

Developing and Maintaining High-Quality Relationships via Emotion

Sara B. Algoe

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Manuscript *in press* at Emotion Review (May 10, 2020). This draft is the pre-print, accepted version, and the published and proofed version may contain minor edits for clarity or style, not substance.

Correspondence to:

Sara B. Algoe

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

CB 3270 Davie Hall

Chapel Hill, NC 27599

(919) 962-2538

algoe@unc.edu

Abstract

This commentary addresses opportunities for understanding the social functions of emotion by taking a developmental perspective. I agree that understanding emotions and their development will meaningfully illuminate understanding of prosociality in everyday life. Taking the authors' approach one step further, I suggest that rather than use the framing of questions about prosociality from the adult literature to guide questions about the development of social emotions in children, in the future, developmental researchers consider the social milieu in which emotions evolved and in which children's emotions may develop to guide their questions. This may feed forward to a richer understanding of cooperation and reciprocity in the literature regarding adult strangers.

KEYWORDS: close relationships, gratitude, guilt, cooperation, reciprocity

Developing and Maintaining High-Quality Relationships via Emotion

Vaish and Hepach (2019) demonstrate the value of both taking a developmental perspective to advance understanding of emotions, and of taking an emotion science perspective to illuminate answers to fundamental questions about social behavior that transcend academic disciplines. To the latter point, as they discuss, a wide variety of researchers are interested in the prosocial building blocks of social life and do not acknowledge the role of emotions. Overall, I agree with the authors on many points and applaud this experimentally rigorous program of work. That said, I think the developmental perspective can help illuminate even more: we should also use it to question prominent assumptions regarding cooperation and reciprocity. In turn, these questions feed back to guide scientific understanding of the social functions of emotions.

From birth, humans depend on others to survive. This may be most apparent during infancy but continues throughout the life course. Other people regulate access to resources, provide help when it's needed, reward one's behavior, and especially when they care about one's welfare, even provide or reveal opportunities that can help one grow. In fact, good relationships can make life seem worth living (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000; Stulz et al., 2018). In short, identifying *good relationship partners* and making sure they know you care about the relationship is both rewarding in its own right, and facilitates survival (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010).

To the extent that guilt and gratitude serve relationship-specific functions for building such alliances, these are fundamental emotions. They probably evolved within the context of our first and most important relationships and extend outward to other members of the social circle, finally being relevant to relationships with total strangers. Researchers in the adult human literature who started the conversations about cooperation and reciprocity did not come at their

question from the same angle. Instead, prominent thinkers in this domain were looking at mature adult relationships and asking why anyone would ever bother being altruistic – that is, helping someone who is unrelated to the self (Trivers, 1971) -- and now a robust body of literature elucidates factors that facilitate cooperation among adult strangers (as an arbitrary example, see Rand, 2016). These are influential works, to be sure. But their influence unfortunately lays the ground rules for where one must fit their research to build on what has come before.

Rather than start with the question of how we get along with strangers, instead, taking a cue from Vaish and Hepach’s developmental approach, I suggest that scholars start with the question of how we form our earliest close relationships and alliances within our social circle. This approach would have implications for the literature reviewed in Vaish and Hepach (2019), and their goal of illuminating the “prosocial functions” of guilt and gratitude by taking a developmental perspective (p. 6). One is that the relationship itself, and the feeling of connection with another person, is *rewarding* (and see Harlow, 1958). Take guilt: The authors emphasize that cooperators must “inhibit selfish behaviors and decisions in order to fulfill our commitments” (p. 5), but rather than inhibiting something, a theoretical approach that recognizes the intrinsic value of feeling connected implies guilty people will be *seeking* something: without missing a beat, guilty perpetrators in these experiments do something to show they care about how their actions affected the other person. Though these experiments are with strangers, perhaps the children’s motivations will be greater toward people they already know and care about, because the risk of losing that support is greatest (which I note yields practical benefit for researchers via larger effect sizes). Finally, the paradigms described in Vaish and Hepach (2019) literally repair the damage the child caused, but functional responding flexibly builds on the underlying motivation (e.g., Chang & Algoe, 2019); if guilt is really about relationship repair,

experimentally blocking the opportunity to repair the actual damage –the most expedient signal of concern about the other person’s welfare -- may reveal other outcomes like affiliative gestures or proximity-seeking to repair the relationship with the person, as a substitute to serve the same relationship-specific function.

The same logic applies to gratitude. The traditions focused on exchange of favors (“reciprocity”) came from the adult literature, where that was the research question being tested: researchers found evidence that gratitude was one mechanism to facilitate exchange of resources (e.g. Tesser, Gatewood, and Driver, 1968), but were not testing broader theoretical questions about the social function of gratitude, so did not test additional possibilities. Later influential reviews (e.g., McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008) were themselves influenced by this existing evidence base. But there is now a robust body of research to support new theorizing that recognizes the value of a qualitatively different type of relationship – those based on communal (not exchange) norms (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2008; Algoe, Dwyer, Younge, & Oveis, 2019). The shift in understanding of what triggers gratitude (Algoe et al., 2008) also shifts understanding of its potential social functions: Understanding gratitude as a detection and response system for promoting high-quality relationships with people who have demonstrated *care for one’s welfare* has led to predictions about a wide variety of social behavioral outcomes beyond reciprocity among adults (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2012; Jia, Lee, & Tong, 2015; Jia, Tong, & Lee, 2014).

