

## HOW “ORGANIZATION” CAN WEAKEN THE NORM OF RECIPROCITY: THE EFFECTS OF ATTRIBUTIONS FOR FAVORS AND A CALCULATIVE MINDSET

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Why are employee loyalty and effort sometimes not reciprocated by employers? Five experimental studies tested the hypothesis that people feel less obligated to reciprocate in an organizational as contrasted with a personal context. Studies 1A and 1B showed that participants felt less obligated to reciprocate the favors of others when they imagined themselves in an organizational rather than a personal context, in part because they were less likely to think that people’s motives for helping were genuine and reflected the other’s true character. Study 2 demonstrated that in an organizational context, individuals were more calculative, deciding to reciprocate or not depending on the favor-doer’s anticipated future usefulness. Studies 3 and 4 extended these results using two different behavioral measures of reciprocating. The findings suggest that the norm of reciprocity may be weaker in organizational contexts in part because such settings elicit more contextual rather than personal attributions and more calculative and future-oriented decision frames.

“You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit.” Willy Loman talking to his boss, Howard, in *The Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller.

“Last week I was informed . . . that after many years of publishing countless New York Times bestsellers, my services were no longer required here. . . . Yes, I have made this company millions of dollars over the years, but they’re going to ask what have I done for them lately.” E-mail from a very senior publishing executive, June 2014.

The idea of reciprocity has been argued to be a universal component of the moral codes governing behavior (Gouldner, 1960). Reciprocity is typically defined as a situation “in which a person is expected to cooperate with individuals who do something for that person first” (Goldstein, Griskevicius, & Cialdini, 2007: 147). Or as Gouldner (1960: 171) stated, “a norm of reciprocity . . . makes two interrelated . . . demands: (1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them.”

The norm of reciprocity plays a large role in explaining interpersonal behavior in many social situations. For instance, reciprocity has been shown to be a fundamentally important mechanism for exercising interpersonal influence (Cialdini, 2009), a

basis for the development and maintenance of social relationships (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), an explanation for many behaviors (e.g., Whatley, Webster, Smith, & Rhodes, 1999) including repaying concessions (Burger, 1986), sharing personal information (Cunningham, Strassberg, & Haan, 1986), restaurant tipping (Rind & Strohmets, 1999), and gift giving (Cialdini, 2009). Reciprocity norms are an integral component undergirding cooperation and productivity, in that relying on reciprocity permits people to balance the resources they have with what they need and also balance resource exchanges over time (Goldstein, Griskevicius, & Cialdini, 2011). Because “cooperation is a fundamental issue in all behavioral sciences” (Gächter & Herrmann, 2009: 791) and indeed in all collective social behavior, and because reciprocity norms help solve cooperation issues, there are evolutionary arguments for the emergence and universality of the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960; Henrich & Henrich, 2007).

Although there are personality and cultural factors that can influence reciprocity (Buchan, Croson, & Dawes, 2002; Gächter & Herrmann, 2009; Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, & Ercolani, 2003; Shen, Wan, & Wyer, 2011), the norm of reciprocity is presumably so strongly internalized that people reciprocate even under anonymity (Rind & Strohmets, 1999; Whatley, Webster, Smith, & Rhodes, 1999), a

fact that rules out seeking social approval or maintaining one's reputation as an explanation for the reciprocation. And people feel obligated to repay favors even when the favor is unrequested and provided by someone not liked (Cialdini, 2009; Regan, 1971).

Reciprocity provides an explanation for behavior that at once complements but also fundamentally differs from explanations based on incentives and the pursuit of self-interest. To illustrate, consider a recent study employing the norm of reciprocity to influence behavior. Goldstein and colleagues observed a higher rate of hotel guests reusing linens when the guests were told that the hotel had *already* made a contribution to a nonprofit environmental group "on behalf of the hotel and its guests" (Goldstein, Griskevicius, & Cialdini, 2007: 148) than when the guests were told that the hotel *would* donate a portion of the savings achieved through linen reuse to an environmental cause. In the latter case, the donation would occur in the future and would *depend* on the guests' behavior, with this contingency providing an inducement for the guests to reuse their linen. Because donations were *contingent* on the behavior of guests, the authors explicitly referred to this condition as involving incentives.

This hotel study (see also Goldstein et al., 2011) illustrates two other important points about the idea of reciprocity. First, reciprocity can and is used intentionally and strategically in attempts to affect the behavior of targets. Nonprofit groups send (unrequested) calendars or address labels, and organizations of all types sometimes provide free meals to targeted individuals, in the expectation that the norm of reciprocity will induce the target to reciprocate by donating money or buying a product or service. Second, individuals have a choice as to whether or not to reciprocate some action done for them or on their behalf. Although there may be a moral, normative component to reciprocity, numerous people do not reuse linens even when donations have already been made on their behalf or donate to organizations that send them free gifts. This fact of variation in responses to circumstances that should elicit the norm of reciprocity makes understanding the conditions for reciprocation both important and theoretically interesting.

