**Abstract**

When a prosocial actor helps someone, how do observers perceive their motives? Prior work has largely focused on two kinds of helping motives: selfish and selfless. We add nuance by examining perceptions of motives that fall somewhere in the middle: relationship-based motives (e.g., showing care, strengthening the helper-recipient relationship). We examine relationship-based motives across different social relationships and helping formats (e.g., anonymous, public). Across four studies (three preregistered, N = 1,882), we find that relationship-based motives are judged as less morally good than selfless motives (e.g., virtue) but more morally good than selfish motives (e.g., reputation-signaling). A selfish motive was ascribed more often, and a selfless motive less often, to agents who helped family versus strangers. Relationship-based motives were ascribed more often to agents who helped family versus strangers and to agents who reveal their identity only to the recipient versus to no one (anonymous) or to everyone (public).

*Keywords*: motives, moral judgment, prosocial behavior

**Relationship-Based Motives for Helping: Are They Seen as Selfish or Selfless?**

When a prosocial actor helps someone, how does an observer perceive the motives underlying their act? Prior work on the perceived motives of prosocial actors has largely focused on two types of motives: *selfless* motives and *selfish* motives (Barasch et al., 2014; Cialdini et al., 1987; Small & Cryder, 2016). Selfless motives are other-oriented (e.g., helping someone because it was the right thing to do), while selfishmotives are self-oriented (e.g., helping someone to boost your social image). In the current work, we extend this framework by examining perceptions of relationship-based motives for helping. When someone helps another person because they are a close friend or family member, do people see their motives as selfish or selfless?

For decades, scholars have examined how social relationships shape moral cognition (Gilligan, 1977). Rai & Fiske (2011) define moral actions as those that constitute social relationships, arguing that even violent acts serve to create, sustain, or regulate social ties (Fisk & Rai, 2014). The evolutionary benefits of prosocial behavior for developing, maintaining, and strengthening social bonds are well-documented (e.g., Brown & Brown, 2009; Hruschka et al., 2015). Even infants demonstrate a cognitive association between prosocial acts and social relationships, tending to infer affiliation from others’ helping behaviors (Power, 2022). Additionally, social neuroscience research further demonstrates the impact of social relationships on support behaviors, showing that activity in brain areas related to caregiving become more active when offering help to loved ones, reflecting motivation shifts from strategic reasons to genuine care for the recipient’s welfare (Clark-Polner & Clark, 2014).

Despite this emphasis on social relationships in moral cognition, research on perceptions of prosocial actors rarely addresses relationship-based motives. Prior studies find that helpers who aid strangers instead offamily members are perceived as less moral (Law et al., 2022; McManus et al., 2020, 2021), than those who help family members. Similarly, agents who prioritize the well-being of loved ones over strangers in moral dilemmas are judged as more moral than agents who are impartial (Hughes, 2017). This is likely because assigning precedence to close others’ health and prosperity is seen as an important moral and social obligation of close social relationships. Indeed, actions are judged morally based on how well they align with relational norms of expected cooperation (Earp et al., 2021). Cognitive biases also encourage helping close others; the closer the relationship, the more beneficial the recipient perceives the help and the less costly the helper perceives it (McGuire, 2003). This “labor of love” effect strengthens emotional bonds and encourages future helping.

However, helping close others is not always seen positively. For instance, when judged independently, helpers who aid strangers are often judged as more moral than those who aid family members because helping a stranger is viewed as “going above and beyond” social expectations (McManus et al., 2021). Similarly, donors with personal ties to charities (e.g., who have lost a friend to the misfortune supported by the charity) are perceived as more selfishly motivated than those without such connections (Lin-Healy & Small, 2012).

While prior research suggests that the helper-recipient relationship influences moral judgments, it typically considers relationship-based motives implicitly, limiting understanding of how explicit relationship-based motives are perceived. Few studies explore how the helper-recipient relationship may interact with the helping format (i.e., the anonymous versus public nature of their actions), which has been shown to be an important factor in moral judgments of prosocial acts. For instance, prior work shows that anonymous prosocial acts are often viewed as more selflessly motivated, whereas public prosocial acts signal reputation-building motives (Berman et al., 2015; Kraft-Todd et al., 2022).

