



## Friends without benefits: When we react negatively to helpful and generous friends



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### ABSTRACT

Being able to identify reliable friends and allies is key to surviving and thriving in the social world. Many cooperative accounts of friendship argue that people select friends based on how helpful and generous they are. While people certainly like helpful and generous others, here we explore a context in which people might respond negatively to a friend being prosocial: When one's friend is more helpful or generous toward another friend. We argue that such preferential prosociality prompts negative reactions, even when the alternative is a friend being less prosocial overall, because giving preferentially to another friend may be viewed as a threat of potential displacement of one's own friendship. In four studies ( $N = 702$ ), we predict and find that people respond negatively to a friend who was more helpful (Studies 1–2) and generous (Studies 3–4), preferring instead that a friend be less helpful and generous overall. Importantly, this preferential prosociality was viewed as particularly negative when the recipient was another friend and was seen as much less negative when the recipient was a relative (Study 1 and 4) or a romantic partner (Study 2). We discuss the implications of these results for cooperation and alliance-based accounts of friendship.

Having friends is key to thriving in the social world, which is why it is critically important that people be able to identify good, reliable friends. In general, people like those who are helpful and generous more than those who are not (for review, see [Barclay, 2016](#)). Therefore, it seems obvious that you would like someone better if that person helped a friend rather than if they failed to help a friend. However, imagine that your friend had not helped you the week before. Now, do you like this friend better when this friend helps another friend or if this friend helps neither of you? Despite the fact that the former friend is more helpful, this decision is not so easy because when it comes to evaluating our friends, we not only want friends who are helpful and generous generally, we want friends who will be preferentially helpful and loyal to us ([DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009a](#)). If preferential help is taken as a signal that we are less valued by a friend, then we might respond quite negatively to a friend who is more helpful. Here we investigate such cases, but first briefly review two broad accounts of friendship that make different predictions about how someone might respond to cases like the one above.

Many accounts of partner choice and friendship focus on cooperation, holding that people select friends based on the cooperative benefits they provide. People can select partners based on a number of dimensions that track the partner's willingness and ability to confer benefits and impose costs, including formidability, and attractiveness

([Barclay, 2016](#); [Lukaszewski et al., 2016](#); [Noë & Hammerstein, 1995](#); [Sell, 2011](#); [Virgil, 2007](#)). However, a large portion of the literature has focused on one particular dimension: how prosocial or cooperative the partner is. These cooperative accounts argue that direct reciprocity (we like and help those who help us), indirect reciprocity (we like and help those who help others), and partner choice drive us to select partners and friends based on the cooperative benefits that they provide ([Baumard et al., 2013](#); [Kenny, Mohr, & Levesque, 2001](#); [Nelson, 2002](#); [Peck, 1993](#); [Rand & Nowak, 2013](#)). In line with these ideas, we know that people evaluate others positively for being helpful and generous ([Barclay, 2013](#); [Delton, Krasnow, Cosmides & Tooby, 2011](#); [Gurven & Winking, 2008](#); [Panchanathan & Boyd, 2004](#); [Shaw, DeScioli, & Olson, 2012](#)) and that people attempt to signal to others that they are cooperative when trying to attract partners ([Andreoni and Bernheim, 2009](#); [Barclay & Willer, 2007](#); [Reis & Gruen, 1976](#)). These cooperative accounts suggest that people select partners based on their cooperativeness and generosity, both to the agent specifically and to other agents more generally (for review, see [Hess and Hagen, 2006](#)).

In relation to scenarios like the one outlined above, cooperative models argue that an agent should respond more negatively to a friend who helps no one rather than a friend who helps at least one person. Indeed, in this case, helping the other friend inflicts no additional direct costs on the agent and so the friend either effectively “defects” against

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two agents or only one agent. These cooperative accounts of friendship should therefore predict a more negative response to the person who helps no one.

However, other models of friendship make different predictions because they hold that a good friend is not only helpful in general, but is also more likely to prioritize helping the individual than someone else (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009a; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). One such model, the alliance account, argues that people should care about how their friend ranks them relative to others, not only about their friend's overall kindness (DeScioli & Kurzban 2009a). Consistent with this, DeScioli and Kurzban (2009a) found that a person's perceived rank among their friends was the strongest predictor of friendship strength, more than the cooperative benefits of the relationship, similarity, or other traditional predictors (see also, DeScioli, Kurzban, Koch, & Liben-Nowell, 2011). Specifically, these authors found that people were most likely to rank friends higher if those friends also ranked them higher and use these rankings to decide whose side to take in potential conflicts. Similar to how countries are obligated to take an ally's side over a non-ally in a dispute (Liska, 1962), the alliance account suggests that, all else being equal, people provide support based on how they rank their allies (friends). Because these rankings are necessarily zero-sum (if someone else is ranked higher, then one is ranked lower), the alliance account posits that one's relative standing among other friends is particularly important (a related model by Tooby & Cosmides (1996) based on "irreplaceability" makes similar predictions to the alliance account in the contexts examined here; we return to these two models in the General Discussion).