Gächter and Herrmann's (2009: 791) review of the extensive experimental research on cooperation, much of which employs various economic games as stimuli, concluded that "many people are 'strong reciprocators' who are willing to cooperate and punish others even if there are no gains from future cooperation or any other reputational gains." Because Gächter and Herrmann reported many instances in which people cooperated with others

and punished those that did not cooperate, regardless of the opportunity for any sort of personal gain, they also distinguished reciprocity as a social norm affecting behavior from the operation of self-interest.

The theoretical ideas and the experimental studies that we present in this paper emerged from the widely evident and very visible discontinuity between, on the one hand, the strong and arguably pervasive imperative of the norm of reciprocity and, on the other hand, the everyday behavior of work organizations in both the public and private sectors that, as so nicely illustrated in the opening quotes, often violate that norm. Willy Loman is a fictional figure being cast aside by the son of someone who had promised Loman that he would be taken care of in his later working years and rewarded for his loyalty to the company. Although this scene comes from a play, similar scenes play out in the work world on almost a daily basis as workplaces not only fail to acknowledge past employee loyalty and contributions but even renege on what such workplaces have implicitly or explicitly promised.

For instance, companies and their managers frequently breach implicit psychological contracts with their employees, or their "*reciprocal* obligations in employment developed during and after recruitment" (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994: 245, emphasis added). In one survey of business school alumni, more than half of respondents indicated that their employers had violated reciprocal obligations (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).

The daily news provides numerous cases of companies not repaying employee loyalty and, instead, harming employees and ex-employees through their actions. Both for-profit companies and public sector employers have eliminated or reduced promised retirement plans and pension benefits—the proportion of private sector workers covered by defined benefit pension plans fell from 35 percent in the early 1990s to just 18 percent by 2011 (Wiatrowski, 2012). Employers regularly jettison retiree medical insurance benefits, benefits sometimes offered explicitly to induce the workers to retire. The proportion of firms with 200 or more employees offering retiree medical benefits fell from 66 percent in 1988 to 28 percent in 2013 (McArdle, Neuman, & Huang, 2014). And employers lay off people even when there is no pressing economic stringency (see Datta, Guthrie, Basuil, & Pandey, 2010, for a review), so that few employees now can expect stable, full-time jobs or rising incomes (e.g., Osterman, 2014).

Moreover, it is increasingly the case that employers preemptively tell new employees *not* to expect a relationship premised on the fulfillment of mutual commitments. For example, employers, often on the advice of their labor lawyers, tell employees

that management cannot promise continuing employment, regardless of the employees' loyalty or length of service. Therefore, employers implicitly or sometimes explicitly tell employees that they need to take care of themselves and be responsible for their own careers and well-being, almost regardless of what those employees do or do not contribute at work (e.g., Hirsch, 1988; Roehling, Cavanaugh, Moynihan, & Boswell, 2000).

These and other similar facts of contemporary employment raise the question: *If reciprocity is a fundamental internalized moral imperative governing so much social behavior, how is it possible that reciprocity appears to be so often lacking inside work organizations?*

One explanation for this employer behavior is that the norm of reciprocity is just not expected to operate inside the workplace at all, so it can be ignored with impunity. However, the empirical evidence suggests that there *are* consequences for violating perceived reciprocal obligations in work organizations. Such evidence suggests that reciprocity is an operative norm, with differences in employee behavior resulting from non-adherence. For example, studies have found that when employees perceive that their employers have failed to deliver what was informally promised, they become less committed, less productive (e.g., Bunderson, 2001; Dabos & Rousseau, 2004; Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Turnley & Feldman, 2000), and more likely to quit (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004).

*Why* employers are willing to abrogate obligations even in the presence of negative consequences for turnover and performance is a distinct, albeit important, issue from the one explored here. In this paper we articulate and empirically examine one specific idea that we developed in an effort to understand why there are so many broken promises and such unreciprocated loyalty and discretionary effort in the workplace: namely, that there are theoretical reasons to expect that merely having someone think of themselves as occupying a role in an organization can weaken that individual's desire to reciprocate and the sense of having an obligation to do so. Our argument is, at its core, consistent with the idea that situational factors affect reciprocity in relationships (e.g., Inesi, Gruenfeld, & Galinsky, 2012) and that one important, but thus far largely unexplored situational contingency, is whether or not the behavior is located in an organizational context.

## BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

As Perugini and colleagues (2003) commented, even after 50 years of research, there remains

ambiguity concerning the definition and precise operationalization of the concept of reciprocity. The ambiguity derives partly from Gouldner (1960), who tackled the idea of reciprocity from a functionalist perspective that first and foremost sought to understand how social order was produced and maintained.

There are at least two ways of thinking about reciprocity. One would be an inherently calculative conceptualization in which people's reciprocation depends on the value of the benefits received, the recipient's need for those benefits, the resources of the donor, the motives imputed to the donor, and the constraints the donor faced in providing the favor (see Gouldner, 1960: 171). This calculative conception of reciprocity leaves it virtually indistinguishable from the idea of incentives and other conceptions of social exchange.