How might the perceived motives of helpers vary depending on the helper-recipient relationship and helping format? Many helpful acts between close others are naturally non-anonymous (e.g., helping a partner with dishes, bringing soup to a sick friend). Rather than reputation-building, such acts may be perceived as motivated for relationship-building. Recent work shows that helpers who reveal their identity to the recipient are seen as more likely to be interested in initiating a relationship with the recipient than anonymous helpers (Freitas et al., 2019). Therefore, public helping of family members may be judged less negatively than public helping of strangers. Distinctions may also arise between revealing one’s identity only to the recipient (e.g., helping your partner privately) and revealing it publicly (e.g., posting about it on social media). It is possible that only in the former might helpers be perceived as motivated by relationship-building.

Drawing from existing theories of helping, we propose that identity disclosure is interpreted differently depending on the helper-recipient relationship. According to interdependence theory (Murray et al., 2009), people in close relationships are expected to prioritize each other’s needs. In this case, revealing one’s identity when helping may be seen as fulfilling a social duty to the recipient (Yu & Chaudhry, 2024), especially when anonymity might create discomfort or emotional distance. In contrast, when the recipient is a stranger, identity disclosure may be seen as unnecessary and instead interpreted through the lens of generalized reciprocity (Yamagishi & Kiyonari, 2000), where helping publicly serves to build a trustworthy reputation that may pay off in future social interactions.

In this investigation, we test these possibilities by examining how observers perceive relationship-based motives for helping in two relationship contexts (family and strangers) and how helping format (anonymous, public, known-to-recipient) influences these perceptions. We compare relationship-based motives with selfish (reputation-based) and selfless (virtue-based) motives. As shown in past work (McManus et al., 2020, 2021), studies on motive perceptions may yield different results depending on whether the helper is evaluated on their own or in comparative or dilemma-based contexts. For example, Bartels (2008) found that participants are more likely to make normatively consistent moral judgments, such as recognizing that sacrificing nine lives is worse than sacrificing three, when evaluating options side by side rather than in isolation. In the current work, we test how observers interpret motives across multiple helpers, enabling comparisons that reflect real-world contexts where multiple types of help often coexist.

Based on prior work and results from Pilot Study 1 (reported in the Supplementary Materials), we constructed the following hypotheses. Since helping family members is associated with inherent relational bonds, we hypothesized that agents who help family members will be perceived as more likely than agents who help strangers to have been motivated by relationship-based motives (H1), including to show care to the recipient and strengthen one’s relationship with the recipient. We also explored whether this effect would be strongest in the known-to-recipient condition, where revealing one’s identity to the recipient may enhance relationship-building. Additionally, since helping others may be seen as genuine concern for another’s well-being, regardless of their relationship to the recipient, we hypothesized that there will be no differences in how likely they are perceived to have been motivated by the Selfless motive (H2). Also, since both those who help family and those who help strangers may have something to gain from helping, such as personal satisfaction, self-enhancement, gratitude, reciprocity, and reputational benefits, we hypothesize that there will be no differences in how likely they are perceived to have been motivated by the Selfish motive (H3). Finally, in line with past work (McManus et al., 2020, 2021), we hypothesized that agents who help family members will be perceived as less morally good than agents who help strangers (H4). We summarize these hypotheses in Table 2 below.

**Current Studies**

We examine the interactive effects of social relationships and helping format on the extent to which helpers are perceived as being motivated to help for selfless, selfish, and relationship-based reasons. Across 3 studies, we investigated the perceived motives of helpers across different relationships contexts (family, strangers) and helping formats (anonymous, public, known-to-recipient), and demonstrate the generalizability of our findings across six different helping scenarios. In these studies, the Selfless motive is “they believed it was the right thing to do”, the Selfish motive is “they wanted others to think they are a good person” and the two Relationship-based motives are “they wanted [the recipient] to know that they care” (Show Care) and “they wanted to strengthen their relationship with [the recipient]” (Strengthen Relationship). These categories were selected based on prior theoretical and empirical work on virtue-based vs. reputation-based helping (e.g., Barasch et al., 2014) and moral motives within close social relationships (e.g., Rai & Fiske, 2011; McManus et al., 2021). The motive labels were not presented alongside the descriptions (see note on motive labels in Supplementary Materials). Studies 1-3 were preregistered (Study 1: <https://aspredicted.org/2RC_QGW>; Study 2: <https://osf.io/2xszy/?view_only=d73ad934ae25409abffcd884437bebfc>; Study 3: <https://osf.io/qzw29/?view_only=1b33dd65cdbf413588ebe042422127d1>). All preregistrations included the hypotheses, methods, and analysis plan. There were minor deviations from the preregistrations as additional exploratory analyses were conducted on additional potential helping motives. All materials, data, and analysis scripts are publicly available: <https://osf.io/xuqw8/?view_only=229c44f67f9e41379c87cba6bc5c5802>.

