



Original Article

It's the attention that counts: interpersonal attention fosters intimacy and social exchange

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Initial receipt 10 June 2013

Final revision received 10 February 2014

Keywords:

Intimacy
Friendship
Attention
Reciprocity
Social exchange

ABSTRACT

Human friendship poses an evolutionary puzzle, since people behave more generously toward their friends than the tit-for-tat strategy stipulates. A possible explanation is that people selectively behave in a generous manner toward their true friends, but not toward fair-weather friends. Social psychological studies have suggested that people use a partner's attentiveness toward them as a cue to distinguish these two types of friends. Accordingly, it was hypothesized that people would increase their intimacy with a partner who was attentive to them. This hypothesis was tested by disentangling the frequent confounding between a partner's attention and the benefits provided by the attentive partner in two scenario experiments (studies 1a and 1b) and three laboratory experiments (studies 2a to 2c). In study 1, a partner's attentiveness was manipulated independently of the benefit provided by the partner. In study 2, the partner's attention was experimentally dissociated from any potential benefit. These studies consistently showed that the participants increased their intimacy with a partner when they received attention from the partner. This result implies that models of the evolution of friendship must incorporate information exchange regarding the valuation of the relationship, as well as the exchange of fitness-related costs and benefits.

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1. Introduction

Friendship is often considered a human instance of mutual cooperation within a dyadic relation, or *reciprocal altruism* (Trivers, 1971). Reciprocal altruism can be maintained when each member of the relation uses the tit-for-tat (TFT) strategy (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981). Some authors, however, have pointed out that human friends do not use TFT (Hruschka, 2010; Silk, 2003; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). For example, friends tend to be more generous than TFT players (e.g., people do not hastily retaliate against a friend's failure to cooperate; McCullough, 2008). Nonetheless, such generosity leaves people vulnerable to exploitation by fair-weather friends, who only reap benefits from their "friendship" and do not reciprocate. Therefore, in order to better understand the evolution of friendship, it is necessary for researchers to know the proximate mechanisms of how people distinguish true friends from fair-weather friends (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). This paper reports a series of experiments that tested whether people would use a partner's attention toward them as a cue to identify true friends. In particular, we tested the hypothesis that people adjust their intimacy with a partner in accordance with how much attention the partner pays to them.

1.1. Friendship and bond testing

Conducting a thorough review of ethnographic and psychological evidence, Hruschka (2010) argued that human friendship differs from TFT-based cooperation. First, whether one helps a friend is not contingent on the friend's previous behavior (e.g., Boster, Rodríguez, Cruz, & Marshall, 1995). Second, people help a friend even when they cannot expect future reciprocation from the friend (e.g., Leider, Möbius, Rosenblat, & Do, 2009). Due to such retrospective and prospective indifference about a friend's input, people are more tolerant of short-term imbalances in exchanges with friends than with strangers (e.g., Shapiro, 1980; Xue & Silk, 2012).

According to Barclay (2013), human friendship must be understood in the context of biological markets, where friends exert their freedom to choose their partner by themselves. In biological markets, it is important for individuals to accurately assess a current partner's willingness to stay in the relationship and provide benefits to them in the future. Interestingly, being ahead of biological market theory, two scholars (a biologist and a social psychologist) independently proposed a similar solution to this problem. Zahavi (1977) and Kelley (1983) maintained that the strength of a bond can be tested by imposing some stress on a tested individual. According to these authors, true friends are those who will act in a pro-relationship manner even when doing so is costly. This test is called *bond testing* in biology, and *stress/strain test* in social psychology.

The notion of bond testing was recently applied to seemingly functionless but potentially dangerous rituals, such as mutual

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eye-poking, in white-headed capuchins (*Cebus capucinus*) in Costa Rica (Perry, 2011). Although such bond testing habits seem rare in modern human societies, costly commitment rituals, such as the sharing of blood, are in fact common in ethnographic records (Hruschka, 2010). Buss (2000) noted that modern technologies, medicines, and laws eliminated naturally-occurring testing situations because they solved problems that used to be unsolvable without friends' costly assistance. Despite the shortage of bond testing rituals and situations, people in modern societies still seem capable of accurately assessing their friends' valuation of them (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009).

Drawing on Dunbar and Shultz's (2010) argument, we propose that people use a partner's attention toward them as a cue to assess the strength of their bond. As we will discuss shortly, whether one pays attention to a partner can be a credible cue of his/her valuation of the partner. There is also social psychological evidence illustrating the importance of social attention. When engaging in a joint task, people are more attentive to their friend's need for help than that of a stranger (Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1989). Moreover, people are interested in whether their partner is attentive to their need (Clark, Dubash, & Mills, 1998). These studies have shown that A is attentive to his/her friend B's needs, and B is interested in whether A is attentive. The present study addresses the remaining question: Will B adjust his/her attitude toward A in accordance with A's attention to him/her?

