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## Considering others in Need: On altruism, empathy and perspective taking

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## CHAPTER 3

# Psychological Motivators of Altruism Among Kin and Friends

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Why do people help others? For evolutionary theorists, answering this question depends on whom “others” refer to and on the evolutionary processes that operated in the context of that specific social relationship. Kin selection theory offers an explanation for greater altruism between closer genetic relatives (Hamilton, 1964), reciprocal altruism theory offers an explanation for altruism between unrelated individuals who engage in reciprocal exchange (Trivers, 1971), and group selection theories offer an explanation for altruism between individuals who may never interact directly with each other (e.g., Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Richerson & Boyd, 2005).

For psychologists, answering the same question typically invokes some cognitive and/or emotional states that actually motivate altruistic behaviour. After all, it’s one thing to know that genetic relatedness, reciprocity, or group selection explains human altruism; it’s another thing to understand the actual operation of the proximate psychological mechanisms. Researchers have identified several psychological states—such as empathy, personal distress, feelings of oneness, perceived similarity—that appear to underlie altruism (e.g., Burger, Messian, Patel, del Prado, & Anderson, 2004; Cialdini et al., 1997; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Schaller & Cialdini, 1988). However, much of the psychological research on helping has not been informed by evolutionary theories of altruism; it has thus remained unclear which of the psychological motives are relevant for which altruistic contexts.

Some have speculated that empathy—an emotional experience that motivates largely unconditional altruism—serves as a psychological mediator of kin-directed altruism (Hoffman, 1981; Krebs, 1987; Schaller, 2003). There is some evidence consistent with this conjecture. Perception of kinship tends to arouse feelings of emotional closeness or social bonding, and altruistic behaviour is mediated in part by this subjective experience (e.g., Korchmaros & Kenny, 2001; Neyer & Lang, 2003). Other studies have found that empathy predicts helping ingroup members more strongly than helping outgroup members (Stürmer, Snyder, & Omoto, 2005; Stürmer, Snyder, Kropp, & Siem,

2006). Narrowing down the role of empathy even further, one recent study found that empathy predicts helping kin more strongly than strangers even after controlling for other motives such as negative affect and oneness (Maner & Gailliot, 2007). Thus, there are good reasons to suppose that empathy is indeed a key psychological motive underlying altruism between kin.

At the same time, other researchers have identified other psychological processes that also appear to underlie altruism between genetic kin. For instance, one study found that reciprocal exchange—which would appear to be relevant primarily to altruism between nonkin—occurs between siblings as frequently as between unrelated friends (Stewart-Williams, 2007); another study found that expectations about reciprocity (but not empathy) partially mediate intentions to help kin (Kruger, 2003). In addition, people indicate greater obligations to help kin than nonkin (Kruger, 2001; Miller & Bersoff, 1998), and people expect more assistance from kin than from friends (Bar-Tal et al., 1977; Mancini & Simon, 1984). In short, the specific proximate mechanisms underlying kin altruism are complex, comprising not only empathy but also reciprocity and norms about helping.

#### *Altruism between friends*

Now, consider a more specific question: Why do people help friends? Or, even more fundamentally, what is friendship? Theories of human relationships (such as those that distinguish between *communal* and *exchange* relationships; Clark, 1984; Fiske, 1992) have tended to place kinship and friendship in the same category (for instance, people are believed to have communal relationships with both kin and friends). Do the evolutionary theories of altruism clarify the picture? One might suggest that altruism between friends (who are not genetically related) is a manifestation of reciprocal altruism and thus governed by norms of social exchange; but this would contradict the psychological evidence (Clark, 1984). One might also suggest that friends might sometimes be treated as though they were kin, simply because of the way in which kin recognition operates. Given that close friends tend to be characterized by very high levels of similarity, familiarity, and empathy—which may be the very cues used to identify kin (Park & Schaller, 2005)—it's possible that psychological responses that evolved for kin relations sometimes extend to friendships (Ackerman, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2007).

Tooby and Cosmides (1996) have argued that friendships cannot be explained by either kin selection theory or reciprocal altruism theory. Rather, friendships involve situations in which people attempt to become irreplaceable to others and align themselves

with those who indeed find them irreplaceable. Arguing that friendships are distinct from exchange relationships, they noted, “explicit contingent exchange and turntaking reciprocation are the forms of altruism that exist when trust is low and friendship is weak or absent, and treating others in such a fashion is commonly interpreted as a communication to that effect” (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996, p. 139). This line of reasoning implies that helping friends may be motivated more by empathy than by expectations about reciprocity. Tooby and Cosmides have pointed this out as well: “Dyads who are able to communicate well with each other, and who intuitively can understand each other’s thoughts and intentions will derive considerably more from cooperative relationships than those who lack such rapport” (p. 137). Thus, although kin and friends are biologically distinct, empathy may underlie helping friends at least as much as helping kin.