**Methods**

Across studies, we used 3 X 2 within-participants designs to examine the effects of Helper-Recipient Relationship (family, stranger) and Helping Format (anonymous, known to recipient, public) on the perceived likelihood and/or moral goodness of selfless, selfish, and relationship-based motives for helping, as well as the moral character of the helpers (for a visualization of this design, see Supplementary Figure 1). In line with recent recommendations to prioritize comparisons across structured variations in moral judgment tasks (McManus et al., 2023), this within-person approach enabled us to assess whether individuals consistently differentiated among helping contexts and motives, rather than relying on group-level averages that may obscure these distinctions. Although this fully crossed design explores a range of helping conditions, it does not encompass the full range of possible relationships and helping formats. Additionally, since it may seem unlikely for a helper to be driven by relationship-based motives without making their identity salient to the recipient, the anonymous family helper condition may seem at first glance improbable. However, many acts of helping, particularly in close relationships, occur without explicit acknowledgement, such as quietly taking out the trash or replacing remote batteries without telling a partner. While relationship-based motives are likely enhanced by explicit recognition, they do not necessarily require it. Thus, we examine the impact of Helper-Recipient Relationship across all three Helping Formats.

We utilized within-participants designs to ensure that all potential helpers were salient in participants’ minds while they completed the assessment, reducing potential biases in participants’ responses that could be produced by only seeing one potential helper. Study 1 examined motive perceptions in the context of an online donation. Study 2 replicated these effects using a different measure of perceived motive salience and moral judgment. Study 3 replicated these effects across six different helping scenarios (e.g., cleaning an elderly person’s yard, giving food to someone who was laid off), randomized between participants. Across studies, participants were American adults recruited on Prolific between October 2022 and September 2023. Sample characteristics are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Sample Characteristics Across Studies*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Study** | **Age** M (SD) | **Gender** |
| Female | Male | Nonbinary | Other |
| **Study 1** (N = 199) | 37.23 (13.97) | 108 | 82 | 7 | 2 |
| **Study 2** (N = 230) | 41.59 (14.38) | 137 | 89 | 3 | 1 |
| **Study 3** (N = 1,238) | 43.55 (13.77) | 586 | 627 | 18 | 7 |

**Table 2**

*Study Predictions and Hypotheses*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Prediction** | **Outcome** | **Expected Result** |
| H1: Relationship-based motives will be perceived as more likely for helping family vs. stranger | Relationship-based motives | Family > Stranger |
| Exploratory: The difference between family and strangers in relationship-based motives will be strongest in the known to recipient condition | Relationship-based motives | Known Family > other targets |
| H2: No differences in perceived likelihood of Selfless motives for helping family vs. stranger | Selfless motives | Family = Stranger |
| H3: No differences in perceived likelihood of Selfish motives for helping family vs. stranger | Selfish motives | Family = Stranger |
| H4: Helping family vs. strangers will be perceived as less morally good | Moral goodness | Family < Stranger |
| Replication: Selfish motives will be perceived as most likely in the public condition | Selfish motives | Public > AnonymousPublic > Known |
| Replication: Selfless motives will be perceived as most likely in the anonymous condition | Selfless motives | Anonymous > PublicAnonymous > Known |
| Exploratory: Relationship-based motives will be perceived as most likely in the known-to-recipient condition | Relationship-based motives | Known > AnonymousKnown > Public |

***Procedures***

After reading about each of six helpers who helped a person in need, participants evaluated the potential motives of each helper separately in a random order. First, they rated how likely it was that each helper helped for each of four potential motives on a five-point Likert scale from “Extremely unlikely” to “Extremely likely”. Participants in Study 1 then evaluated the moral goodness of each potential motive for each helper on a six-point Likert scale from “Extremely morally bad” to “Extremely morally good.” Participants in Studies 2 and 3 were also asked to indicate how much each motive contributed to that donor’s decision to donate on a scale from 0 to 100. Participants were instructed to assign these proportions such that if they thought, for example, that a given motive accounted for 50% of the donor’s decision to donate, then they should enter 50 for that motive. Since the results of this contribution task closely mirrored the overall pattern of findings from the Likert-scale ratings, we report them in full in the Supplementary Materials.

