Prosocial Motivation and Behavior in Close Relationships

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Why are people in close relationships motivated to go beyond their own self-interest and act in a manner that benefits their partner? Some theorists would point to person factors in answering this question, specifying various personality dimensions as particularly relevant. Others would take a social cognitive approach, emphasizing the manner in which relationship cognitions guide prosocial activity. This chapter will review findings from a long-standing program of research on prosocial behavior in close relationships from an interdependence perspective. We will make three main points.

First, we will suggest that the structure of interdependence between persons should be an important concern for social and behavioral scientists interested in understanding prosocial motivation and behavior. That is, it is important for us to understand the manner in which each person’s actions influence the other’s well-being. We will suggest that *diagnostic situations* are particularly meaningful and important in understanding prosocial actions, in that in such situations the individual’s direct self-interest is pitted against the interests of the partner.

Second, we will suggest that behaving to the benefit of one’s partner in such situations rests on key structural features of relationships. Specifically, behaving prosocially rests on the degree to which the individual is dependent on a relationship and, accordingly, experiences strong commitment to it. We emphasize the concepts of dependence and commitment because we believe psychologists typically place too much weight on positive affect in relationships, on concepts such as liking versus disliking, positive versus negative attitudes, and the like.
Third, we will propose that in interdependent relationships, each person’s actions have implications for the partner. Thus, we should understand prosocial behavior not so much by examining individual-level cognition, personality, or motivation, but by examining the relationship between individuals, by understanding the implications of each person’s thoughts, traits, and motives for those of the partner. In short, we are going to suggest that psychology, particularly social psychology, should be more truly social in character when attempting to understand prosocial motives and behavior in interpersonal contexts.

Interdependence Structure: Relevance of Diagnostic Situations

Diagnostic Situations and Transformation of Motivation

Sometimes involvement with a relationship partner is simple. When partners’ goals correspond and their preferences are compatible, partners can readily achieve desirable outcomes such as intimacy, companionship, sexual gratification, and security. Such a situation is described by interdependence theorists as one involving high correspondence of outcomes (Kelley, Holmes, Kerr, Reis, Rusbult, & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The true test of a relationship arises when outcomes are not correspondent – when partners encounter dilemmas involving conflicted interaction, incompatible preferences, extra-relationship temptation, or the experience of betrayal. Holmes and Rempel (1989) term such dilemmas “diagnostic situations.” A diagnostic situation is an interdependence dilemma – a situation in which the individual’s direct self-interest is incompatible with the interests of the relationship. Diagnostic situations are termed “diagnostic” because behavior in such situations communicates the
individual's broader motives. They are “diagnostic” in that when a partner behaves well in a dilemma of this sort, such behavior communicates the partner’s pro-relationship motives, revealing that the partner is willing to depart from his or her immediate self-interest to promote one’s own well-being and the well-being of the relationship.

According to interdependence theory, behaving well in diagnostic situations rests on transformation of motivation, or the psychological process whereby an individual comes to react to a given situation not on the basis of direct self-interest, but on the basis of broader considerations, such as long-term goals, social or personal values, norms, or the well-being of a partner or relationship (Arriaga & Holmes, in press; Kelley et al., 2003; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). How does transformation of motivation come about? To begin with, an individual encounters a specific given situation, which describes outcome interdependence based on direct self-interest (see Figure 1). In the given situation, individuals sometimes react on the basis of that which is dictated by direct self-interest. Alternatively, the given pattern may then activate any of several possible interpersonal orientations, which embody stable transformational tendencies. For example, a given pattern may activate specific dispositions (attachment style), relationship-specific motives (commitment), or social norms (“do unto others...”). Relevant orientations may yield habitual transformation tendencies, or the transformation process may be mediated by orientation-colored cognitive interpretations and affective reactions. That is, the process may be automatic or may involve systematic cognitive activity. The transformation process yields what is referred to using interdependence terminology as the effective situation, which represents preferences based on such broader considerations. Effective preferences directly guide behavior in interpersonal contexts.
For example, in a situation between Hillary and Bill involving an act of betrayal by Bill, Hillary must decide whether to: (a) pursue her “gut level,” given preferences (i.e., preferences based on direct self-interest) and seek revenge, or to (b) inhibit this impulse, exhibit pro-relationship transformation, and react in a constructive manner (i.e., preferences based on “broader considerations”). If Hillary sets aside her direct self interest and forgives Bill, Bill will likely recognize that she is motivated by pro-relationship concerns and their relationship will be maintained or improved.

