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HELPING BEHAVIORS IN RELATIONSHIPS

Helping behaviors are behaviors intended to benefit a relationship partner in response to an actual or perceived need; examples include the provision of social support, willingness to sacrifice, and accommodation. Helping behaviors are a type of *prosocial behavior,* which is a broader category of social behaviors intended to benefit others. Although there are many forms of prosocial behavior (e.g., sharing, cooperating, adhering to norms of honesty, fairness, and reciprocity), only a subset of these are enacted in response to the needs of others and are thus considered forms of helping. This entry describes different forms of helping behavior, examines the motivational underpinnings of helping, and identifies the personality and relationship factors that predict effective and ineffective helping in ongoing relationships.

What Is Helping?

Helping behavior can take many forms, but the type of help most often studied in ongoing relationships is *social support.* Social support serves two broad functions: (1) to help others cope with stressful life events and (2) to facilitate their goal strivings. The first type of social support—assisting others during times of adversity—has been labeled *safe haven* support. This type of support involves the provision of *instrumental aid* (e.g., material resources, task assistance, problem solving) or *emotional support* (e.g., physical affection, comfort, understanding) that is intended to relieve another person's distress, assist that person in his or her coping efforts, and protect or promote his or her health and well-being. Research has shown that receiving social support during times of adversity helps individuals cope more effectively with stress and is associated with better health and psychological adjustment.

The second type of social support—assisting others in their goal pursuits—has been labeled *secure base* support. This type of support involves the provision of *instrumental aid* (e.g., material resources, information) or *emotional support* (e.g., encouragement, validation) that is intended to facilitate another person's goal-strivings, personal growth, and exploration. Research has shown that when people receive support for their goal strivings, they have higher self-esteem and self-efficacy, are more motivated to pursue personal goals, and more likely to make progress toward actually achieving these goals.

Two related lines of work examine other pathways through which partners help each other achieve their goals and celebrate their successes. First, research on the *Michelangelo phenomenon* shows that people are more likely to become the person they want to be (their ideal self) when a partner affirms and validates their ideal self and behaves in ways that help move them toward this ideal. Second, researchers have shown that partners play a critical role in helping each other capitalize on positive events. For example, when one person shares a success with another (a process called *capitalization*), the benefits of this success for that person's well-being are amplified if a relationship partner responds with active, enthusiastic support (e.g., by expressing pride and excitement or sharing the achievement with others). This research demonstrates that relationship partners play an important role in helping each other benefit from the good times, rather than just coping with the bad times.

Another form of helping behavior is *willingness to sacrifice.* Situations involving willingness to sacrifice arise when relationship partners have conflicting goals, needs, or preferences (through no necessary fault of either partner). Sacrifice occurs when one partner forgoes his or her own desires to allow the other partner to fulfill an important desire. Sacrifice is a form of helping behavior

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because it involves one person's willingness to forgo self-interest to respond to the needs of a relationship partner.

Other forms of helping behavior include *accommodation* and *forgiveness*. Situations involving *accommodation* and *forgiveness* arise when one partner engages in a negative act (a transgression or betrayal), thereby imposing an emotional or material cost on the other partner. *Accommodation* occurs when the offended person refrains from responding negatively and instead responds in a constructive manner that defuses negativity and promotes the well-being of the other person (and the relationship). *Forgiveness* occurs when the offended person ceases to feel resentment or anger toward the transgressor or ceases to demand punishment or restitution. Accommodation and forgiveness are forms of helping because one person overcomes negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to benefit the partner or the relationship. Moreover, accommodation and forgiveness are often motivated by the desire to meet the emotional needs of a partner. For example, forgiveness is often motivated by a desire to reduce another person's suffering by relegating the betrayal to the past and relieving the offender of guilt or shame.

In summary, helping behavior can take many forms in ongoing relationships and can occur during good times and bad times. Common in all these forms of helping is an act of caring or goodwill by one person that is intended to meet the needs of another, thereby promoting that person's well-being.

Although helping is intended to benefit others, not all helping efforts will be successful, and even well-intended behavior can have unintended negative consequences. For example, helpers may offer support in a way that leads the recipient to feel incompetent, indebted, or like a burden. Thus, researchers have focused on the quality of the help people provide as well as on whether people help (or how much they help). Effective helping behavior is characterized by two key features: *sensitivity* and *responsiveness*. *Sensitivity* reflects the degree to which the helper's behavior is in synchrony with, and appropriately contingent upon, the needs of the recipient. *Responsiveness* reflects the degree to which the recipient feels understood, validated, and cared for. Thus, regardless of the type of help being provided, the benefits of that help will depend on the degree to which it is sensitive and responsive to the recipient's needs.

Providing effective help is not always easy—it requires a variety of skills (e.g., perspective taking, emotion regulation), adequate resources (e.g., cognitive and emotional resources), and sufficient motivation. As such, helping is likely to be easier for some people than for others and in some relationships compared with others. The following sections examine the motivational, personality, and relationship factors that predict whether people help and whether their helping behavior is sensitive and responsive.