Finally, participants rated the moral character of each helper simultaneously. Participants in Study 1 rated them on a bipolar scale from 0 (Extremely bad) to 100 (Extremely good). Participants in Studies 2 and 3 rated them on a monopolar five-point Likert scale from “Not at all morally good” to “Extremely morally good”. Although different response formats were used across studies, the relative patterns of attribution were consistent. To assess interrelationships among motive perceptions, we computed average between-motive likelihood correlations across studies. The two relationship-based motives were strongly correlated (*r* = .67), suggesting they reflect a similar underlying construct. Both were moderately positively correlated with the selfish motive (*r* = .34–.35) and weakly negatively correlated with the selfless motive (*r* = –.13 and –.12), indicating that relationship-based motives may be perceived as somewhat self-interested but distinct from purely selfish or selfless motives. The selfless and selfish motives were moderately negatively correlated (*r* = –.37). Together, these patterns provide support for the discriminant and convergent validity of the motive measures. Full motive likelihood correlations within each study are reported in Supplementary Table 1.

***Power Analysis (All Studies)***

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G\*Power3 (Faul et al., 2007) to test the difference between two dependent means using a two-tailed test, an effect size of *dz* = .20, and an alpha of .05. Results showed that a total sample of 199 participants was required to achieve a power of .80. We chose *dz* of 0.20 as our smallest effect size of practical and theoretical significance. Although this power analysis was based on pairwise comparisons, it does not directly account for the power to detect a 3 × 2 within-subjects interaction. Recent simulation-based guidelines from Lakens & Caldwell (2021) suggest that detecting small interaction effects (*f* = .10) in a 3 × 2 within-subjects design requires a sample size of 384 participants. Based on these benchmarks, we acknowledge that Studies 1 (N = 199) and 2 (N = 230) were underpowered to detect small interaction effects. However, Study 3 (N = 1,240) was well-powered to detect even modest interaction effects in our design.

**Results**

***Perceived Moral Goodness of Motives (Study 1)***

First, we examined the moral goodness ratings of each motive (Figure 1). The Selfless motive had the highest mean moral goodness rating (M = 5.44, SD = 0.58), followed by the two Relationship-Based motives, Show Care (M = 5.14, SD = 0.65) and Strengthen Relationship (M = 4.55, SD = 0.77), and, finally, the Selfish motive (M = 3.23, SD = 0.99). These findings demonstrate that people tend to think relationship-based motives fall somewhere in between selfless and selfish motives in terms of moral goodness.

**Figure 1**

*Mean Perceived Moral Goodness of Helping Motives*

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*Note: Mean Perceived Moral Goodness of Helping Motives in Study 1. Error bars depict 95% confidence intervals.*

***Perceived Likelihood of Motives (All Studies)***

 Next, we examined the impact of Helper-Recipient Relationship (Relationship) and Helping Format on motive perceptions. To examine the fixed effects and interaction effects of the helper-recipient relationship and helping format on the perceived likelihood of each motive, we conducted two-way repeated-measures ANOVAs (Table 3). If a significant interaction effect was observed, a series of post-hoc two-way ANOVAs were conducted on 2x2 subsets of Helping Format and Relationship to identify where the interaction effect occurred. If no significant interaction effect was observed but a main effect of Helping Format and/or Relationship was observed, post-hoc Tukey tests were conducted to examine the main effects. We summarize the results here and report full models in the Supplementary Materials. The mean perceived likelihood of each motive across studies is displayed in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Mean Perceived Likelihood of Motives Across Studies*

**

*Note:* Mean perceived likelihood of helping motives across studies. Error bars depict 95% confidence intervals. Known to R. indicates Known to Recipient condition.