**Empirical Evidence of the Transformation Process**

Do important phenomena involve conflict between self-interest and the interests of a relationship? Does behaving well in such situations involving a partner rest on pro-relationship transformation of motivation? Research relevant to understanding accommodative behavior suggests an affirmative answer to these questions. Accommodation is defined as the tendency, when a partner enacts a potentially destructive behavior, to (a) inhibit impulses to react destructively in turn, and (b) instead react in a constructive manner (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). We suggest that from a perfectly self-interested point of view, people are not inclined to accommodate. Rather, accommodation rests on transformation of motivation, which involves “taking account of broader considerations,” considerations such as personal values, concern for the well-being of a partner, goals for the future of the relationship, and broader social norms.

To the extent that this is true, and to the extent that “taking account of broader considerations” rests on active cognitive activity, variations in reaction time should reveal the discrepancy between given versus effective preferences. In situations
requiring transformation of motivation, compared to participants given plentiful reaction time, those given limited reaction time should exhibit substantially more destructive, self-interested behavior. In one study, participants heard hypothetical situations in which partners enacted constructive or destructive behaviors. Participants were given either limited or plentiful reaction time. The proportion of times the participant chose a constructive response was then measured. Consistent with expectations, when confronted with destructive partner acts, participants exhibited more constructive behavioral responses given plentiful reaction time (i.e., time for transformation) than given limited reaction time (i.e., no time for transformation) (see Figure 2). When confronted with constructive partner acts whereby no transformation is necessary, the probability of constructive behavior did not differ for limited versus plentiful reaction time. Thus, accommodation does involve conflict between self-interest and the interests of the relationship, and behaving well in accommodative dilemmas does rest on pro-relationship transformation.

Past research has explored the transformation process using both experimental and non-experimental methods, using a variety of measurement techniques, using a variety of participation populations, and using a variety of paradigms. For example, paradigms have varied the presence versus absence of transformation-relevant concern (reduced vs. normal), the degree of interdependence-relevant concern (acquaintance vs. close-other interaction), and the resources available for the transformation process (depleted vs. non-depleted resources). Research has examined the responses individuals consider enacting ("gut level," given preferences) versus the behavior they actually enact (transformed, effective preferences) as well as preferences under conditions of
limited time ("gut level," given preferences) versus plentiful time (transformed, effective preferences) (e.g., Rusbult et al., 1991). But what motivates individuals to make the necessary transformation in response to an interdependence dilemma? We consider this question in the next section.

Pro-Relationship Motivation: Commitment as a Central Motive

Commitment, Dependence, and the Investment Model

We have argued that commitment is a key variable in understanding relationships. Commitment embodies one’s history of interdependence, guides present behavior, and shapes goals for future behavior. Commitment is defined as the sense of allegiance individuals develop toward the objects of their dependence. Commitment is comprised of three components: (1) intent to persist, (2) psychological attachment, and (3) long-term orientation (cf. Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Arriaga & Agnew, 2001).

According to the Investment Model of Commitment (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), people become committed because they are dependent on their relationships – because (a) they are satisfied with the relationship, as the relationship gratifies the individual’s most important needs (companionship, intimacy, sexuality; Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992); (b) they believe their alternatives are poor, as their most important needs could not be gratified independent of the relationship (in an alternative relationship, by friends or kin); and (c) they have invested many important resources in the relationship, such as time and effort, shared friendship network, and material possessions (see Figure 3).