1.2. Credibility of social attention

One might argue that social attention cannot be a credible cue of true friends because, unlike costly bond testing behaviors, social attention entails little cost and thus is fakeable. Nonetheless, as attention is a limited resource, paying attention to a certain partner necessarily reduces the amount of attention paid to other partners. As far as every potential partner is concerned about whether a person (A) is paying attention to him/her, A must allocate his/her attention to the potential partners according to his/her valuation of them.

Some might criticize the above argument by citing modern technologies (e.g., mobile phone) that enable people to cheaply connect with a larger number of partners than ever before. Nonetheless, as people tend to prefer having a relatively small number of close friends over having a lot of friends (Reis, 1990), the number of close others (or the size of a support clique) remains relatively small even in modern environments (Dunbar & Spoor, 1995). Moreover, research on mobile phone users' social networks has revealed that people tend to keep their active network size constant by replacing peripheral, old relationships with newly activated relationships (Miritello, Lara, Cebrian, & Moro, 2013). In addition, it is noteworthy that the mobile phone technology does not provide "free" connections with a lot of others. Miritello, Moro, et al. (2013) revealed that those with large mobile phone networks tend to spend less time per call than those with small networks. Therefore, the limited resource in the ancient environment (i.e., time) still functions as a constraint of network size. This may plausibly apply to another limited resource, namely, attention.

1.3. Is social attention a cue or a signal?

If A allocates his/her attention according to his/her valuation of partners, and the amount of attention allows the partners to credibly assess A's valuation of them, it might be more appropriate to call this "signal" than a "cue." However, we consider that it is premature to call social attention a signal because the term "signal" tends to be used in a more restricted manner than the term "cue." Maynard Smith and Harper (2003), for example, defined a signal as any act or structure that evolved because of its effect of altering other individuals' behavior. It is possible that attention allocation strategies evolved

not to alter others' behavior but to alter one's own behavior (e.g., not to miss an important partner's predicaments). We shall revisit to this terminology issue in the general discussion section.

1.4. Intimacy as a proxy for perceived bond strength

The literature regarding close relationships suggests that perceived bond strength can be conceptualized as *intimacy*. According to Reis and Shaver (1988), intimacy has three building blocks: *understanding* (i.e., a partner accurately understands you), *validation* (i.e., a partner values your traits, attitudes, and opinions), and *caring* (i.e., a partner is concerned about your well-being). Validation and caring are especially relevant to the bond strength. That is, the higher the partner's valuation of you, the more likely the partner is to remain in the relationship with you; likewise, the more concern the partner has for your well-being, the more likely the partner is to help you when you are in dire need (see Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004, for a more recent treatment of intimacy under the rubric of perceived partner responsiveness).

1.5. Dissociating attention from benefit

The hypothesis of the present study was that a partner's attention toward a target person would increase the target's intimacy with the partner. Self-evident as it might first appear, to our knowledge, there is no conclusive evidence to support this hypothesis. The difficulty accrues from the frequent confounding between attention and benefit: If a partner pays attention to your needs and behaves accordingly, he/she becomes your efficient support provider (Reis, 1990). In study 1 (consisting of two scenario experiments), we wrote scenarios in which attention was manipulated independently of any benefits accruing from the partner's attentiveness. After confirming that attention itself was a determinant of intimacy in the scenario experiments (study 1), we proceeded to test the hypothesis in a series of laboratory experiments, in which a partner's attention was experimentally dissociated from any potential benefit (study 2).

2. Study 1

Two scenario experiments (studies 1a and 1b) were conducted to test whether a partner's attention, independent of benefit, would promote intimacy.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Participants in study 1a were 312 Japanese undergraduates (196 males, 104 females, and 12 unreported; $M_{\text{age}} \pm SD = 21.4 \pm 2.96$ years), who completed a questionnaire in class. Three participants were omitted due to missing values.

Participants in study 1b were 105 Japanese undergraduates (57 males and 48 females; $M_{\text{age}} \pm SD = 19.3 \pm 1.85$ years). As these two studies were conducted at different universities, there were no overlaps in participants.

2.1.2. Design and materials

Three support scenarios (i.e., advice, surprise, and moral support scenarios) were written for the experiments (see Table 1). To write these scenarios, we conducted a pilot study ($N = 101$, 55 females, $M_{\text{age}} \pm SD = 18.79 \pm 1.98$ years), in which we asked the respondents to describe real support events in an open-ended format, and then indicate whether the material or non-material aspects of the event were most important. Forty-seven events, for which the respondents considered the non-material aspects to be of central importance, included 16 advice, nine surprise, and seven moral

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