern and helping might be more prominent in the context of close relationships than among strangers. However, studies examining prosocial behavior across different relationship contexts have not disentangled empathic concern from egoistic factors (e.g., simple negative affect, perceptions of oneness). Thus, the possibility that empathic concern is more likely to promote helping when the recipient is a close

relationship partner (e.g., kin) than when he or she is a stranger has not been directly tested and previous findings remain inconclusive.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH

In the current research, we assessed the link between empathic concern and willingness to help a kin-member versus a stranger. The goals of this study were twofold: (1) to assess whether increases in helping associated with increasing relational closeness might be mediated by enhanced empathic concern; (2) to assess whether empathic concern differentially predicts willingness to help a kin-member versus a stranger; that is, we evaluated the relationship between empathic concern and willingness to help separately within different relationship contexts (strangers, kin). The current study was intended to improve upon previous research by using methods designed to disentangle altruistic (empathic concern) from egoistic (oneness, simple negative affect) motivators of helping.

Participants imagined scenarios in which either a kin-member or a stranger was in need, after which they indicated their affective reactions, perceptions of oneness, and willingness to help. We predicted that: (1) increasing relational closeness (i.e., kin vs. stranger) would be associated with increases in empathic concern, general negative affect, perceptions of oneness, and willingness to help; (2) this increase in willingness to help would be at least partially attributable to increases in empathic concern; (3) after controlling for non-altruistic factors (negative affect, perceptions of oneness), empathic concern would maintain a significant relationship with helping among kin; (4) no such relationship would be observed among strangers, after controlling for non-altruistic factors.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred fifty-four undergraduate psychology students (101 women, 50 men, three failed to report gender) participated in exchange for course credit.

Design

Each participant was randomly assigned to respond to one of two sets of scenarios (adapted from Cialdini et al., 1997). Participants in the kin condition read two scenarios in which a close family member was in need of aid. In the stranger condition, participants read identical scenarios, except that the target was a stranger. (Two scenarios were included to enhance the generalizability of the findings). For each scenario, participants rated their emotions and willingness to provide aid.

Procedure

The experiment was presented as a study of impression formation. Participants in the kin condition first imagined a close relative of similar age. Participants in the stranger condition imagined a person they might recognize from class, but to whom they had not previously spoken. Participants then wrote a brief

description of the target ('personality, interests, values, attitudes, etc.'). Participants were told that if they were unsure about these attributes, they should try to judge them based on whatever information they had. The purpose of this task was to make salient the degree of closeness between the participant and the target (see Cialdini et al., 1997).

Next, participants imagined two scenarios: one in which the target had been evicted from his or her home and did not have a place to stay, and one in which the target had been killed in an automobile accident and his or her young children were left without anyone to care for them. After each scenario, participants rated their emotions using an affect checklist adapted from previous studies (e.g., Batson et al., 1997; Maner et al., 2002), as well as their willingness to help.

Perceptions of Oneness

Participants responded to two questions assessing the degree of self-other overlap they perceived with the target. Participants indicated the extent to which they would use the word 'we' to describe their relationship with the target (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Participants also responded to the Inclusion of the Other in the Self scale (Aron et al., 1992); participants selected from a set of increasingly overlapping circles labeled 'self' and 'other,' the circles that best described their perception of identity overlap with the target. A composite measure of oneness was calculated by averaging responses to these two items ($r = 0.82$). Placement of these items was counterbalanced: half of the participants completed them before reading the helping scenarios; the other half completed them afterward.[1]

Affective Reactions

It was essential to effectively distinguish empathic concern from the experience of more general, self-focused negative affect. Empathic concern is typically conceptualized as a specific type of affect—one that is accompanied by a focus on another person. We therefore used a general-specific (GS) measurement strategy to differentiate empathic concern from the experience of general negative affect. GS modeling is an analytic technique designed to differentiate specific constructs (e.g., spatial or verbal reasoning abilities) from the more general constructs presumed to underlie them (i.e., general intelligence; Gustafsson & Balke, 1993; Schmid & Leiman, 1957). Model specification was based on previous research, which indicated that a GS measurement model is effective for differentiating empathic concern from general negative affect (Maner et al., 2002).[2]