Being dependent means that you “need” a relationship; the relationship gratifies important needs, those needs cannot be gratified elsewhere, and you have invested a
good deal in the relationship. Accordingly, we suggest that commitment should powerfully predict tendencies to persist at a given line of behavior, to remain involved in a relationship, to continue at a specific job or career, to continue using a given product (e.g., brand of toothpaste), etc.

**Empirical Evidence of Commitment and Persistence in Relationships**

Does commitment emerge as a consequence of dependence and does it promote persistence? With respect to close relationships, there are numerous studies that provide evidence for the bases of dependence described here (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult et al., 1998). Here we will briefly describe one such study. Individuals provided self-report measures of the Investment Model variables on 13 separate occasions over the course of an academic year. About a third of the relationships ended during this time. The data provided on multiple research occasions are not independent, so they were analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling. We used growth curve analysis to transform data for each variable into trend scores, scores representing linear change over time in each model variable. Increases over time in feelings of satisfaction, decreases over time in perceived quality of alternatives, and increases over time in the magnitude of investments each significantly predicted increases over time in commitment. Figure 4 displays mean trend scores for each variable as a function of later relationship fate – for voluntary stayers, voluntary leavers, and for “the abandoned,” whose partners ended the relationship. As can be seen, among stayers, commitment increased substantially over time; commitment increased moderately among the abandoned, and commitment declined over time among leavers. Parallel supportive evidence was obtained for all Investment Model variables. Moreover, commitment was
by far the strongest predictor of later relationship fate.

The investment model has been tested using both experimental and non-experimental methods (e.g., Agnew, Hoffman, Lehmliller, & Duncan, 2007), using a variety of measurement techniques (e.g., Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996), using a variety of participation populations, in a variety of cultures, and across multiple domains, for example, not only in the context of close relationships, but also in organizational settings and in the domain of consumer behavior (cf. Le & Agnew, 2003).

Commitment and Relationship Maintenance Mechanisms

Beyond being a potent predictor of persistence in a relationship, commitment also promotes other behaviors that reflect pro-relationship orientation. Committed individuals are willing to exert effort and endure cost for the good of their relationships, departing from immediate self-interest for the good of the relationship. Commitment predicts both behavioral and cognitive maintenance processes. For example, in addition to examining the association of commitment with (a) accommodation, past research has examined behavioral tendencies for committed individuals to (b) sacrifice immediate self-interest for the good of the relationship (e.g., Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997), and (c) forgive a partner’s acts of betrayal (e.g., Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Research has also focused on cognitive tendencies to (d) derogate attractive and tempting relationship alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), (e) exhibit positive illusion regarding one’s relationship, perceiving one’s relationship as better than (and not as bad as) other relationships (e.g., Van Lange, Rusbult, Semin-Goossens, Goerts, & Stalpers, 1999), and (f) become more cognitively interdependent with respect to mental representations of the partner and self (e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, &
Langston, 1998). We will briefly describe illustrative findings regarding two behavioral and two cognitive mechanisms that are particularly relevant to prosocial action and motivation.