The second view of reciprocity views it as an internalized social norm, activated almost automatically and without much thought or calculation, founded on well-socialized expectations that kindnesses should be repaid. From this perspective, reciprocity is not merely action taken in the pursuit of one's self-interest. In this article, we focus on this second conceptualization of reciprocity because we are particularly interested in examining whether organizational contexts reduce the *moral obligation* to reciprocate (i.e., whether people are inclined to return the help of those who have helped them regardless of whether they stand to gain anything).

Because relationships are integral to organizational functioning, the idea that people might feel less obligated to reciprocate in organizational contexts could seem counterintuitive as violating the norm could put relationships at risk. After all, organizations are in essence all about relationships—customer relationships, partner relationships, mentor-mentee relationships, and the employment relationship among others. However, we argue that many of what appear to be “reciprocal” relationships in organizations differ in some important ways from situations that would invoke the norm of reciprocity. First, they are often not predicated on the obligation to repay past favors but rather are premised on current and future expected interactions. Second, relationships in formal organizations are frequently more impersonal and business-like—calculative—than relationships in personal contexts. Impersonality is the essence of bureaucracy (Weber, 1947) and formal organization. Thus, not every organizational relationship necessarily entails elements of reciprocity nor will every relationship invoke reciprocation.

In this article, we first want to establish the fundamental finding that reciprocity may be lower

in organizational contexts. We then also propose and test *some* of the possible mechanisms that reflect the many differences between personal and organizational contexts, differences that would cause reciprocation to be less inside formal organizations. Briefly, we propose that people in organizational contexts may be less likely to observe the moral norm to reciprocate because (1) they are less inclined to think that those who have helped them have truly sincere and genuine motives for helping; and (2) organizational contexts encourage deliberative and calculative decision-making that often results in less moral and more self-interested behavior.

### Organizations Influence the Type of Attributions People Make

People's desire to reciprocate depends in part on their view of why the favor was bestowed in the first place—their attributions of the helper's motives (e.g., Schopler & Thompson, 1968). For instance, Ames, Flynn, and Weber (2004: 464) found that people were more willing to return a favor when they believed that the help they received from others came from positive affect rather than from strategic calculation. Similarly, explaining the phenomenon of why it is seemingly lonely at the top of hierarchies (e.g., Lee & Tiedens, 2001), Inesi and colleagues (2012) observed that when individuals attributed generous actions to the instrumental motives of others, the individuals were both less grateful and less motivated to return the favor. Thus, the attributions that people make about the helpful actions of others have implications for whether they will reciprocate favors.

Because people generally attribute behavior to personal dispositions rather than situations (Ross, 1977), in most circumstances, people are likely to think that the helpful and generous actions of others are driven by benevolent motives and reflect on the qualities of the person providing the help. However, because organizations are strong situations (Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989) in which people engage in behaviors that reflect their roles (e.g., Lieberman, 1956), it is likely that in organizational contexts, people will be somewhat more prone to attribute favors from others as being driven by factors external to the favor-doer (e.g., role and work obligations) rather than by factors internal to the favor-doer (e.g., positive affect, inherent generosity, helpfulness).

When people believe that others have helped them “from the heart,” they typically feel indebted and grateful, and believe it is their moral obligation to repay the kindness they have received (Gouldner, 1960; Whatley et al., 1999). However, because

people in organizational contexts are likely to attribute favors from others as being driven by factors external to the favor-doer such as aspects of their job responsibilities, they may be less inclined to think that those who have helped them have truly sincere and genuine motives for helping—for example, they may feel that other people are being nice to them simply because they are doing their “jobs.” As a result, they may be less inclined to think that they have a *moral* obligation to repay the other person.

### Organizations Elicit a Future-Oriented and Calculative Mindset

Reciprocity, as we have noted, is about the obligation to repay *past* kindnesses and reciprocate behaviors already performed for someone's benefit. Reciprocity is largely, although not entirely, presumed to be *non-calculative*. That is why, for instance, even unrequested (or possibly even unwanted) favors or gifts, even from people we do not like, can still activate reciprocity norms and behaviors (Cialdini, 2009; Regan, 1971). As Goldstein and colleagues (2011) argued, if providing help to another is predicated on the expectation and calculation of *future* benefits, then the behavior is explained by the idea of incentives, not by reciprocity.

Organizations, however, are all about rationality and calculation about the future (Weber, 1947). Therefore, one reason that behavior in organizations may violate the norm of reciprocity is because organizations and the decision logics they promote are oriented toward the future rather than the past. For instance, one important activity of CEOs is managing future expectations for performance (e.g., Kasznik & McNichols, 2002). Planning for future contingencies is another important component of organizational activities (e.g., Powell, 1992). This is not to imply that organizations are not trapped by past decisions—sunk cost effects (e.g., Staw, 1976)—or do not attempt to explain and rationalize past performance (e.g., Bettman & Weitz, 1983). What we simply mean is that, in organizational contexts, there is strong evidence that people make decisions more often based on calculative self-interest and the foreseeable future. This may be because people expect that organizations operate based on rationality (e.g., Haran, 2013; Weber, 1947), self-interest (e.g., Bornstein & Yaniv, 1998; Wildschut, Insko, & Pinter, 2007) and unemotional behavior (e.g., Gray & Wegner, 2010; Knobe & Prinz, 2008), and that they should behave accordingly in such contexts.