The GS model included two latent factors. The first was a general negative affect factor, indicated by seven items—*sad, low-spirited, heavy-hearted*, *sorrowful, sympathetic, compassionate,* and *soft-hearted* (see Figure 1). This factor accounted for variance shared by all of these items and, therefore, assessed participants' general experience of negative emotion. The model also included a specific empathic concern factor, which accounted for shared covariation among the items *sympathetic*, *compassionate*, and *soft-hearted*, above and beyond that accounted for by general negative affect. This factor assessed the portion of participants' affect that was other focused. Both empathic concern and general negative affect were allowed to correlate freely with perceptions of oneness. However, as is

[1]The point at which participants completed these measures did not influence any of the findings. Therefore, data from the two counterbalanced conditions were combined.
[2]Very high correlations among simple composite measures of empathic concern, personal sadness, and distress suggest that they do not effectively distinguish among these affective states (see Cialdini et al., 1997; Maner et al., 2002). It should be noted that alternative models (e.g., all items loading on a single factor; separate sadness and empathy factors) did not fit these data well, indicating the utility of the GS modeling approach.

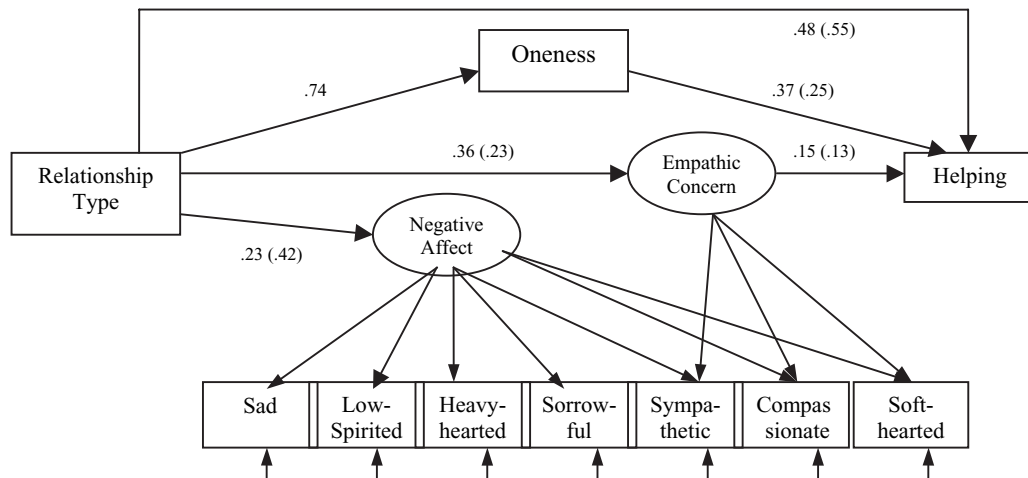*Jon K. Maner and Matthew T. Gailliot*

Figure 1. A structural equation model depicting the effects of relationship type (kin-member vs. stranger) on empathic concern, general negative affect, perceptions of oneness, and willingness to help. The first set of path coefficients refers to the eviction scenario. Path coefficients in parentheses refer to the child care scenario. All path coefficients are significant ($p < 0.05$ or less). All factor loadings were significant ($p < 0.01$ or less). The path from general negative affect to helping was non-significant

standard in GS modeling, the correlation between empathic concern and general negative affect was set to zero, ensuring that these constructs were separable. Thus, the GS model allowed for distinct and meaningful assessments of both empathic concern and the more general experience of negative affect.

Helping Measure

Willingness to help was assessed using 7-point scales, with higher scale points reflecting more labor-intensive forms of helping. For the eviction scenario, participants indicated the highest form of aid they would be willing to provide from the following options: (1) no help, (2) give him (or her) an apartment guide, (3) help him find a new place to live by driving him around for a few hours, (4) offer to have him come stay with you for a couple of days (provided you had space), (5) offer to have him come stay with you for a week (provided you had space), (6) offer to have him come stay with you until he found a new place (provided you had space), (7) offer to have him come live with you rent-free (provided you had space). The level of cost associated with each option was based on research conducted by Cialdini et al. (1997), in which undergraduate students rated each option in terms of its cost to the helper. The resultant weights for the seven response options were: 0.0, 0.6, 2.9, 3.6, 4.2, 5.9, 8.3. These weights constituted the dependent variable.