**Behavioral Maintenance Mechanisms**

**Willingness to sacrifice.** One tendency often exhibited by couple member is a general willingness to sacrifice for their partner. We define willingness to sacrifice as the tendency, when partners’ outcome preferences are noncorrespondent, to (a) forego otherwise desirable behaviors, (b) engage in otherwise undesirable behaviors, or (c) both (Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997; Van Lange, Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997). Across a series of studies employing a variety of methods (both experimental and non-experimental) and a variety of participant populations (undergraduates, married partners), past research manipulated or measured (a) the three bases of dependence (i.e., satisfaction, alternatives, and investments), (b) commitment level, (c) willingness to sacrifice, and (d) couple well-being (Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). Consistent with expectations, it was found that (a) all three bases of dependence accounted for unique variance in predicting commitment; (b) commitment predicted willingness to sacrifice; and (c) willingness to sacrifice predicted couple well-being. Moreover, causal modeling analyses revealed that (d) commitment fully mediates any associations of the three bases of dependence with willingness to sacrifice (e.g., satisfaction does not exert any direct effect on sacrifice); and (e) willingness to sacrifice partially mediates the association of commitment with couple well-being. Sacrifice does not fully mediate the effects of commitment because it promotes couple well-being via a variety of mechanisms, including accommodation, forgiveness, and other mechanisms described
Forgiveness of betrayal. How about forgiveness, or the inclination, when a partner departs from the norms of decency and fairness that are assumed to govern the relationship, to (a) forego desire for retribution and demands for atonement, and (b) instead react in a more constructive, less judgmental manner? Forgiveness involves the resumption of pre-betrayal patterns of interaction. Does strong commitment promote forgiveness? We assume that level of commitment exhibits some day-to-day variation, and that people are capable of experiencing feelings of greater or lesser commitment to a given relationship. Accordingly, past research used a simple priming technique to temporarily activate low versus high feelings of commitment (Finkel et al., 2002). The experiment was described as “two separate studies.” In “Study 1” low versus high commitment was primed by asking participants to answer open-ended questions that brought to mind thoughts regarding either independence or dependence (low vs. high commitment). After priming, in “Study 2” forgiveness was measured; specifically, participants indicated how they would react to a series of hypothetical partner betrayals. Both destructive and constructive reactions to betrayal were assessed. Consistent with expectations, compared to participants in the low commitment priming condition, those in the high commitment priming condition were: (a) significantly less likely to react to betrayal in a destructive manner (i.e., with exit or neglect responses); and were (b) non-significantly more likely to react in a constructive manner (i.e., with voice or loyalty responses; see Figure 5). Commitment more powerfully inhibits destructive impulses than it promotes constructive acts. Interestingly, it is destructive actions that are more harmful to relationships; commitment is particularly powerful in inhibiting destructive
impulses.

Cognitive Maintenance Mechanisms

Perceived superiority. Commitment to a partner also fuels cognitive maintenance mechanisms. In the literature regarding self processes, there is abundant evidence that individuals’ perceptions of themselves are somewhat more positive than a strictly veridical view of the world can support. For example, individuals evaluate themselves in exceedingly positive ways, perceive that they possess greater control over events than they truly possess, and hold exceptionally optimistic beliefs regarding the future (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). Do people engage in parallel forms of illusion regarding intimate partners and relationships? As evidenced by recent research on this question, the answer is a resounding “yes.”

For example, past research has examined perceived superiority. Perceived superiority describes the tendency to perceive one’s relationship as both better than others’ relationships, and not as bad as others’ relationships. Using a simple thought-listing task, individuals were asked to record all of the thoughts that spontaneously come to mind regarding relationships, their own or others (Van Lange et al., 1999). Four key tendencies are evident in individuals’ thought lists. First, they have more positive thoughts about their own than about other relationships. Second, they possess fewer negative thoughts about their own than about other relationships. Third, they have more positive than negative thoughts about their own relationship. And fourth, they possess more negative than positive thoughts about others’ relationships. Moreover, these tendencies are greater to the extent that individuals are more committed.
Is perceived superiority a motivated process? A variety of techniques have been used to test this claim. First, perceived superiority is evident beyond concrete indices of relationship quality. Also, this tendency is not attributable to self-esteem – it rests on commitment. And to separate “reality from illusion,” instructional set has been varied (accuracy instructions vs. no instructions vs. threat instructions). Consistent with expectations, the association of commitment level with positive illusion (total perceived superiority) is stronger to the extent that psychological threat is stronger.