**Table 3**

*Two-Way ANOVAs for the Likelihood of Each Potential Motive*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **DV** | **Source of variation** | **Study 1** | **Study 2** | **Study 3** |
| Selfless Motive | Helping Format | F(2, 396) = 35.80, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .051 | F(2, 458) = 49.65, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .055 | F(2, 1888) = 334.90, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .104 |
| Relationship | F(1, 198) = 19.31, *p* < .001, *ηp2*= .007 | F(1, 229) = 1.23, *p* = .268, *ηp2* < .001 | F(1, 944) = 18.28, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .001 |
| Interaction | F(2, 396) = 11.53, *p* < .001, *ηp2*= .008 | F(2, 458) = 2.86, *p* = .059, *ηp2*= .001 | F(2, 1888) = 35.06, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .004 |
|  | Show Care Motive | Helping Format | F(2, 396) = 256.30, *p* < .001, *ηp2*= .360 | F(2, 458) = 392.70, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .357 | F(2, 2474) = 2041,*p* < .001, *ηp2* = .387 |
| Relationship | F(1, 198) = 51.22, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .023 | F(1, 229) = 113.00, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .026 | F(1, 1237) = 617.20, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .027 |
| Interaction | F(2, 396) = 18.72, *p* < .001, *ηp2*= .014 | F(2, 458) = 36.06, *p* < .001, *ηp2*= .012 | F(2, 2474) = 133.10, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .008 |
| Strengthen Relationship Motive | Helping Format | F(2, 396) = 306.90, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .346 | F(2, 458) = 485.10, *p* < .001, *ηp2* < .280 | F(2, 2474) = 2641, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .298 |
| Relationship | F(1, 198) = 373.50, *p* < .001, *ηp2*= .231 | F(1, 229) = 656.40, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .204 | F(1, 1237) = 2100, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .151 |
| Interaction | F(2, 396) = 62.69, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .059 | F(2, 458) = 71.48, *p* < .001, *ηp2*= .032 | F(2, 2474) = 412.50, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .032 |
| Selfish Motive | Helping Format | F(2, 396) = 407.90, *p* < .001, *ηp2*= 472. | F(2, 458) = 547.40, *p* < .001, *ηp2*= .493 | F(2, 1888) = 1927.0, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .435 |
| Relationship | F(1, 198) = 0.81, *p* = .370, *ηp2* < .001 | F(1, 229) = 2.77, *p* < .001, *ηp2*< .001 | F(1, 944) = 18.94, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .001 |
| Interaction | F(2, 396) = 8.48, *p* < .001, *ηp2*= .005 | F(2, 458) = 3.73, *p* = .025, *ηp2*= .001 | F(2, 1888) = 19.90, *p* < .001, *ηp2* = .001 |

**Selfless Motive.** While there was a significant main effect of Relationship on the perceived likelihood of the selfless motive in Study 1 (such that agents who helped family were seen as more likely to have helped for a selfless reason than agents who helped strangers), there was no significant main effect of Relationship in Studies 2 or 3, supporting H2. Across studies, anonymous helpers were seen as most likely to have helped for a selfless reason, followed by known-to-recipient helpers, and, finally, public helpers. Across studies, we found an interaction effect between Helping Format and Relationship, indicating that agents who helped strangers publicly were seen as especially unlikely to have helped for a selfless reason.

**Selfish Motive.** In Studies 2 and 3, and although we did not expect a significant effect of Relationship based on pilot work (H3), agents who helped family were seen as more likely to have helped for a selfish reason. Across studies, we found an interaction effect between Helping Format and Relationship such that differences between public helpers and the other two helping formats were smaller in the family condition than the stranger condition (i.e., agents who helped family anonymously and known only to the recipient were viewed as slightly more likely to have helped for a selfish motive and agents who helped family publicly were viewed as slightly less likely to have helped for a selfish motive than those who helped strangers). The latter may reflect the fact that agents who helped strangers publicly were seen as less likely to be motivated by relationship-based concerns, thereby increasing the relative salience of selfish motives in the absence of a relational explanation. Consistent with prior work (e.g., Barasch et al., 2014), the motive contribution results showed that agents who helped strangers publicly were viewed as most strongly motivated by the selfless motive.

 **Relationship-Based Motives.** Across studies, agents who helped family were seen as more likely than agents who helped strangers to have donated to show their care for the recipient and to strengthen their relationship with the recipient. For both motives, there was an interaction effect between Helping Format and Relationship such that agents who helped strangers were seen as especially unlikely to have helped for relationship-based motives in the public and known-to-recipient conditions compared to the anonymous condition. This may be because agents who helped strangers in the known-to-recipient condition may have been seen as less plausible, contributing to the unexpected drop in relational motive likelihood ratings. Importantly, the motive contribution results help clarify this effect, showing that, for both strangers and family members, relationship-based motives were perceived to contribute most to the decision to help in the public condition, followed by the known-to-recipient condition, and least in the anonymous condition. Known-to-recipient helpers were seen as most likely to have been motivated to strengthen their relationship with the recipient, followed by public helpers, and, finally, anonymous helpers.