For the childcare scenario, participants chose the highest form of aid they would provide from the following options: (1) nothing, (2) donate $10 toward a fund for the kids, (3) donate $25 toward a fund for the kids, (4) donate $50 toward a fund for the kids, (5) start a fund-raising campaign for the kids' welfare, (6) have the kids come live with you until a permanent home was found, (7) have the kids come live with you and raise them as you would your own. Again, a weighting scheme based on Cialdini et al.

(1997) was used to calculate the dependent variable. The weights for the seven response options were: 0.0, 3.0, 4.2, 5.7, 6.0, 8.0, 9.2.[3]

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses of Variance evaluated main effects of the relationship context manipulation on perceptions of oneness and willingness to help (parallel analyses were not possible for empathic concern and negative affect, because these were latent variables). Participants in the kin condition reported greater perceptions of oneness ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.30$) than did participants in the stranger condition ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.38$), $F(1,150) = 178.78$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.54$. Participants also expressed greater willingness to help in the kin condition (eviction: $M = 6.74$, $SD = 1.57$; childcare: $M = 8.84$, $SD = 0.69$), compared with the stranger condition (eviction: $M = 2.00$, $SD = 2.20$; childcare: $M = 5.19$, $SD = 2.10$), eviction $F(1,152) = 234.32$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.61$, childcare $F(1,152) = 205.06$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.57$.

The primary hypotheses of the study were tested in two ways. First, we assessed the fit of an overall structural equation model that evaluated relationships among relationship type (manipulated), putative mediators (empathic concern, general negative affect, oneness), and willingness to help. Second, we assessed the links between putative mediators and willingness to help *within* each relationship condition. Separate analyses were conducted for the two scenarios.

Eviction Scenario

For the overall structural equation model, relationship type (stranger vs. kin) served as the exogenous variable. Empathic concern, general negative affect, and oneness served as putative mediators. Willingness to help served as the outcome variable. Perceptions of oneness were allowed to correlate with both empathic concern ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$) and negative affect ($r = 0.11$, $p < 0.10$). The full structural equation model is pictured in Figure 1. This model fit the data very well, χ^2 (27, $n = 146$) = 29.54, $p = 0.34$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.03, SRMR = 0.04 (Hu & Bentler, 1998). All GS factor loadings were significant ($p < 0.01$ or less).

Participants imagining a kin-member, compared to a stranger, exhibited greater negative affect, empathic concern, perceptions of oneness, and willingness to help. More important, both empathic concern and perceptions of oneness appeared to partially mediate effects of relationship type on helping. Deleting the paths from empathic concern to helping, $\chi^2\Delta$ (1) = 7.33, $p < 0.01$, and from oneness to helping, $\chi^2\Delta$ (1) = 25.57, $p < 0.001$, both significantly decreased model fit. No link between general negative affect and helping was observed; adding this path did not enhance model fit, $\chi^2\Delta$ (1) = 0.91, *ns*. A direct path from relationship type to helping was observed, indicating that some of the variance in helping was not accounted for by any of the putative mediators.

We also conducted analyses separately within each relationship context (kin and stranger). For each analysis, structural equation modeling was used to assess whether empathic concern, general negative affect, and perceptions of oneness would maintain a significant link with helping, while statistically controlling for one another. Results are summarized in Table 1. Findings were consistent with our expectation that whereas empathy would be linked to helping in the kin condition, no such link would

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[3]We conducted parallel analyses in which the dependent variables were coded as simple one to seven values. These dependent variables produced equivalent results, indicating that findings were not specific to the particular weighting scheme.