Cognitive interdependence. As individuals become increasingly committed to a relationship, and develop relationship-specific cognition, affect and behavioral responses, they come to think of their partners as part of themselves, and come to regard themselves as part of a collective unit that includes the partner. We use the label cognitive interdependence to describe this relational self – a sense of self that includes relationship-specific cognitive, affective and behavioral structures, along with an explicit consideration of the self as part of the relationship (Agnew & Etcheverry, 2006; Agnew, 2000; Agnew et al., 1998). Cognitive interdependence may be thought of as a habit of thinking that supports pro-relationship motivation and behavior. The existing literature both indirectly and directly supports the assertion that cognitive interdependence characterizes committed relationships. For example, actor-observer differences in attribution are attenuated for close partners in comparison to strangers, with such attenuation presumably occurring because the distinction between self and partner becomes blurred (Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988). Similarly, individuals tend to “reflect” others’ successes when the other is close, but not when the other is a stranger (Tesser, 1988). The existence of reflected experiences of success and parallel patterns
of self-partner attribution is compatible with the notion that commitment results in cognitive restructuring, including incorporation of a close partner into one’s sense of self.

Past research has directly tested whether strong commitment to a relationship is associated with a relatively pluralistic, other-inclusive cognitive representation of the self-in-relationship. For example, in a two-wave longitudinal investigation of romantic relationships (Agnew et al., 1998), cognitive interdependence was found to increase hand in hand with commitment level. The more romantically committed individuals became, the greater was the tendency to think about the relationship in a pluralistic, other-inclusive manner, as reflected, for example, in the spontaneous use of plural pronoun cognitions ("we," "us," "our," or "ours") to describe one’s self and one’s relationship. In addition, the more romantically committed individuals became, the more they came to regard themselves as "blended" with the partner, as revealed in perceived overlap in mental representations of self and partner (as measured with the Inclusion-Of-Other-In-The-Self Scale; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Furthermore, romantically committed individuals tended to regard their relationships as relatively central to who they are and what their lives are about.

The effects of commitment and cognitive interdependence were also found to be reciprocal: Earlier commitment was significantly associated with increases over time in levels of cognitive interdependence and earlier cognitive interdependence was significantly associated with increases over time in commitment level. Such reciprocal causal associations were anticipated, in that key processes in ongoing relationships unfold over extended periods of time. Such cyclical patterns have considerable adaptive value in the context of an ongoing involvement. Although the field of social
psychology has tended to emphasize models of unidirectional cause-and-effect, we believe that models of mutual cyclical influence may be a more suitable means of understanding causal processes in ongoing relationships. We discuss this point further below.

Interdependence and Interaction: Commitment, Trust, and Mutual Cyclical Growth

Interdependence theory suggests that partners are interdependent not only at the level of specific interactions – in terms of the specific behaviors and outcomes that constitute a given interdependence situation – but also at the level of broader motives – in terms of the transformations that partners routinely apply in deciding how to behave in specific interactions. Given the centrality of commitment in promoting pro-relationship behavior, it would be adaptive for partners to implicitly or explicitly attend to one another’s commitment. Why? First, dependence and commitment place the individual in a vulnerable position: the more you need something, the more you stand to lose. People attend carefully to risky, dangerous situations. Second, commitment promotes the sorts of pro-relationship behavior and cognition on which the very existence of a relationship rests. People attend carefully to how much others are willing to "contribute" to social entities (groups or dyads). Third, given that pro-relationship acts tend to be guided by reciprocity, it is adaptive to have a good sense of a partner’s motivation toward pro-relationship behavior. Fourth, given that mutuality of commitment represents balance of power, and given that balance of power is a stable pattern, it is adaptive to have a good understanding of the extent of a partner’s commitment.
Commitment, Trust, and Mutual Cyclical Growth

We suggest that trust is an implicit gauge of the strength of a partner’s commitment. Following Holmes and Rempel (1989), trust is defined not as a personal disposition but as a relationship-specific motive, as the abstract, positive expectation that the partner can be relied upon to care for one and be responsive to one’s needs, now and in the future. Trust has three components: (a) predictability – belief that the partner’s behavior is consistent, not volatile, (b) dependability – belief that the partner can be counted upon to be cooperative and essentially benevolent, and (c) faith – conviction that the partner is intrinsically motivated to be caring; belief that the partner’s motives go beyond instrumental reasons for benevolence.