#### *Overview of the present research*

To the extent that altruism among kin and friends are distinct phenomena, an important task for psychologists is to sift out the key psychological motives in these two relationship contexts. Although the results of Maner and Gailliot (2007) suggests that empathy is a key motivator underlying kin-directed altruism, they did not control for another important motive—expectations about reciprocity; moreover, their study did not address friendship at all. In the studies described below, we presented participants with either a scenario involving helping a kin member or a friend, measured willingness to help, and measured several key putative motivators of helping—empathy, perceived reciprocal support, oneness, and distress. We were thus able to test the independent effect of each motive while controlling for the other motives and to make direct comparisons between kin and friend. Study 3.1 was conducted with a sample of university students. Study 3.2 was conducted with a sample of adults in the community.

### **Study 3.1: University Student Sample**

#### *Method*

##### *Participants and procedure*

Eighty-seven students (28 men, 59 women; mean age = 21.49,  $SD = 2.36$ , range = 17-27) at the University of Groningen participated in exchange for €5.

Participants completed the study sessions in separate cubicles. After completing a questionnaire for demographic information, participants read a description indicating that the present research was being conducted for an institution that seeks to unite volunteers with disabled people in order to develop new activities in the disabled people's lives. Then the experimental manipulation was introduced: Participants randomly assigned to the *kin condition* were asked to think about a kin member close to themselves in age; participants assigned to the *friend condition* were asked to think about a friend whom they felt close to and whom they have known for a couple of years. Participants were asked to indicate the name, gender<sup>1</sup>, and age of the kin member or friend. They were also asked to indicate how frequently they met this person per month and the degree to which they experienced feelings of oneness with this person (measure described below). Participants were informed that they would be reading an article about a disabled person who is part of the volunteer program. They were also informed that, in order to appreciate the circumstances of this person, they should imagine that the events described in the article occurred to the female kin member or friend that they had named. Participants then read a newspaper article describing events that occurred to the disabled person, which was accompanied by a picture of the person.

The article described the story of Leonie, a student who had a major bicycle accident and ended up with serious facial damage, a shattered foot, and social stigma. In the article, Leonie relates her experiences in the hospital, how she felt when she saw herself again for the first time, how she has been recovering, and how she feels when people stare at her. She ends her story by saying that she would like to go for a "walk" now and then, but that this is very difficult because she is in a wheelchair. Right after reading the article, and before turning the page, participants were asked once more to imagine how this would influence the life of the kin member or friend that they had named before. Participants then completed a set of questionnaires (described below).

### *Measures*

*Oneness* with the family member or friend was measured using the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale (Aron et al., 1992). This scale assesses feelings of closeness by asking participants to choose one of a pair of seven gradually overlapping circles indicating the overlap between themselves and the other.

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<sup>1</sup> We omitted 27 additional participants from this study because they compared a male friend or family member to the female target as presented in the newspaper article.

*Willingness to help* was measured by asking participants to indicate on a 7-point scale (1 = *absolutely not*, 7 = *definitely yes*) whether they were willing to help Leonie by offering her a sympathetic ear and by taking her out now and then. Responses to these two questions were highly correlated ( $r = .77$ ,  $p = .001$ ); they were combined to create a measure of participants' willingness to help.

*Empathy* was measured with the adjectives *sympathetic* and *compassionate* ( $r = .72$ ,  $p = .001$ ). These two items have been used to measure empathy in previous research (Batson, 1991). On a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*), participants indicated the extent to which they felt these emotions.

*Distress* was measured with adjectives *distressed*, *disturbed*, and *alarmed* ( $\alpha = .70$ ). Participants provided responses on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Finally, to assess participants' expectations about being able to receive help in a similar situation, we asked them two questions: (1) "Suppose you are in the same situation as Leonie. Do you think that others would help you by offering you a sympathetic ear?" and (2) "Do you think that others would help you by taking you out now and then?" Participants indicated their answers to these two questions on a 7-point scale (1 = *absolutely not*, 7 = *definitely yes*). We combined the two items to create a construct that we termed *perceived reciprocal support* ( $r = .63$ ,  $p = .001$ ). It should be noted that these items do not measure expectations about reciprocity in a dyadic, tit-for-tat manner, but rather expectations about reciprocity in a broader social context. This method was used because, given the scenario, it would have been unrealistic to ask participants whether they expected Leonie to reciprocate in kind. We discuss the implications of this methodology below.