Moreover, research suggests that when people are primed with a “business mindset,” they tend to select the decision that maximizes personal benefits and minimizes personal costs, paying less attention

to the decision's ethical or moral implications (Kouchaki, Smith-Crowe, Brief, & Sousa, 2013; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999). For example, Kouchaki and colleagues (2013) found that priming people with money rather than a neutral stimulus increased the likelihood of activating a business decision frame—a way of thinking in which self-interest dominates (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999). Most relevant to our studies, they found that activating a business decision frame led to fewer ethical decisions. Because reciprocity has a moral, normative component, Kouchaki and colleagues' results are consistent with the prediction that an organizational or business decision context can result in fewer normatively moral decisions—in this case, a diminished willingness to adhere to the norm of reciprocity.

Furthermore, recent research has found that deliberative and calculative decision-making can result in less ethical and more self-interested behavior. For example, scholars have shown that merely asking people to solve mathematical computations promotes a greater tendency to lie and act selfishly (Wang, Zhong, & Murnighan, 2014; Zhong, 2011). These results are consistent with our predictions as well. Organizations are contexts that are more likely to induce and, in fact, reward a deliberative and calculative mindset. Therefore, we predict that organizations are less likely to be settings that encourage reciprocation, a form of altruistic and moral behavior.

Thus, based on the research evidence that organizations prompt calculative, business-like, impersonal, and future-oriented thinking, we propose that organizational contexts would prompt people to pay more attention to the future benefits of targets than to the moral requirement to repay a past behavior. As such, we expect that in organizational contexts, people would be more strategic and calculating about whom to help, deciding on the basis of who might be useful and relevant to them in the future. Therefore, we expect that people in organizational contexts will or will not return favors contingent on whether they see the other as being or not being useful to them in the future. If the favor-doer is not useful, organizational contexts will diminish the likelihood of reciprocation; however, if the favor-doer seems to be important for the individual's future success, organizational contexts might even increase the likelihood of reciprocation. Our prediction in this instance is about the interaction between context and future benefit, not about a main effect.

## OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

In five studies, we compared how people responded to a favor—something nice done for

them—that occurred either in an organizational context or in a personal context. Across all the studies, we predicted that people would be relatively less motivated to return a favor when it occurred in an organizational context. Studies 1A, 1B, and 2 tested this hypothesis using self-report measures. Studies 3 and 4 employed two different behavioral measures of actual reciprocating. In addition to testing this hypothesis, the studies examined some of the possible psychological processes that could help explain the observed effect. Because we are trying to compare the obligation to reciprocate or actual reciprocation across personal and organizational contexts, we necessarily chose favors or kindnesses that could plausibly occur in both types of settings.

## STUDY 1A

### Method

**Participants.** Three hundred and twenty-five participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk participated in this experiment (206 Males, 119 Females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 28.54$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 7.97$ ). The sample consisted of White Americans (75 percent), Latino Americans (7 percent), African Americans (7 percent), Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (10 percent), and Native Americans (1 percent). To disguise our hypothesis, we advertised the experiment as a study on social perception.

**Procedure.** Study 1A used a 2 (Context: Personal vs. Organizational)  $\times$  2 (Social Relationship with Target: Friend vs. Acquaintance) experimental design. We randomly assigned participants to one of four experimental conditions. In the *personal context/friend condition*, participants read that a *friend* had invited them to dinner and paid for their meal at the end. In the *organizational context/friend condition*, participants read that a *friend from work* had invited them to dinner and paid for their meal at the end.

Participants in the two other experimental conditions read that the target who performed the favor for the participant was an acquaintance rather than a friend. Specifically, in the *personal context/acquaintance condition*, participants read that the target was “someone you know and have interacted with a few times,” while in the *organizational context/acquaintance condition*, participants read that the target was “someone you know *from work* and have interacted with a few times.” We described the target in the scenario as either a “friend” or an “acquaintance” to ensure that any differences in the motivation to reciprocate were not because of the particular social relationship between the favor-doer and the potential reciprocator. To the

extent that responses across the two different social relationships (friend and acquaintance) are similar, we could more reliably infer that the effect of organizational versus personal context operates similarly across at least these two different degrees of social connection.

After reading the vignette, participants completed several measures. First, using a 7-point scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Extremely), participants answered four items that assessed *the extent to which they felt obligated to reciprocate*: (a) “Do you feel obligated to reciprocate the favor?”; (b) “Do you think you owe a great deal to the other person?”; (c) “Would you feel guilty if you did not reciprocate the favor?”; and (d) “Do you think you would return the favor in the future, even if it’s costly to you?” ( $\alpha = .84$ , factor loadings  $> .64$ ). Then, using a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree), participants answered six items that assessed *the extent to which they attributed the target’s generous behavior to the target’s dispositional qualities* (e.g., (a) “The other person’s behavior reflected his or her inner traits and values;” and (b) “The other person acted this way because of some aspect of the work situation he or she is in.” [reverse-scored];  $\alpha = .83$ , factor loadings  $> .42$ ). Third, using a yes/no response, participants indicated *whether they construed the target’s behavior in the scenario as a favor*. This question served as a manipulation check. Finally, participants answered a demographic questionnaire. Then, they were thanked and debriefed.