According to Holmes and Rempel, John develops trust as a consequence of observing Mary behave well in the sorts of diagnostic situations described above. Developing trust is essentially a matter of uncertainty reduction, or in our language, trust represents confidence in the strength of a partner’s commitment. What are the consequences of enhanced trust? We suggest that as individuals become increasingly trusting, they become increasingly willing to take risks and make themselves vulnerable by becoming dependent on their relationships. They not only become more satisfied, but are also likely to drive away or derogate tempting alternatives and invest in their relationships in material and nonmaterial ways.

For an illustration of the process by which trust and commitment inspire mutual growth, see Figure 6. First, the state of dependence yields strong commitment. Second, strong commitment motives pro-relationship behaviors such as accommodation. Third, the partner’s observation of such behavior yields perceived pro-
relationship behavior. Fourth, perceived pro-relationship behavior (in diagnostic situations) induces strong partner trust. Fifth, strong trust makes the partner increasingly willing to become dependent on the relationship (increasingly satisfied, willing to drive away alternatives, and willing to invest in the relationship). Then the cycle continues. We are describing a process of mutual cyclical growth, a process whereby each person’s dependence, commitment, and pro-relationship acts operate on one another and feed back on one another in such a manner as to promote the continued health and vitality of the relationship (or, alternatively, to send a relationship into a spiral of deterioration).

**Empirical Evidence of Commitment, Trust, and Mutual Cyclical Growth**

We employed data from two longitudinal studies to test our model (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Study 1 was a three-wave longitudinal study of dating relationships, and Study 2 used data from a six-wave longitudinal study of marital relationships. Both studies obtained measures of each construct outlined in Figure 6. In each study there is non-independence of data on two dimensions (data from male and female partners are non-independent as are the data from each partner at each research occasion), so we performed hierarchical linear modeling analyses to test our predictions. All analyses examined main effects of participant sex, main effects of time, and all two- and three-factor interactions of each model variable with sex and time. In testing model links we examined concurrent simple associations, residualized lagged simple associations, and concurrent mediation analyses.

Does trust reflect the strength of partner commitment? First, we examined the association of each person’s commitment with the partner’s trust – the link between his
commitment and her trust, and between her commitment and his trust. This is not a
direct link in the model, but embodies our claim that trust is an implicit gauge of partner
commitment. Each person’s commitment was found to be significantly associated with
the partner’s trust level concurrently. Also, each person’s earlier commitment
significantly predicted change over time in partner trust level.

Next, we examined the simple associations between contiguous model variables. All
five concurrent associations were significant, in both studies; and most residualized
lagged associations were significant. Earlier measures of presumed predictors tended
to account for change over time in their presumed consequences (8 of 10 associations).

In subsequent mediation analyses, we obtained good support for our model of direct
and indirect associations. All presumed proximal predictors exhibited significant
associations with criteria. All presumed distal predictors exhibited significant
associations with criteria. However, in mediation analyses, when we examined the
simultaneous associations of each criterion with its presumed proximal and distal
predictors, presumed proximal predictors accounted for unique variance, whereas
coefficients for presumed distal predictors declined substantially (to nonsignificance).

For further evidence that our findings were specific to the relational constructs we
proposed and not to *any* relational constructs, we also examined attachment variables.
Commitment, dependence, and trust are clearly relevant to the issues of care-giving,
care-seeking, and felt security that are at the heart of attachment theory. When we
examine attachment variables along with the proximal interdependence predictor,
interdependence predictors continue to account for unique variance. Attachment
appears to operate “at the margins;” most associations with attachment style are in the
predicted direction, but these variables accounted for little of the variance in key criteria.