### *Results and discussion*

In the friend condition, the mean age of the friend was 21.24 ( $SD = 2.34$  range = 17-27); the mean contact frequency was 9 times per month ( $SD = 7.71$ ). In the kin condition, the mean age of the kin member was 21.76 ( $SD = 2.38$ , range = 10-28); the mean contact frequency was 6 times per month ( $SD = 8.11$ ). Because there was no influence of contact frequency or participant gender on willingness to help, these variables were not included in any of the remaining analyses.

Table 3.1 shows the mean levels of all measures in the kin condition and the friend condition. Participants experienced greater feelings of oneness with friends than with kin,  $t_{85} = 4.04$ ,  $p = .001$ , suggesting that they perceived friends to be psychologically more

close than family members. Means on the remaining measures (including willingness to help) did not differ between the two conditions.

Table 3.1  
*Mean levels (and SD's) of Oneness, Empathy, Distress, Perceived Reciprocal Support, and Willingness to Help in Kin and Friend Conditions*

|                            | Oneness     | Empathy    | Distress    | Perceived reciprocal support | Willingness to help |
|----------------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Kin<br>( <i>n</i> = 42)    | 3.79 (1.54) | 5.48 (.92) | 3.03 (1.25) | 4.98 (1.17)                  | 4.48 (1.38)         |
| Friend<br>( <i>n</i> = 45) | 5.04 (1.36) | 5.36 (.96) | 2.87 (1.27) | 4.99 (1.33)                  | 4.71 (1.47)         |

Which psychological motives predicted willingness to help? Correlations among these variables revealed an interesting difference between the kin and friend conditions (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2  
*Correlations among All Measures in Kin and Friend Conditions*

|                                 | Kin condition |       |      |       | Friend condition |       |       |       |
|---------------------------------|---------------|-------|------|-------|------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|                                 | 2             | 3     | 4    | 5     | 2                | 3     | 4     | 5     |
| 1. Oneness                      | -.11          | .09   | -.05 | -.05  | .37*             | .12   | .20   | .08   |
| 2. Empathy                      |               | .40** | .17  | .24   |                  | .41** | .45** | .39** |
| 3. Distress                     |               |       | .05  | .22   |                  |       | -.16  | .21   |
| 4. Perceived reciprocal support |               |       |      | .40** |                  |       |       | .22   |
| 5. Willingness to help          |               |       |      |       |                  |       |       |       |

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

In the kin condition, willingness to help was predicted especially by perceived reciprocal support, whereas in the friend condition, willingness to help was predicted especially by empathy. To test the independent effects of the motives on willingness to help, we conducted two regression analyses, separately for the kin and friend conditions (see Table 3.3). The results showed that, in the kin condition, willingness to help was predicted by perceived reciprocal support ( $\beta = .45, p = .015$ ) after controlling for the other variables; no other predictor exerted a significant effect. In the friend condition, willingness to help was predicted by empathy ( $\beta = .34, p = .099$ ) after controlling for

other variables, although the effect was marginally significant; no other predictor exerted a significant effect.

Table 3.3  
Results of Regression Analyses in Kin and Friend Conditions in which Willingness to Help was the Dependent Variable

|                              | Kin condition  |      |      | Friend condition |      |      |
|------------------------------|----------------|------|------|------------------|------|------|
|                              | $\beta$        | $t$  | $p$  | $\beta$          | $t$  | $p$  |
| Empathy                      | .11            | .65  | .52  | .34              | 1.69 | .099 |
| Distress                     | .18            | 1.00 | .33  | .11              | .54  | .60  |
| Oneness                      | -.01           | -.22 | .83  | -.01             | -.49 | .63  |
| Perceived reciprocal support | .45            | 2.54 | .015 | .11              | .56  | .58  |
|                              | R-square = .21 |      |      | R-square = .17   |      |      |

In sum, when empathy and perceived reciprocal support were pitted against each other, perceived reciprocal support predicted willingness to help when the recipient was imagined to be kin, whereas empathy predicted willingness to help when the recipient was imagined to be a friend. These findings might appear to contradict the findings of Maner and Gailliot (2007) whose results showed that empathy predicted helping when the recipient was kin (but not when the recipient was a stranger). However, Maner and Gailliot did not measure perceived reciprocal support, and so their study did not simultaneously assess the effects of empathy and perceived reciprocal support. Interestingly, even when we repeated the same analyses excluding perceived reciprocal support (in an attempt to replicate Maner and Gailliot's analysis), none of the predictors exerted a significant effect in the kin condition (all  $\beta$ s  $\leq$  .24,  $p$ s  $\geq$  .33) and only empathy exerted a significant effect in the friend condition ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $p = .022$ ). Thus, these results indicate that empathy is an important motive underlying altruism between friends. Somewhat surprisingly, these results also indicate that perceived reciprocal support—but not empathy—has a particularly strong predictive effect on helping kin.