Table 1. Relationships among putative mediators of helping and willingness to help a kin-member versus a stranger

Relationship type	Empathic concern	Oneness	General negative affect
	Apartment eviction scenario		
Kin-member	0.32**	0.28*	0.16
Stranger	0.18	0.44***	0.03
	Childcare scenario		
Kin-member	0.25*	0.05	0.15
Stranger	0.16	0.33**	0.17

Note: Standardized path coefficients are provided.
$^*p \leq 0.05$; $^{**}p \leq 0.01$; $^{***}p \leq 0.001$.

be observed in the stranger condition. When participants imagined a kin-member in need, empathic concern held a significant relationship with willingness to help, above and beyond negative affect and perceptions of oneness. In contrast, no significant link between empathic concern and helping was observed when the target was a stranger. Among strangers, it was perceptions of oneness, not empathic concern, which predicted helping. Indeed, whereas omitting the path from empathic concern to helping appreciably reduced the fit of the kinship model, $\chi^2\Delta (1) = 7.23$, $p < 0.01$, no such decrement in model fit was observed for the stranger model, $\chi^2\Delta (1) = 2.71$, $p > 0.10$.

Childcare Scenario

Overall model specification was the same as in the previous scenario (see Figure 1). Again, perceptions of oneness were allowed to correlate with both empathic concern ($r = 0.06$, *ns*) and negative affect ($r = 0.06$, *ns*). This model also fit the data well, $\chi^2 (27, n = 152) = 50.45$, $p < 0.01$, CFI $= 0.98$, RMSEA $= 0.076$, SRMR $= 0.047$ (Hu & Bentler, 1998). All GS factor loadings were significant ($p < 0.001$ or less).

Participants imagining a kin-member, compared to a stranger, exhibited greater negative affect, empathic concern, perceptions of oneness, and willingness to help. More important, both empathic concern and perceptions of oneness appeared to partially mediate effects of relationship type on helping. Again, no link between general negative affect and helping was observed. Deleting the path from empathic concern to helping significantly decreased model fit, $\chi^2\Delta (1) = 4.91$, $p < 0.05$, as did deleting the path from oneness to helping, $\chi^2\Delta (1) = 10.27$, $p < 0.001$. Adding a path from negative affect to helping did not enhance model fit, $\chi^2\Delta (1) = 3.40$, *ns*. A direct path from relationship type to helping was observed, indicating that some of the variance in helping was not accounted for by any of the putative mediators.

Again, separate analyses were conducted within each relationship condition (see Table 1). When participants imagined a kin-member in need, empathic concern held a significant relationship with willingness to help, above and beyond negative affect and perceptions of oneness. In contrast, no significant link between empathic concern and helping was observed in the stranger condition. Among strangers, it again was perceptions of oneness, not empathic concern, which predicted helping. Omitting the path from empathic concern to helping reduced the fit of the kinship model, $\chi^2\Delta (1) = 3.85$, $p < 0.05$, whereas no decrement in model fit was observed for the stranger model, $\chi^2\Delta (1) = 2.07$, $p > 0.10$.

DISCUSSION

Questions pertaining to the motives underlying prosocial actions have long been the subject of scientific debate. Although previous theories suggest that empathic concern may promote truly altruistic forms of prosocial behavior, researchers have repeatedly questioned the link between empathic concern and helping. The current study builds on this area of research by showing that the link between empathy and willingness to help may depend upon relationship context.

Empathy, Helping, and Relationship Context

The current research suggests that the empathy-helping link may depend on the relationship context in which a helping opportunity is considered. When participants considered a kin-member in need, empathic concern predicted willingness to help, over and above egoistic motivators. In contrast, when participants considered a needy stranger, only perceptions of oneness predicted willingness to help. These data therefore suggest that helping in close personal relationships (e.g., kinship relationships) could be motivated by empathic concern and a true desire to enhance the welfare of another person. These data also suggest, however, that such a motive may be less likely to operate in more distant social relationships (e.g., among strangers).