The importance of friendship rank would prompt people to monitor their place relative to others and respond negatively to the threat of being displaced with some form of friendship jealousy (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009a, 2011; Shaw, 2013, 2016). There is extensive evidence of friendship jealousy in human friendships (Bevan & Samter, 2004; Kraft & Mayeux, 2016; Nezlek, 1993; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006); frantic efforts to avoid losing one's ranking with friends – displacement in friendship ranking, or merely the threat of such, drives people to engage in friend-guarding behaviors when they perceive such threats (Krems, Williams, Kenrick, & Aktipis, 2017). This friendship jealousy appears to be a functional response to information that one may soon be displaced in a friend's ranking and could certainly be triggered by a friend preferentially helping another friend. We know that people infer higher degrees of friendship when they see someone giving someone else special treatment (Kleiman-Weiner, Shaw, & Tenenbaum, 2017; Liberman & Shaw, 2017).

Thus, if the alliance account is correct, it should be possible to find scenarios in which people actually do not like friends who are more prosocial toward others because such prosociality could be taken as a signal that the other person is currently – or soon to be – valued more highly. Such information should make the agent concerned about being displaced in the friend's rankings (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009a). Of course, this could be consistent with some cooperative accounts based on person-specific generosity (Delton & Robertson, 2016). Such accounts suggest that people's decision-making is guided by an internal regulatory variable that computes the cost a person will pay to give benefits to a specific social partner—also called “welfare-tradeoff ratios” (WTRs). These models might suggest that if an agent's friend helps another person, but not the agent, the agent now knows that their friend will pay cost  $X$  for someone else, but not for them. This could easily trigger a negative reaction because it is giving one information that the friend's actual WTRs are lower toward one. Importantly, the alliance account makes a more nuanced prediction that is not made by models based in WTRs; the negativity of the agent's response here should be calibrated to whether the target of the help is someone who is likely to displace the agent (e.g. another friend) rather than someone who fills a very different, yet close role (e.g. a relative or significant other).

In four studies, we investigated the predictions made by cooperative

and alliance accounts of friendship and attempt to answer two questions. First, do people respond more negatively to a friend being preferentially helpful (Study 1–2) and generous (Study 3–4) to others (as predicted by the alliance account), or do they respond more negatively to someone who is less helpful and generous overall (as predicted by cooperative accounts)? Second, are these negative reactions particularly strong when the other recipient is a friend rather than someone else (e.g. a relative or romantic partner) as predicted by the alliance account (Study 1, 2, 4)?

Our studies are designed to compare the predictions of the alliance account to different cooperative models of friendship and partner choice. The first two studies test the alliance account against the indirect reciprocity models of cooperation (e.g. Nowak & Sigmund, 1998) which predict that agents should respond more positively to those who are more generous overall (especially if one holds constant negative or positive effects to the agent). Study 3 tests the predictions of the alliance account against models of direct reciprocity (e.g., Trivers, 1971), which predict that people should respond more positively to those who give them more benefits. Finally, Study 4 investigates whether the results from Studies 1–3 can be accounted for by a person-specific model based on WTRs (Delton & Robertson, 2016).

## 1. Study 1

In Study 1, we investigated people's reaction to a friend helping someone or not. Participants read vignettes in which their friend does not help them and then has a subsequent opportunity to help someone else in similar circumstances. We varied whether the friend helped the other person or not and who else requested help (friend or parent). Cooperative accounts based on indirect reciprocity (e.g., Nowak & Sigmund, 1998) suggest that people track benefits delivered to them and third parties and are positively predisposed toward those who are more helpful. Thus, these accounts predict that, holding constant benefits delivered to the self, people should respond more positively toward someone who helps than someone who does not. Further, these accounts make no specific predictions about whether helping another friend or a parent differs. Conversely, the alliance account predicts that people should feel upset about their friend helping someone else, especially when that person is another friend who could potentially displace them in that friend's friendship rankings.

### 1.1. Method

#### 1.1.1. Participants

Two hundred and two (50% female,  $M = 37.28$ ;  $SD = 12.34$ ) participants completed a 3-min study for \$0.25. Participants in all studies were recruited online through Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) and TurkPrime (Litman, Robinson, & Abberbock, 2016). All surveys were presented through Qualtrics. Participation was restricted to AMT workers from the United States with a 95% approval rating or higher as recorded by AMT. Before beginning data collection, we decided not to exclude any participants from any of the studies as the design was fairly simple. In all studies, we attempted to recruit ~50 participants per cell. Each study ended with participants providing basic demographic information.

#### 1.1.2. Design and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a two-way, between-subjects design in which we varied whether the friend helped (friend's action: helped other, helped neither) and the relationship between one's friend and the other person (relationship: friend or parent). After entering the name of a close friend, participants read a scenario in which they imagined asking to borrow said friend's trailer. In all conditions, their friend (the decision-maker) was unwilling to lend the participant the trailer. Participants were then told that the decision-maker either had (helped other condition) or had not

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