Because Study 3.1 was conducted with university students—who may have particularly strong friendships and few opportunities to assist kin—we repeated the study with older adults in the community in Study 2. Also, in Study 3.1, we had constrained the choice of kin by asking participants to imagine someone around their age (which would exclude younger kin whom people might actually assist more frequently). In Study 3.2, this constraint was removed.

### Study 3.2: Community Sample

#### *Method*

##### *Participants and procedure*

Forty-four adults (15 men, 29 women, mean age = 38.91,  $SD = 10.08$ , range = 23-59) working in various businesses in Groningen, the Netherlands participated voluntarily.

Participants completed the questionnaires at their place of business. The methods of Study 3.2 were identical to those of Study 3.1, except for two differences. First, participants in the kin condition were asked to think of a family member whom they felt close to and were asked to indicate what their relationship towards this family member was. Second, the picture that accompanied the article about Leonie was of a woman whose age could be estimated to be between 30 and 40 years old. Oneness, willingness to help ( $r = .89, p = .001$ ), empathy ( $r = .66, p = .001$ ), distress ( $\alpha = .75$ ), and perceived reciprocal support ( $r = .68, p = .001$ ) were measured in the same manner as in Study 3.1.

#### *Results and Discussion*

In the friend condition, the mean age of the friend was 38.91 ( $SD = 11.42$ , range = 23-59); the mean contact frequency was 8 times per month ( $SD = 8.59$ ). In the kin condition, the mean age of the kin member was 38.90 ( $SD = 8.65$ , range = 25-54); the mean contact frequency was 7 times per month ( $SD = 9.96$ ). The family members named by the participants were children (2), parents (5), siblings (7), cousins (3), and other family members (4).

Table 3.4  
*Mean levels (and SDs) of Oneness, Empathy, Distress, Perceived Reciprocal Support, and Willingness to Help in Kin and Friend Conditions*

|                        | Oneness     | Empathy     | Distress    | Perceived reciprocal support | Willingness to help |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Kin<br>( $n = 21$ )    | 3.45 (1.73) | 5.19 (1.26) | 2.22 (.88)  | 5.52 (1.17)                  | 3.64 (2.21)         |
| Friend<br>( $n = 23$ ) | 4.52 (1.50) | 5.16 (.90)  | 2.61 (1.24) | 4.93 (1.67)                  | 3.78 (1.99)         |

Table 3.4 shows the mean levels of all measures in the kin condition and the friend condition. Again, participants experienced greater feelings of oneness with friends than

with kin members,  $t_{41} = 2.17, p = .036$ . Means on the remaining measures did not differ between the two conditions.

Table 3.5  
*Correlations among All Measures in Kin and Friend Conditions*

|                                 | Kin condition |      |      |       | Friend condition |      |      |      |
|---------------------------------|---------------|------|------|-------|------------------|------|------|------|
|                                 | 2             | 3    | 4    | 5     | 2                | 3    | 4    | 5    |
| 1. Oneness                      | .30           | -.25 | .38  | .48*  | -.06             | .22  | -.02 | .12  |
| 2. Empathy                      |               | .19  | .24  | .52*  |                  | -.41 | .06  | .39  |
| 3. Distress                     |               |      | -.08 | .22   |                  |      | .18  | -.02 |
| 4. Perceived reciprocal support |               |      |      | .59** |                  |      |      | -.11 |
| 5. Willingness to help          |               |      |      |       |                  |      |      |      |

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

The correlations among the variables showed a somewhat different pattern of relationships than Study 1 (see Table 3.5). Participants' willingness to help in the kin condition was predicted not only by perceived reciprocal support, but also by empathy and oneness. In the friend condition, willingness to help was predicted only by empathy ( $r = .39, p = .070$ ). To test the independent effects of the motives on willingness to help, we again conducted two regression analyses, separately for the kin and friend conditions. The results fell in line with those of Study 3.1 (see Table 3.6). In the kin condition, perceived reciprocal support emerged as the only predictor of willingness to help ( $\beta = .49, p = .020$ ). In the friend condition, empathy emerged as the only predictor of helping ( $\beta = .49, p = .062$ ).