Motivations for Helping

Social and evolutionary theorists agree that caring for others is a universal human tendency—human beings have an innate propensity to engage in actions that benefit others, to feel compassion toward those who are suffering, and to protect and promote the welfare of others. Nevertheless, the motivation to provide help in specific situations (and the quality of help provided) will vary across situations, people, and relationships. Researchers distinguish between two different aspects of motivation: (1) one's overall degree of motivation to help (felt responsibility for responding to another's needs) and (2) the specific form of that motivation (altruistic versus egoistic).

In general, people will be more motivated to help others if they feel personally responsible for meeting the others' needs and have the skills and resources to do so. Felt responsibility can vary across relationships (e.g., people feel more responsible for meeting the needs of their children than of their friends), people (e.g., people differ in their chronic level of *communal orientation*), and situations (e.g., people feel more responsible for helping when they are the only person present during a situation of need).

Even if individuals are equally motivated to care for others in terms of felt responsibility, they may differ in the nature of that motivation. Helping behavior may be motivated by the desire to promote another's welfare (*altruistic motivation*) or the desire to gain benefits for the self (*egoistic motivation*). These motives may be dispositional, relationship-specific, or situation-specific. One

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important situational factor is the degree to which the helper feels *empathic concern* (sympathy, compassion) versus *personal distress* (alarm, anxiety, guilt) in response to a person in need; empathic concern increases altruistic motivation, whereas personal distress increases egoistic motivation.

Distinguishing between altruistic and egoistic motives is important because these motives shape helping behavior. Helpers who are altruistically motivated tend to be more effective helpers—they are more attuned to their partner's signals, more willing to expend effort to respond appropriately to these signals, and more likely to provide help in a manner that expresses their benevolent motives. In contrast, helpers who are egoistically motivated tend to be focused on their own needs, which interferes with their ability to provide optimal help to others. Although altruistic motivation is associated with more effective helping than is egoistic motivation, both forms of motivation mobilize helping behavior and increase the likelihood that an individual will respond to the needs of others.

Individual Differences in Helping

Because effective helping requires adequate skills, resources, and motivation, people differ in their willingness and ability to help others in need. Research shows that individuals who have a *secure attachment style* (who are comfortable with closeness and confident that they are loved) are more likely to provide sensitive and responsive support to their relationship partners and more likely to help for altruistic versus egoistic reasons. In contrast, insecure individuals are less effective helpers. Those who are high in attachment *anxiety* (worried about being rejected or unloved) tend to have an over-involved, intrusive caregiving style that is out of synch with their partner's needs, and although they are altruistically motivated to help others, they are also egoistically motivated (e.g., they help others to be loved and needed). In contrast, those high in attachment *avoidance* (uncomfortable with closeness) tend to be neglectful and controlling in their caregiving style, and they tend to help others for largely egoistic reasons (e.g., to gain benefits for the self or to avoid sanctions for not helping).

Researchers have also identified broad personality dimensions that are linked to helping behavior. Individuals who are high in *agreeableness* (pleasant, kind, concerned with cooperation and social harmony), dispositional *empathy* (a tendency to take the perspective of others and to feel compassion for those less fortunate), *prosocial personality orientation* (a tendency to be concerned for the welfare of others and to act in ways that demonstrate this concern), *communal orientation* (adherence to a norm of mutual, noncontingent responsiveness to needs), and *compassionate love* toward humanity (an attitude containing feelings, thoughts, and behavioral predispositions focused on caring for, supporting, and understanding others) are more likely to provide help to others in need (strangers as well as ongoing relationship partners).

Individual differences in chronic social motives have also been linked to various forms of helping behavior. For example, approach and avoidance motivations have been linked to different motives for sacrifice in intimate relationships. Individuals who are high in *approach motivation* (who focus on attaining social incentives such as closeness and affiliation) are more likely to sacrifice to attain positive outcomes for their partner and their relationship (e.g., to make their partner happy, to increase closeness). In contrast, those high in *avoidance motivation* (who focus on avoiding social threats such as rejection and conflict) are more likely to sacrifice to avoid negative outcomes (e.g., to avoid feeling guilty, to avoid upsetting their partner). Approach motives for sacrifice are associated with better psychological and relationship outcomes. In related work, individuals who give priority to pursuing *ego goals* (who seek to construct, maintain, protect, and enhance positive images of the self) are less likely to cultivate supportive friendships than are those who give priority to *compassionate goals* (who seek to support and promote the welfare of others).

Evidence also suggests that chronic differences in self-regulatory resources affect certain forms of helping behavior. For example, individuals who have *poor self-regulation skills* (who have difficulty controlling their impulses) are less likely to engage in accommodation behavior in their intimate relationships. Likewise, individuals who are *chronically self-focused* are less effective support providers, presumably because they have fewer cognitive and emotional resources for discerning

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and attending to the needs of others as well as more egoistic motives for helping others.

Finally, researchers have examined sex differences in helping. Overall, there are few differences between men and women in their helping behavior or in their motivations for helping, but two reliable effects have emerged. First, men are less likely than are women to provide sensitive emotional support to same-sex friends. This difference appears to be due primarily to norms concerning the appropriateness of comforting behavior in male same-sex relationships, but evidence also indicates that men are less skilled than are women at providing emotional comfort. Second, men are more likely to provide instrumental aid to strangers in need (a situation in which women may feel less comfortable or safe intervening), but it is not yet clear whether this gender difference also occurs in close relationships.