***Perceived Moral Character of Helpers***

Next, we examined the impact of Relationship on the perceived moral character of helpers (Figure 3). Across all studies, agents who helped strangers were seen as more morally good than agents who helped families. This difference was not significant in Study 1, but this was likely due to the bipolar scale of moral character used in Study 1, which was replaced by the monopolar scale for Studies 2-3. This effect was marginal in Study 2 and significant in Study 3. The impact of Relationship varied across scenarios in Study 3, suggesting that there may be features of the situation (e.g., whether it is online or in person) that influence moral judgments of helpers who help close versus distant others. Future work should clarify these effects.

**Figure 3**

*Mean Perceived Moral Character of Helpers Across Studies*

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*Note: Mean perceived moral character of helpers across studies. Error bars depict 95% confidence intervals.*

To examine the relationship between the perceived likelihood of each type of motive and the moral character judgments of helpers, we calculated the average correlation between each motive and moral character judgments across studies. The Selfless motive had a moderate positive correlation with moral character (*r* = 0.47, *p* < .001) and the Show Care motive had a weak positive correlation (*r* = 0.20, *p* < .001), suggesting that the more helpers are seen as motivated to do the right thing and to show care for the recipient, the more moral they are judged to be. Additionally, the Strengthen Relationship motive had a very weak, close to null correlation with moral character (*r* = -0.03, *p* = .418), suggesting that the extent to which helpers are seen as motivated to strengthen their relationship with the recipient is unrelated to judgments of their moral characters. Finally, the Selfish motive (*r* = -0.19, *p* < .001) had a weak negative correlation with moral character, suggesting that the more helpers are seen as being selfishly motivated, the less moral they are judged to be.

**General Discussion**

 Across three high-powered studies, we investigated perceptions of the moral goodness and the likelihood of selfish, selfless, and relationship-based motives for helping, as well as the proportion that each type of motive contributes to decisions to help and the moral character of helpers. We examined these effects across two different types of social relationships (family, strangers) and three different helping formats (anonymous, public, known-to-recipient donors).

We found that relationship-based motives, such as showing care to the recipient and strengthening one’s relationship with the recipient, are perceived as less morally good than a selfless, virtue-based motive but as more morally good than a selfish, reputation-based motive. Observers are more likely to ascribe relationship-based motives to agents who help family than agents who help strangers, especially when they disclose their identity only to the recipient (“known-to-recipient”). Indeed, the results of the motive contribution measure indicated that observers attribute about 50% of these helpers’ decisions to help to relationship-based motives, underscoring their perceived importance in these helping contexts (see Supplementary Materials). This may be because, by selectively disclosing their identity to the recipient, these helpers are perceived as wanting to establish a more personal and intimate connection with their recipient than anonymous helpers, who remain unknown to their recipient, and public helpers, who are known to all observers.

We also found that certain relationship-based motives are more strongly related to judgments of helpers’ moral characters than other relationship-based motives. Specifically, helpers who are seen as more likely to have helped to show their care for the recipient were judged as more morally good, but perceptions of the likelihood that helpers helped to strengthen their relationship with the recipient were not significantly associated with moral judgments. This complex pattern suggests there may be important nuance even within the category of relationship-based motives for helping. It is possible that relationship-strengthening motives have more crucial implications for moral character judgments in defined community or social group contexts where reciprocal helping is more common or crucial to social life. Future work should continue to explore relationship-based motives to clarify these findings, as well as how motive perceptions may interact with other factors, such as perceived traits (e.g., a public helper being seen as arrogant), norm violations, and authenticity to shape how helpers are evaluated.

While we found differences in the extent to which motive attributions shape moral character judgments, they may also shape other aspects of social cognition and behavior. For example, since helping someone signals a helper’s commitment to their relationship with that person, motive attributions play a key role in establishing and maintaining social relationships (Imada, 2020). Prior work shows that the more people attribute prosocial motives to helpers, the more people report intending to cooperate with them (Guo, 2023), the higher performance evaluations they receive (Badawy et al., 2016), and the more rewards they are allocated (Johnson et al., 2002).