## Results

**Manipulation check.** Only 9 participants (3 percent) responded that the other person in the scenario did not do them a favor. These participants were nonetheless retained in the final analysis because their exclusion yielded results nearly identical to those described below.

**Obligation to reciprocate.** We hypothesized that individuals in an organizational context would feel less obligated to reciprocate relative to individuals in a personal context. To test this hypothesis, we first calculated an index for felt obligation to reciprocate. Then, we regressed felt obligation to reciprocate on dummy coded context (0 = Personal, +1 = Organizational), social relationship with target (0 = Acquaintance, +1 = Friend), and the interaction of these two predictor variables. The interaction term was not significant,  $t(321) = .56$ , and thus, the subsequent analysis was collapsed across the two different social relationships. As predicted, participants who imagined that they were in an organizational context felt significantly less obligated to reciprocate

( $M_{Organizational} = 4.45$ ,  $SD_{Organizational} = 1.27$ ) relative to participants who imagined that they were in a personal context ( $M_{Personal} = 4.89$ ,  $SD_{Personal} = 1.19$ ),  $b = -.44$ ,  $t(323) = -3.20$ ,  $p < .01$ .

**Attributions made about the favor.** Next, we analyzed attributions made about the favor. We first calculated for each participant an attribution index, with higher scores representing a stronger inclination to attribute the target’s behavior to the target’s dispositional qualities. We then conducted a parallel regression as described above predicting attribution scores. On this measure also, the interaction term was not significant,  $t(321) = -.38$ , and thus the subsequent analysis was collapsed across the two social relationship conditions. As predicted, participants who imagined that they were in an organizational context were significantly less likely to attribute the target’s favor-doing behavior to a dispositional cause ( $M_{Organizational} = 5.06$ ,  $SD_{Organizational} = .87$ ) compared with participants who imagined that they were in a personal context ( $M_{Personal} = 5.32$ ,  $SD_{Personal} = .84$ ),  $b = -.25$ ,  $t(323) = -2.65$ ,  $p < .01$ .

We then conducted a mediation analysis to test whether attribution beliefs explained why context type had an effect on felt obligation to reciprocate (see Figure 1, Upper Panel). We reran the regression model predicting felt obligation to reciprocate, this time controlling for attribution beliefs. In this model, the significance of context as a predictor was reduced,  $b = -.34$ ,  $p = .01$ , and attribution beliefs was a significant predictor,  $b = .39$ ,  $p < .001$ . A bias-corrected bootstrap (1,000 iterations) indicated a significant indirect effect,  $CI_{95} = [-.20, -.02]$ , indicating that attribution beliefs accounted for some of the effect of context on felt obligation to reciprocate. Thus, participants who imagined that they were in an organizational context felt less obligated to reciprocate in part because they were less

TABLE 1  
Results of Supplementary Analysis for Study 1A and Study 1B

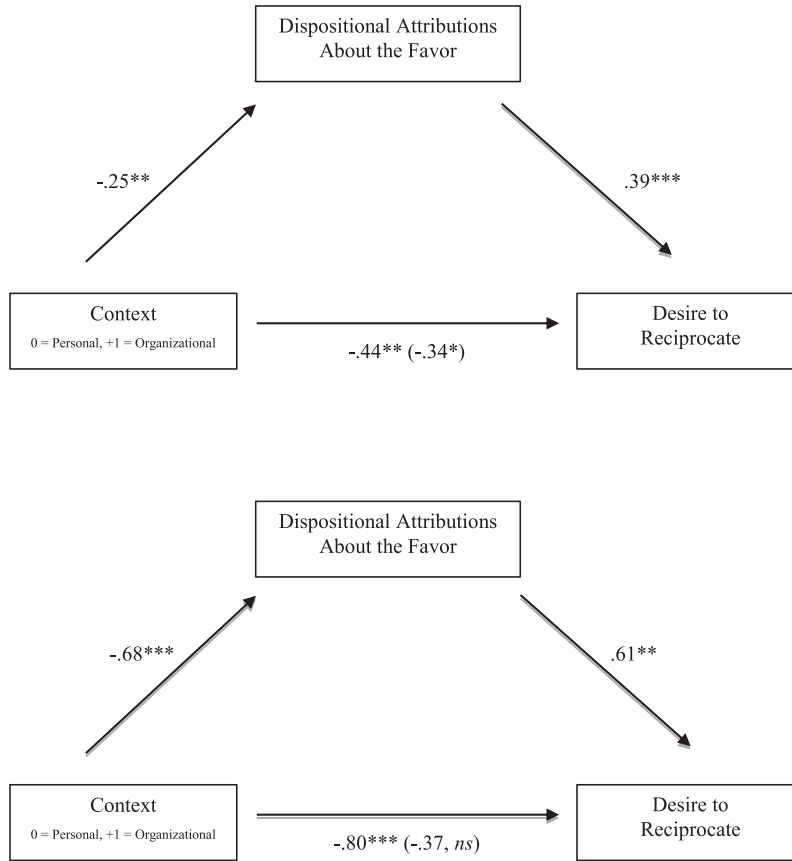
	DV: Felt Obligation to Reciprocate	DV: Dispositional Attribution
Study 1A		
Condition	-.43**	-.25**
Gender	-.22	.24*
Ethnicity	.09	.12
Study 1B		
Condition	-.81***	-.70***
Gender	.21	.19
Ethnicity	.05	.07