Table 3.6  
*Results of Regression Analyses in Kin and Friend Conditions in which Willingness to Help was the Dependent Variable*

|                              | Kin condition  |      |      | Friend condition |      |      |
|------------------------------|----------------|------|------|------------------|------|------|
|                              | $\beta$        | $t$  | $p$  | $\beta$          | $t$  | $p$  |
| Empathy                      | .21            | 1.13 | .28  | .49              | 2.01 | .062 |
| Distress                     | .25            | 1.42 | .18  | .19              | .77  | .46  |
| Oneness                      | .30            | 1.55 | .14  | .12              | .52  | .61  |
| Perceived reciprocal support | .49            | 2.60 | .020 | -.21             | -.92 | .37  |
|                              | R-square = .59 |      |      | R-square = .24   |      |      |

The results of Study 3.2 indicate that the strong predictive effect of empathy on helping friends cannot be attributed to the potentially stronger friendships among university students. Also, the effect of perceived reciprocal support on helping kin does not appear to be due to the fact that the kin imagined were around the same age. However, the number of participants in the kin condition was too small to draw any clear conclusions regarding the age of kin. The findings do indicate once more that perceived reciprocal support is an important predictor of helping kin, whereas empathy is an important predictor of helping friends.

### General Discussion

In two studies, we examined the impact of psychological motivators of helping within two specific close-relationship contexts: when the recipient was perceived to be either a kin member or a friend. In both studies (conducted with different samples of participants), we found that helping kin is driven primarily by perceived reciprocal support and helping friends is driven primarily by feelings of empathy.

This research complements and extends previous research. First, the results showed that people feel more oneness with friends than family; thus, at a psychological level, the lack of a genetic relation between friends does not appear to translate into a weaker bond. In addition to any effects of genetic relatedness, there does appear to be a strong bond between friends that is driven by a distinct process (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). Second, corroborating the research by Kruger (2003) and Stewart-Williams (2007), the present results showed that perceived reciprocal support predicted willingness to help, especially when the recipient was imagined to be kin. These findings shed light on an

under-explored issue: the degree to which perceived reciprocal support matters within kin relationships. Kin selection theory and its implications may lead researchers to overlook the importance of other processes underlying altruism between kin; surprisingly, perceived reciprocal support may be more fundamental between kin than between friends, when other psychological motivators (such as empathy) are held constant.

We should note, however, that our measure of expectations about reciprocity did not pertain to dyadic, tit-for-tat reciprocity. Rather, it measured people's expectations about receiving assistance from *someone*. Is this a limitation of the study? On the one hand, our measure may have better captured actual reciprocal altruistic tendencies among humans; evidence shows that reciprocal altruism often goes beyond the dyadic, tit-for-tat level—a phenomenon termed *generalized reciprocity* (Das & Teng, 2002). On the other hand, one could still make the argument that our measure of perceived reciprocal support had nothing to do with actual reciprocity; rather, it may have measured people's perceptions about obligations and norms regarding helping. Of course, because people feel more obligated to help kin (Kruger, 2001; Miller & Bersoff, 1998) and expect more assistance from kin (Bar-Tal et al., 1977; Mancini & Simon, 1984), the results could be interpreted as indicating that such obligations and norms underlie altruism among kin more strongly than altruism among friends, and that empathy-induced helping between friends exists over and above obligations and norms regarding helping.

A more straightforward limitation of the present studies is that they did not rigorously test situations in which the recipients of altruism are one's own children (or other, lower-generation kin). As Stewart-Williams (2007) noted,

“Unreciprocated kin altruism is most common in relationships in which there is an asymmetry in the neediness and/or reproductive value of the parties involved. Consider the parent–offspring relationship. Young offspring have a greater need for help than their parents, and older offspring generally have greater reproductive value than their parents. As such, it makes good evolutionary sense that altruism would tend to flow down through the generations, from parent to offspring, more than it would do the reverse. In contrast, siblings and cousins are usually similar in age and therefore usually have similar needs and reproductive values. Under such circumstances, there may be little call for unreciprocated altruism—little reason that help would flow in one direction rather than the other. Thus, siblings and cousins may instead form reciprocal alliances.” (p. 197)

Thus, future research on the effects of different psychological motives underlying kin altruism must attend to the specific relationship that exists between the helper and

recipient. Categorizing different family relationships simply as “kin” may overlook interesting patterns of psychological motives that underlie helping within different relationships.