In the present work, we have largely explored the helper-recipient relationship and helping format as independent factors, but it is also possible that observers make inferences about helping format based on the helper-recipient relationship (or vice-versa). For example, observers may believe that fewer people are likely to find out the identity of an agent who helps a stranger compared to an agent who helps a close other. As a result, observers may assume that there is greater anonymity surrounding helping strangers than helping close others. Similarly, observers may assume that, given the intimacy indicated by the selective disclosure of their identity to the recipient, known-to-recipient helpers are more likely to have a close relationship with the recipient than anonymous or public helpers. Future work can determine the influence of the helper-recipient relationship on inferences about the helping format, and vice-versa, and how these inferences in turn shape motive attributions.

We note that one limitation of the present work is that motive perceptions were assessed with a pre-specified list of potential motives. It is an open question how readily accessible these motives are to participants. The salience of relationship-oriented motives may depend on the framing of moral situations. For instance, some prior work (e.g., Moral Foundations Theory) distinguishes between the moral value of fairness (based on reciprocal altruism) and the moral value of loyalty (based on coalitional cognition) (Graham et al., 2013). Other work distinguishes between reciprocity and charity (or need-based giving) (Niemi et al., 2017). This work finds that charity is viewed as more fair and morally praiseworthy, and based less on one’s personal goals, than reciprocity. To which category does helping close others belong? While helping close others reflects partiality, which is often criticized as showing bias or favoritism (Shaw, 2013), the current work demonstrates that partiality as relationship-building may be perceived as a moral middle ground. The same features that distinguish relationship-driven helping from blind impartiality also reflect its sensitivity to social roles and expectations, something that observers see as both somewhat selfish and somewhat selfless. In this way, helping as a form of relationship-building may occupy a unique psychological space that bridges values often portrayed as conflicting, such as loyalty and fairness.

In addition, although our within-subjects design maximized power and allowed us to examine multiple conditions within participants, it may have introduced contrast effects that do not fully reflect how people make moral judgments in everyday life. To address this concern, we conducted an exploratory between-subjects analysis using only the first helper each participant evaluated in Study 3, before any comparisons could occur. The results of this analysis closely mirrored the within-subjects findings, with similar patterns of attribution across all four motives. For instance, for both relationship-based motives, we observed significant main effects of both helping format and relationship, as well as a significant interaction, such that this motive was most attributed to family helpers and particularly in the known-to-recipient condition. This suggests that our core effects are not solely artifacts of within-participant comparisons. Notably, while the between-subjects subset included adequate sample sizes for most cells (n = 215–234), two conditions, the strangers who helped publicly (n = 174) and strangers who were known only to the recipient (n = 191), fell just below our preregistered power target of 199 participants. Thus, although slightly underpowered for detecting smaller effects in these conditions, the consistency of findings across designs offers additional support for the robustness of our results. We report the full two-way ANOVAs for these between-subjects comparisons in Supplementary Table 9.

Finally, our findings are situated within a specific cultural context, American adults, and may not generalize to cultural settings with more interdependent models of the self, where loyalty and relational obligations are more central to moral reasoning (e.g., Miller et al., 1990). As we have theorized in prior work (e.g., McManus et al., 2020), the impact of relational obligations on moral praise may depend on whether helping occurs in a tradeoff context, where favoring a relative over a non-relative may be especially valued, or in a non-exclusive context, where helping a relative does not involve forgoing help to others and may therefore be seen as expected, making help to non-relatives appear more discretionary and praiseworthy.

Relatedly, our findings pertain to perceptions of individual helping directed at other individuals. It remains an open question whether the same patterns would emerge when the helper is an organization, the recipient is a non-human entity (e.g., animals or the environment), or the act is publicly framed as norm-setting or advocacy. Recent work suggests that even norm-signaling motives, which are ostensibly prosocial, may be perceived skeptically when helping is public, particularly for acts of generosity (Kraft-Todd, Kleiman-Weiner, & Young, 2023). Exploring how these contextual factors shape motive attributions will be essential for understanding the broader boundaries of our findings.