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

**FIGURE 1**  
**Mediation Analysis for Study 1A (Being Invited to Dinner; Upper Panel) and Study 1B (Being Picked Up at the Airport; Lower Panel)**



Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

inclined to think that the other person had a sincere and genuine motivation to help.

Although people were randomly assigned to experimental conditions, we nonetheless reran these analyses, controlling for race (dummy coded: 0 = Ethnic Minorities, +1 = Whites) and gender (dummy coded: 0 = Males, +1 = Females), as these demographic variables do sometimes explain some of the variance in ethical behavior (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010), and therefore may also influence people’s propensity to reciprocate. This analysis yielded virtually identical results (see Table 1).

**Discussion**

Study 1A showed that people reported a lower desire to reciprocate a favor they received (i.e., being treated for dinner) when it occurred in an organizational context relative to a personal context. Study 1A also showed that this effect was partially mediated by the tendency to see the favor occurring in the organizational context as being

less related to a dispositional cause. Importantly, Study 1A showed that these effects occurred whether or not the person doing the favor was described as a friend or as a more casual acquaintance and the results held when we controlled for the race and gender of participant.

**STUDY 1B**

To ensure that our results were not just the result of some idiosyncratic aspect of the particular scenario we had used in Study 1A, we conceptually replicated the findings from Study 1A using a different scenario in Study 1B.

**Method**

**Participants.** One hundred forty-four participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk participated in this experiment (89 Males, 55 Females;  $M_{age} = 30.02$ ,  $SD_{age} = 7.43$ ). The sample consisted of White Americans (69 percent), Latino Americans (10 percent), African Americans (6 percent), and

Asian Americans/ Pacific Islanders (15 percent). The sample was also educationally diverse in that there were individuals with high school degrees (12 percent), some college experience (44 percent), college degrees (38 percent), and professional/graduate-level degrees (6 percent).

**Procedure.** As in Study 1A, Study 1B used a 2 (Context: Personal vs. Organizational)  $\times$  2 (Social Relationship With Target: Friend vs. Acquaintance) experimental design. We randomly assigned participants to one of four experimental conditions. In the *personal context/friend condition*, participants imagined that they were returning from a personal trip and that their friend offered to bring them home from the airport. In the *personal context/acquaintance condition*, participants read a parallel scenario, except we changed “friend” to “acquaintance.”

By contrast, in the *organizational context/friend condition*, participants imagined that they were returning from a *business trip*, and that a *friend from work* offered to bring them to the office from the airport. In the *organizational context/acquaintance condition*, participants read a parallel scenario, except we changed “friend” to “acquaintance.”

After reading the vignette, participants answered the same measures from Study 1A. They reported the extent to which they felt obligated to reciprocate ( $\alpha = .86$ ), their attributions of the target’s behavior ( $\alpha = .87$ ), and a manipulation check to determine whether they construed the behavior in the scenario as a favor. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed.

## Results

**Manipulation check.** All of the participants exposed to this scenario saw the behavior of the other as constituting a favor.

**Obligation to reciprocate.** We began by analyzing felt obligation to reciprocate. We regressed felt obligation to reciprocate on dummy coded context (0 = Personal, +1 = Organizational), social relationship with target (0 = Acquaintance, +1 = Friend), and the interaction of the two predictor variables. The interaction term was again not significant,  $t(140) = 1.68$ , and thus, the subsequent analysis was collapsed across the two relationship conditions. As in Study 1A, participants who imagined that they were in an organizational context felt significantly less obligated to reciprocate ( $M_{Organizational} = 4.31$ ,  $SD_{Organizational} = 1.47$ ) relative to participants who imagined that they were in a personal context ( $M_{Personal} = 5.11$ ,  $SD_{Personal} = 1.07$ ),  $b = -.80$ ,  $t(142) = -3.63$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Attributions made about the favor.** Participants who imagined that they were in an organizational

context were also significantly less likely to attribute the target’s favor-doing to a dispositional cause ( $M_{Organizational} = 5.04$ ,  $SD_{Organizational} = 1.07$ ) compared with participants who imagined that they were in a personal context ( $M_{Personal} = 5.73$ ,  $SD_{Personal} = .65$ ),  $b = -.69$ ,  $t(142) = -4.46$ ,  $p < .001$ .