Theoretical Implications of the Model

There are number of important theoretical implications of this model. First, regarding the link between A’s Accommodation and B’s Perception of A’s Accommodation, disparities between the given situation and effective situation serve as the basis for attributional activity, revealing transformation-relevant motives. Departures from direct self-interest are meaningful. This link does not simply reflect projection (“I accommodate, my partner accommodates”), as the perception of a partner’s accommodation was found to be more powerfully related to the partner’s report of his or her accommodation than to one’s own report of one’s own accommodation. A social constructionist would suggest that perception is largely inside the head. Consistent with interdependence theory assumptions, however, it appears that interdependence structure and processes to some degree are “real” and perceivable by both partners.

Second, with respect to the concept of trust, when we place the interests of a relationship above personal interests in diagnostic situations, our partners trust us. Thus, trust is a function of the individual, partner, and situation. Situations provide opportunities to display pro-relationship motives – you cannot know that a partner is trustworthy unless his motives are tested. Individuals must “pass the test” in diagnostic situations and partners must perceive such acts, recognizing disparities from given preferences.

Third, with respect to the trust-dependence link, strong trust frees individuals from anxiety, allowing them to risk increased dependence. Trusting individuals not only become increasingly satisfied, but they also become more willing to drive away or
derogate alternatives and more willing to invest in the relationship in material and nonmaterial ways.

Fourth, it is important to note that trust is a product of the relationship, not a personal disposition. When we find that our partners do not trust us or will not commit to us, we often turn to personality as an explanation (“He has been hurt badly in the past”). What is more important than our history of dependence is what transpires in a specific relationship.

One final implication concerning the model as a whole: It is useful to conceptualize commitment and trust as aspects of what might be termed “relationship regulation.” Dependence yields commitment, which promotes pro-relationship acts; when partners perceive such acts they develop increased trust, and become increasingly willing to become dependent. Thus, changes in each person’s actions and motives trigger complementary changes in the partner. Adaptations such as these reside at the heart of an interdependence analysis of prosocial motives and behavior.

Over time, the process exhibited in Figure 6 yields mutuality. Equity theory, too, suggests that mutuality is beneficial. The problem with an equity analysis is that, according to equity theory, equally low dependence should be as healthy as equally high dependence. However, our results cannot be explained by this sort of analysis because growth requires more than 50-50 reciprocity. Partners must sometimes be willing to give more than the other, taking it on faith that the partner enacts as many pro-relationship acts as they do (or will do so over time). Moreover, equity theory suggests that mutuality results from conscious attention to fairness. Our model suggests that it results from lawful interdependence processes and that partners’ behavior may have little to do
with fairness *per se*. Indeed, from our perspective, there is a higher form of “goodness” than justice: it is benevolence.

**Summary and Conclusions**

*Interdependence Structure is Important*

First, interdependence structure is important. This chapter has highlighted two properties of situation structure – correspondence level (as in diagnostic situations) and dependence level (as a function of satisfaction, alternatives, investments). Why is it important to attend to situation structure? First, situations afford the display of motives. For example, John knows that Mary is committed and trusts her precisely because she accommodates and sacrifices, because she departs from her direct self-interest for the good of the relationship. Second, social cognition is “all about” understanding (a) situation structure *per se*, along with (b) the implications of one’s own and others’ behavior *in* specific situations. Too much social cognition research studies “free floating” cognition, cognition that is unhinged from the interpersonal setting to which it is relevant. Third, psychologists talk a lot about person-situation interactions, but do not often study the situation *per se*. As one example of this neglect, the most popular marital therapy is cognitive-behavioral, in which clinicians work on partners’ social skills and cognitions during conflict. Often, the “problem” faced by couple members is not so much that partners have bad manners or are thinking about the situation wrong. Rather, the problem is the problematic situations they confront. To help couples, we need to spend as much time on their circumstances of interdependence as on their social skills and cognition.
Commitment is a Central Motive

Second, commitment is a central motive. Commitment embodies partners’ interdependence histories, and motivates departures from direct self-interest in interdependence dilemmas.