**Conclusion**

When people observe others engaging in helping behavior, they infer different underlying motives for helping. The current work adds nuance to the existing literature on motive attributions by examining attributions of relationship-based motives for helping. We demonstrate that relationship-based motives are perceived as occupying an intermediate moral position, between selfish and selfless motives, and are more likely to be attributed to helpers who help close others, especially when only the recipient knows about the good deed. The present work therefore helps to situate the study of evaluations of prosocial behavior within the context of social relationships.**References**

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**Appendix A**

**Anonymous Donor (Study 1)**

Gordon, who doesn't know Ryan personally, came across the "Go Fund Me" page. After some deliberation, Gordon decided to donate $100 to Ryan. When asked if he would like to disclose his identity alongside his donation, Gordon chose not to reveal his identity to Ryan or to anyone else who could see the donation page. Therefore, only Gordon himself would know whose donation it was.

**Known-to-Recipient Donor (Study 1)**

Kevin, who doesn't know Ryan personally, came across the "Go Fund Me" page. After some deliberation, Kevin decided to donate $100 to Ryan. When asked if he would like to disclose his identity alongside his donation, Kevin chose to reveal his identity to Ryan, but Kevin did not reveal his identity to anyone else who would eventually see the donation page. Therefore, in addition to Kevin himself, Ryan and anyone that Ryan told would know whose donation it was.

**Non-Anonyous Donor (Study 1)**

Isaac, who doesn't know Ryan personally, came across the "Go Fund Me" page. After some deliberation, Isaac decided to donate $100 to Ryan. When asked if he would like to disclose his identity alongside his donation, Isaac chose to reveal his identity both to Ryan and to anyone else who would eventually see the donation page. Therefore, in addition to Isaac himself, Ryan, anyone who Ryan told, and anyone else who saw the donation page would know whose donation it was.

**Appendix B**

*Six Helping Scenarios in Study 3*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **GoFundMe**Ryan was recently diagnosed with early-stage skin cancer. If treated soon, he has a high chance of survival. However, Ryan’s health insurance is subpar; it will only cover about 50% of his treatment and he will be unable to continue to work and gain an income. Because of this, Ryan created a “Go Fund Me” page, asking for donations to help pay his medical bills. The “Go Fund Me” page has been widely shared since its creation, reaching Ryan's family and friends, as well as people who Ryan has never seen or met before. | **Food Bin**Ryan recently lost his job due to a nation-wide layoff at his company. Although he has been working hard to apply to as many job openings as he can, he is struggling to find something new. As he searches for a new job, Ryan has been using what little savings he has to pay his rent, and hasn't been able to afford buying much food. For his last few meals, he has eaten at the local food pantry. Ryan was recently spotlighted in a news article about the layoffs, which detailed his situation. At the end of the article, there is an address for a secured donation bin where people can donate nonperishable food items for Ryan. The article states that Ryan checks the donation bin every day at noon, but donations are accepted anytime. The article has been widely shared, reaching Ryan’s family and friends, as well as people who Ryan has never seen or met before. |
| **College Fund**Ryan lives in a low-income neighborhood and has always dreamed about going to college. Recently, he was accepted into a top university but did not receive enough financial aid to cover the cost of his tuition, room, and board. Because of this, Ryan has set up a donation box on the corner of the local grocery store, where he sometimes stands and asks for donations to help him cover the costs of attendance. Many people have seen Ryan on the corner, including his family and friends, as well as people who Ryan has never seen or met before | **Struggling Student**Ryan has been working hard to maintain his grades in college while also juggling a part-time job to pay his rent. However, despite his best efforts, he has faced significant challenges in one of his biology courses this year. If he does not pass the final exam, he will fail the course and need to take an extra semester of classes in order to fulfill his graduation requirements. Ryan has posted about his struggles on social media. Many people have seen Ryan's post, including his family and friends, as well as people who Ryan has never seen or met before. |
| **Clean Yard**Ryan has lived alone in his home for decades. His house, once the pride of the neighborhood, has slowly fallen into disrepair over the years. His mobility has declined with age, making it difficult for him to maintain the property. Over time, his yard had become cluttered with a massive amount of debris and plant overgrowth. The clutter now poses a safety hazard for Ryan, who uses a cane to walk. Many people have seen the debris in Ryan's yard, including his family and friends, as well as people who Ryan has never seen or met before. | **School Project**Ryan is working on completing his middle school science fair project. To collect the data for the project, Ryan needs 50 people to complete a survey. The survey is long with several free response questions and takes about 1 hour to complete. Two days before the project was due, Ryan still had not collected enough responses on the survey. In a panic, he posted about it on social media, asking people to complete the survey. The post has been widely shared, reaching Ryan's family and friends, as well as people who Ryan has never seen or met before. |