Vaish & Hepach (2019) describe an elegant experiment that suggests, for children, gratitude is also about the specific relationship with the benefactor who cares about the child (Vaish, Hepach, & Tomasello, 2018). Going forward, I encourage them to move beyond the potential limitations of narrowly considering that gratitude solves the reciprocity problem and

instead broadly consider that reciprocity is just one tool to help humans solve the *having good relationships* problem. Detecting good relationship partners is a survival skill. Perhaps because of this, it is intrinsically rewarding to feel valued by another person and humans are intrinsically motivated to connect with others who value them (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People use a wide variety of behaviors to make such connections. If early survival skills are the building blocks on which later skills are built (and see Bowlby, 1958), my question to the authors is this: What more could we learn about the social functions of gratitude if we assume that infants, dependent on others from day one, with nothing to offer “in exchange” for others’ responsiveness to their needs than smiles, coos, cuddles, and other gestures of affection, must *develop* a broader repertoire of social skills to keep good relationship partners engaged in a relationship with them as they develop a broader understanding that other people are not necessarily invested in their welfare in the ways their immediate caregivers are, and might even want to exploit them?

There are many things that drive cooperation and reciprocity, but caring about the specific person and relationship, wanting the rewards from being around that person, and seeing and experiencing the rewards from helping them, are not to be overlooked. What if it’s the other way around: caring and motivation for connection came first and direct repayment is derivative?

References

- Algoe, S. B., Dwyer, P. C., Young, A., & Oveis, C. (2019). A new perspective on the social functions of emotions: Gratitude and the witnessing effect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*
- Algoe, S. B. (2012). Find, remind, and bind: The functions of gratitude in everyday relationships. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 6(6), 455-469. doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2012.00439
- Algoe, S. B., Haidt, J., & Gable, S. L. (2008). Beyond reciprocity: Gratitude and relationships in everyday life. *Emotion*, 8(3), 425. doi.org/10.1037/1528-3542.8.3.425
- Bartlett, M. Y., Condon, P., Cruz, J., Baumann, J., & Desteno, D. (2012). Gratitude: Prompting behaviours that build relationships. *Cognition & Emotion*, 26(1), 2-13.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529. <https://doi-org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
- Bowlby, J. (1958). The nature of the child's ties to his mother. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 39, 350-373.
- Chang, Y-P., & Algoe, S. B. (2019). On Thanksgiving: Cultural variation in gratitude demonstrations and perceptions between the United States and Taiwan. *Emotion*, Advance online publication: <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000662>
- Harlow, H. F. (1958). The nature of love. *American Psychologist*, 13(12), 673.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine*, 7(7), e1000316.
- Jia, L., Lee, L. N., & Tong, E. M. W. (2015). Gratitude facilitates behavioral mimicry. *Emotion*,

15(2), 134–138. doi.org/10.1037/emo0000022

Jia, L., Tong, E. M., & Lee, L. N. (2014). Psychological “gel” to bind individuals’ goal pursuit:

Gratitude facilitates goal contagion. *Emotion, 14*(4), 748-760. doi: 10.1037/a0036407

McCullough, M. E., Kilpatrick, S. D., Emmons, R. A., & Larson, D. B. (2001). Is gratitude a moral affect?. *Psychological Bulletin, 127*(2), 249.

McCullough, M. E., Kimeldorf, M. B., & Cohen, A. D. (2008). An adaptation for altruism: The social causes, social effects, and social evolution of gratitude. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 17*(4), 281-285.

Rand, D. G. (2016). Cooperation, fast and slow: Meta-analytic evidence for a theory of social heuristics and self-interested deliberation. *Psychological Science, 27*, 1192–1206.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0956797616654455>

Reis, H. T., Collins, W. A., & Berscheid, E. (2000). The relationship context of human behavior and development. *Psychological Bulletin, 126*(6), 844.

Stulz, N., Hepp, U., Gosoni, D. G., Grize, L., Muheim, F., Weiss, M. G., & Riecher-Rössler, A.

(2018). Patient-identified priorities leading to attempted suicide: Life is lived in interpersonal relationships. *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention, 39*(1), 37–46. <https://doi-org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/10.1027/0227-5910/a000473>

Tesser, A., Gatewood, R., & Driver, M. (1968). Some determinants of gratitude. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 9*(3), 233.

Trivers, R. L. (1971). The evolution of reciprocal altruism. *The Quarterly Review of Biology, 46*(1), 35-57.

Vaish, A., Hepach, R., & Tomasello, M. (2018). The specificity of reciprocity: Young children

reciprocate more generously to those who *intentionally* benefit them. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 167, 336-353.

Watkins, P. C., Scheer, J., Ovnicek, M., & Kolts, R. (2006). The debt of gratitude: Dissociating gratitude and indebtedness. *Cognition and Emotion*, 20(2), 217–241. <https://doi-org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/10.1080/02699930500172291>