Focusing on commitment represents a departure from a large body of relationship research that emphasizes the role of positive affect in shaping interpersonal behavior. However, feeling good is not enough. Social scientists place undue emphasis on positive affect, spending a lot of time studying satisfaction, positive attitudes, and favorable versus unfavorable stereotypes. Structural dependence and motives such as commitment play equally important roles in guiding behavior. In fact, commitment predicts continuation of behavior – in a relationship, at a job, with a specific product – better than any other variable we have examined (better than satisfaction, better than personality traits, better than dyadic adjustment).

Departures From Direct Self-Interest Are Visible and Meaningful

Third, departures from direct self-interest (i.e., from that which is predictable based on situation structure) are not only visible, but also provide meaningful information. To begin with, partners are reasonably in touch with their interdependence; for example, they perceive one another’s acts of accommodation with some degree of accuracy. They also recognize who is more committed, who needs the relationship more, etc. The field of psychology places a good deal of emphasis on cognitive bias, on illusion, on the extent to which human perception and cognition are “constructive processes.” Of course, perception and cognition are colored by motivation and error. But at the same time, humans are not totally out of touch with reality.
Moreover, departures from direct self-interest are meaningful. Accommodation, forgiveness, and other positive behaviors rest on pro-relationship transformation. In short, it is when people behave in ways that are not directly driven by the situation that we learn something about them.

Many theories of relationships emphasize the disappearance or transcendence of self-interest, arguing that with increasing closeness (a) people no longer distinguish between self-interest and partner-interests, or (b) people behave well simply because the partner needs it. Although people often behave well in interdependence dilemmas, such behavior is antithetical to self-interest. The continued existence and compelling nature of self-interest is precisely what makes prosocial behavior interesting.

*Prosocial Behavior is More than the Sum of its Part(ner)s*

Fourth, to misquote the Gestalt psychologists, prosocial behavior in close relationships is more than the sum of its part(ner)s. Much of contemporary psychology, even social psychology, is focused on the individual. We expend an enormous amount of energy studying individual-level attitudes and cognition and stereotypes. Even when we manage to “get outside of the head,” we still tend to explain behavior in terms of individual-level processes. For example, we study “self” processes (self-esteem, self-concept, self-regulation) or individual personality. Interdependence theory principles provide a solid basis for understanding truly social psychological phenomena, providing a particularly compelling account of prosocial motivations and behaviors. In so doing, it helps keep the “social” in social psychology.
References


Figure Captions

Figure 1: Transformation of Motivation Process
Figure 2: Reactions to Non-Dilemmas and Accommodative Dilemmas
Figure 3: Investment Model of Commitment
Figure 4: Investment Model Prediction of Relationship Fate
Figure 5: Priming Commitment to Influence Forgiveness of Betrayal
Figure 6: Model of Commitment, Trust, and Mutual Cyclical Growth
Figure 1

Given Situation → Transformation Process → Effective Situation → Behavior

Activation of Relevant Interpersonal Orientations

Cognition and Affect
  Habitual Tendencies

Interpersonal Orientations
  Dispositions; Relationship-Specific Motives; Norms
Figure 2
Figure 3

- Satisfaction Level (+)
- Quality of Alternatives (-)
- Investment Size (+)

Dependence Level

Commitment Level (+)

Persistence
Figure 4
Figure 5

Graph showing the level of response under different conditions.

- **Voice**
  - High Commitment Prime: 5
  - Low Commitment Prime: 5

- **Loyalty**
  - High Commitment Prime: 4
  - Low Commitment Prime: 4

- **Exit**
  - High Commitment Prime: 2
  - Low Commitment Prime: 3

- **Neglect**
  - High Commitment Prime: 3
  - Low Commitment Prime: 4

Legend:
- **High Commitment Prime**
- **Low Commitment Prime**