Relationship Features That Promote Helping

Although personality factors play an important role in helping behavior, the strongest predictors of helping in ongoing relationships are features of the relationship itself. Many of these features increase helping by increasing felt responsibility for the welfare of relationship partners. Felt responsibility is greatest in relationships that are high in interdependence, commitment, emotional closeness, and trust, all of which foster communal norms that encourage mutual responsiveness to needs. For example, according to *Interdependence Theory,* when one person's life is deeply intertwined with a relationship partner, and when that person is committed to maintaining this relationship, they enact *transformations of motivation* in which the desire to pursue self-interest in a given situation is replaced or supplanted by the willingness to pursue outcomes that promote the welfare of the partner or the relationship. Research shows that relationship commitment increases a variety of pro-relationship behaviors including accommodation, forgiveness, and willingness to sacrifice.

Relationships also differ in the norms that govern the giving and receiving of benefits. *Exchange relationships* (such as relationships with business partners) involve a tit-for-tat norm in which benefits are given with the expectation of immediate and comparable benefits in return. In contrast, *communal relationships* (such as relationships with family and friends) involve a norm of mutual responsiveness, in which benefits are given in response to needs as they arise with no expectation of benefits in return. Relationships also vary in their level of *communal strength.* Communal strength reflects the degree to which a person feels responsible for meeting the needs of a partner and is willing to incur costs to meet those needs. For example, parent–child relationships are high in communal strength; parents feel a great deal of responsibility for meeting their children's needs and are often willing to incur large costs to meet these needs. Overall, research shows that people are more likely to help others with whom they have a communal versus an exchange relationship and that helping behavior increases as the degree of communal strength increases (e.g., people are more likely to help a spouse than a friend, and more likely to help a friend than a neighbor.)

Relationships highest in communal strength tend to involve kin. This pattern is consistent with evolutionary perspectives on helping. According to Kin Selection Theory, prosocial behavior evolved because it increases inclusive fitness (the successful transmission of one's genes from all sources to the next generation); therefore, helping behavior should increase as the degree of genetic relatedness increases between the helper and the person in need. Consistent with this approach, research shows that people are more likely to help kin than to help nonkin; and even among kin relationships, degree of genetic relatedness predicts additional variance in helping behavior. Some theorists have suggested that feelings of emotional closeness or communal strength (which promote helping behavior) may be proximal psychological mechanisms that mediate the link between genetic relatedness and willingness to help.

In addition to increasing the motivation to respond to the needs of another, relationship features also affect whether individuals are altruistically or egoistically motivated to help others. For example, altruistic motives are greatest in relationships that are high in compassionate love and emotional intimacy, partly because these qualities foster empathic concern, which is a critical source of altruistic motivation. Altruistic motives are also strong in relationships that are high in trust and

felt-security (confidence in a partner's love and commitment), partly because these qualities reduce self-protective (egoistic) motives for helping (such as helping to earn a partner's love or helping to increase a partner's dependence on the relationship) that can interfere with other-oriented emotions and actions. Research shows that when individuals feel secure and confident in their partners' regard, they are more willing to sacrifice, more accommodating, and more willing to forgive transgressions; they are also more likely to provide sensitive and responsive support to relationship partners during stressful and nonstressful times.

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See also Accommodation; Capitalization; Jaremka Caregiving Across the Life Span; Communal Relationships; Compassionate Love; Empathy; Forgiveness; Responsiveness; Social Support, Nature of; Transformation of Motivation; Willingness to Sacrifice

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Hispanic/Latino Families

The U.S. Census reports that since the turn of the 21st century Hispanics/Latinas(os) have become the largest racial/ethnic minority in the country. In 2003, Hispanics/Latinas(os) surpassed African Americans, who were then the largest racial and ethnic minority, reaching an unprecedented 13 percent of the U.S. racial/ethnic population. The labels *Hispanic* or *Latina(o)* are panethnic concepts frequently used to describe Latin-American and Caribbean immigrants and their children. These concepts are a convenient, albeit controversial, way to describe this rather diverse community. The label *Hispanic* was introduced by the U.S. Census and is used mostly in government, policy, and social science reports, whereas the label *Latina(o)* is a community-based term frequently presented as a political alternative to *Hispanic*. Surveys conducted in the Hispanic/Latino communities suggest that endorsement of these labels varies a great deal by nationality and that sometimes both terms are used interchangeably. Yet, surveys also reveal that the preference for most immigrants and their U.S.-born second and third generation is to be identified by nationality. The lack of a standardized terminology can be explained by the demographic diversity in the Latino community and the politics of ethnic labeling.

Indeed, Hispanics/Latinos are a community differentiated by nationality (Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans are the three largest groups), race (there are White, Brown, and Black Hispanic/Latinos), social class, and gender or sexuality. Within each of these communities, age, education, and immigration status further differentiates individuals and families. Most social scientists agree

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