While some previous research has provided clues that relationship context might shape motivations for helping, the current study is the first to directly examine the psychological factors that might mediate helping in different relationship contexts. The current studies supplement the literature on prosocial behavior by disambiguating egoistic from altruistic factors and showing that meaningful forms of prosocial action are more likely to be driven by empathic concern when they occur in the context of a close relationship. The current findings are consistent with previous evidence suggesting that individual differences in empathy predict helping when the target is a friend but not a stranger (Schlenker & Britt, 2001), and when the target is similar to, but not dissimilar to the provider of help (Stürmer et al., 2005). This research is also consistent with social exchange theories, which suggest that people tend to exchange resources more freely with close others than with strangers (Mills & Clark, 1982). The current study also fits with evolutionary theories, which imply that acts truly designed to benefit another person may be most likely to occur within kinship relationships, because such acts serve to benefit one's own genetic success (Hamilton, 1964).

We observed no evidence in the current study to suggest that empathic concern predicted willingness to help a stranger. In this context, only egoistic factors (perceptions of oneness) predicted participants' willingness to help. This is consistent with previous claims that although prosocial acts among strangers may sometimes appear to be altruistically motivated, these acts instead could be motivated by more self-centered concerns (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1997).

Implications for the Measurement of Affect

In addition to implications for understanding the nature of prosocial behavior, the present research also has implications for the measurement of complex emotional states. The current studies illustrate that latent variable modeling techniques (e.g., general-specific modeling) can provide a useful analytic approach to measuring and differentiating complex affective states from the more basic emotional states that underlie them. Many theories of emotion focus on specific forms of positive and negative affect (e.g., awe, pride, guilt, shame, jealousy). Certain hypothesis-testing situations may require that

one differentiate such states from one another or from the more basic emotional states with which they are associated. The analytic approach described in the present paper provides a useful methodological tool in this regard.

Limitations of the Current Research

There are limitations of the current research that provide useful avenues for future research. First, the extent to which the current findings generalize to other helping situations is unknown. For example, some researchers have suggested that empathic concern may motivate trivial forms of helping among strangers when costs to the helper are low (e.g., providing someone with change for a phone call; Neuberg et al., 1997). Moreover, previous research on social dilemmas suggests that, even in the absence of obvious selfish motives, people will sometimes still cooperate with strangers, thus suggesting a place for 'sociality' (if not outright altruism) in theories of interpersonal behavior among strangers (Caporael, Dawes, Orbell, & Van de Kragt, 1989). Future research might benefit from exploring the extent to which motivations for helping in different relationships depend upon various characteristics of the need situation. In addition, although the current study identified factors associated with self-reported willingness to help, the extent to which this willingness translates directly into action remains an empirical question.

Second, these findings leave questions regarding the mediators of helping in other types of social relationships. For example, people often exert considerable energy in caring for romantic partners and there are reasons to suppose that empathy might motivate helping in this context. Similarly, theories of reciprocal altruism (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Trivers, 1971) imply that people might provide aid to non-kin with the goal of enhancing their welfare, to the extent that those individuals are likely to reciprocate. The presence of a long-term friendship with another person acts as a powerful cue that someone is a good bet for future reciprocation. The experience of empathic concern could facilitate this type of reciprocal sharing, suggesting the presence of an empathy-helping link among friends. Future research might profitably explore the motivations underlying prosocial acts within a range of relationship contexts. Such an exploration would open a greater window onto the contextual and psychological factors that promote prosocial behavior.

CONCLUSION

The social world is made up of many different types of relationships. In any given day, individuals may interact with family, friends, romantic partners, and complete strangers. The current studies suggest that like many forms of interpersonal action, the nature of prosocial behavior may depend on the type of relationship that exists between the provider and the recipient of help. This research suggests that prosocial behavior among close others (family members) may be driven by empathic concern and a genuine desire to enhance another's welfare. Findings also imply, however, that prosocial actions among strangers are relatively more likely to be motivated by self-centered concerns. The current research therefore suggests that some proportion of seemingly altruistic behavior (e.g., helping among strangers) may be egoistically, rather than altruistically, motivated. However, this study also suggests that true altruism, at least in the proximate psychological sense, may exist within the context of close relationships. In specifying the motives underlying prosocial behavior, the current findings may have implications for understanding the very foundation of human prosociality.

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