We then conducted a mediation analysis to test whether attribution beliefs explained why context had an effect on felt obligation to reciprocate (see Figure 1, Lower Panel). We reran the first regression model predicting felt obligation to reciprocate, this time controlling for attribution beliefs. In this model, context became a non-significant predictor,  $b = -.37$ ,  $t(141) = -1.77$ ,  $p = .08$ , but attribution beliefs remained a significant predictor,  $b = .61$ ,  $t(141) = 5.66$ ,  $p < .001$ . A bias-corrected bootstrap (1,000 iterations) revealed a significant indirect effect,  $CI_{95} = [-.69, -.19]$ , indicating that attribution beliefs statistically mediated the effect of context on felt obligation to reciprocate. Thus, participants who imagined that they were in an organizational context felt less obligated to reciprocate because they were less inclined to think that the other person had a sincere and genuine motive to help.

Once again, we reran these analyses controlling for race and gender (see Table 1). The results were virtually identical with the inclusion of these control variables.

## Discussion

Using a different scenario, Study 1B again showed that participants who imagined that they were in an organizational context felt less obligated to reciprocate, partly because they were less likely to attribute the favor they received to a dispositional cause. These effects emerged whether the person who did them a favor was described as their friend or their acquaintance. Thus, taken together, Studies 1A and 1B provided evidence consistent with our theoretical argument that one reason why people express a lower desire to reciprocate in an organizational context is because they are less inclined to think that favors occurring in such a context say something about the person doing the favor, such as how generous and helpful that individual is.

## STUDY 2

In Study 2, we sought to investigate empirically our argument that organizational contexts prompt more calculative decision-making about reciprocating. In so doing, we wanted to test the core argument that organizations shift how people think about reciprocity, from a decision that is based on



moral obligations to one that is based on the calculation of the favor-doer's future usefulness.

To test this idea, we presented a scenario similar to the previous studies and told participants that the favor-doer in the scenario was potentially more useful (High Instrumentality) or less useful (Low Instrumentality) to them in the future. We predicted that in the organizational context condition, participants would be more discriminating about returning favors, in that they would be more willing to return favors made by those who are more likely to be useful to them in the future. By contrast, we did not expect participants in the personal context condition to differentiate based upon the other's future usefulness, because research suggests that in personal situations, people feel they have a strong moral obligation to repay past kindnesses, even from strangers (Whatley et al., 1999) and casual acquaintances (Shen et al., 2011), regardless of the person's future usefulness (e.g., Gächter & Herrmann, 2009).

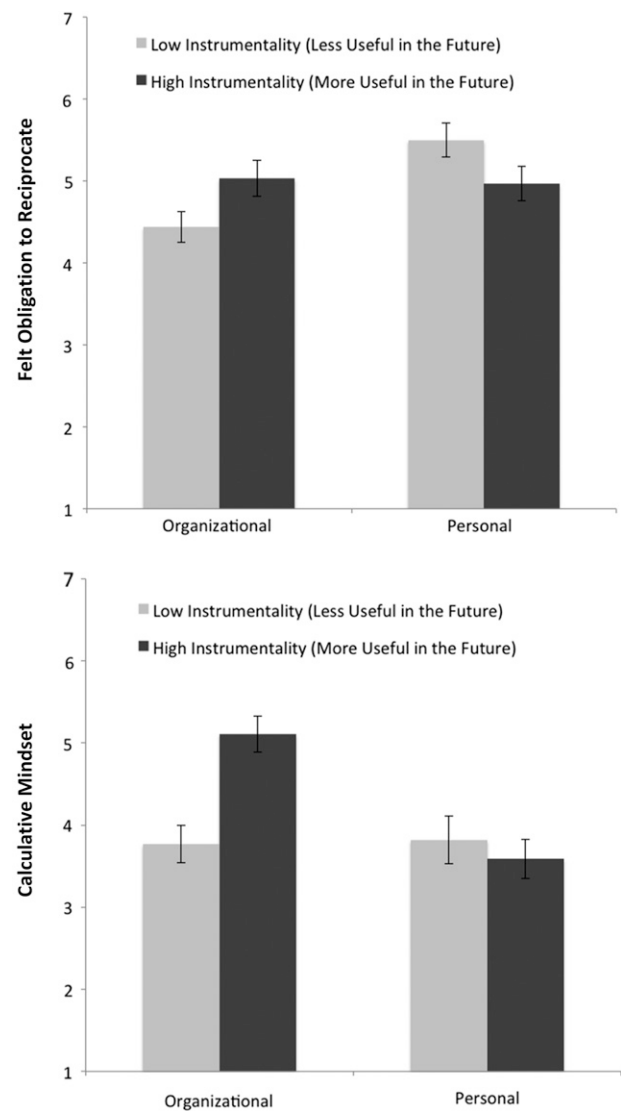
Second, we explored whether the tendency to be more calculative explained why people would tend to discriminate based on future usefulness in organizational contexts, but not in personal contexts. We hypothesized that, in an organizational context, people would more strongly consider the incentives and benefits they can get in the future when they make decisions about returning favors. By contrast, we expected that in the personal context condition, calculation of incentives and benefits would have no effect on people's decision to reciprocate, consistent with the idea that in personal contexts, moral obligations more strongly guide people's decision to reciprocate (Gouldner, 1960; Whatley et al., 1999).

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred eighty-two individuals recruited from a nationally representative participant pool maintained by a third party online panel company (50 Males, 129 Females, 3 unidentified;  $M_{\text{age}} = 38.10$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.08$ ) participated in this experiment. Participants were paid a small amount for participating. The sample consisted of White Americans (75 percent), Latino Americans (6 percent), African Americans (8 percent), Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (10 percent), and Native Americans (< 1 percent). The sample was also educationally diverse in that there were individuals with high school degrees (18 percent), some college experience (45 percent), college degrees (29 percent), and professional/graduate-level degrees (8 percent).

**Procedure.** Study 2 used a 2 (Context: Personal vs. Organizational)  $\times$  2 (Future Instrumentality of

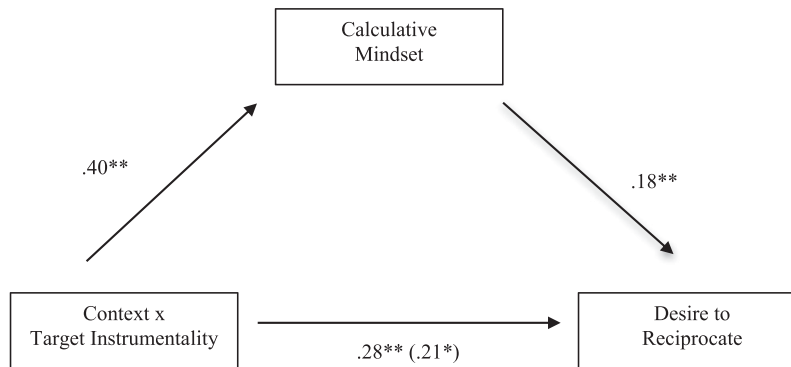
**FIGURE 2**  
Willingness to Reciprocate (Upper Panel) and Calculative Mindset Scores (Lower Panel) as a Function of Condition and Target Instrumentality



the Target: Low vs. High) design. In the *personal context condition*, participants imagined that they were returning from a personal trip and that their *friend* offered to bring them home from the airport. In the *organizational context condition*, participants imagined that they were returning from a *business trip*, and that *their coworker* offered to bring them to the office from the airport.

We then manipulated whether the target in the scenario was described as being potentially useful or less useful to the participants in the future. In the *High Instrumentality* condition, participants read that circumstances made it likely that the other person will be able to do much for them in the future. In the *Low Instrumentality* condition, participants

**FIGURE 3**  
Mediated Moderation Analysis for Study 2



Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

read that circumstances made it likely that the other person will be unable to do much for them in the future.

After reading the vignette, participants completed our dependent measures. First, participants answered *the extent to which they felt obligated to reciprocate* ( $\alpha = .87$ ), using the same items from Study 1A and Study 1B. Then, using a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree), participants answered two items that assessed a *calculative mindset*, the extent to which they considered their interests and perceived benefits in the decision to reciprocate: (a) “In forming my decision on whether I should return the favor, I considered what would increase my chances of being a successful person in the future;” and (b) “In forming my decision on whether I should return the favor, I considered the possible benefits that I could get in the future if I decided to return the favor.” We created these two items as an attempt to measure a rational and calculative decision-making process (e.g., Wang et al., 2014; Zhong, 2011). We averaged responses to these two items to form a composite ( $r = .52, p < .001; \alpha = .68$ ),<sup>1</sup> with higher scores representing a stronger calculative, future-oriented mindset. Finally, participants answered a demographic questionnaire. Then, they were thanked and debriefed.

## Results

**Felt obligation to reciprocate.** We tested the hypothesis that in an organizational context, but not in a personal context, people would be more

inclined to make decisions about reciprocity based on the usefulness of the favor-doer in the future. To examine this, we conducted a 2 (Context: Personal vs. Organizational)  $\times$  2 (Future Instrumentality of the Target: Low vs. High) ANOVA. The predicted interaction was significant,  $F(1,178) = 7.21, p < .01$  (see Figure 2, Upper Panel). Among participants who imagined that they were in an organizational context, those who read that the target was not useful in the future felt less obligated to return the favor ( $M = 4.44, SD = 1.40$ ) compared with participants who read that the target was someone who could be potentially useful in the future ( $M = 5.03, SD = 1.45$ ),  $t(97) = -2.06, p = .04$ .

By contrast, among participants who imagined that they were in a personal context, the future value of the person who helped them had no impact on their willingness to reciprocate. In fact, the pattern of means was approaching significance in the *opposite* direction to the one observed in the organizational context condition. It was those who learned that the target had *no* future value to them that showed a somewhat stronger desire to return the favor ( $M_{notuseful} = 5.50, SD_{notuseful} = 1.36; M_{useful} = 4.97, SD_{useful} = 1.37; t[81] = 1.76, p = .08$ ; see Figure 2). Although this difference is marginally significant, the result is consistent with the idea that reciprocity is a moral obligation that overrides issues of future helpfulness. More importantly, the pattern of means in our data supports the hypothesis that people in organizational contexts reciprocate the kindness of others depending on their anticipated future value, while people in a personal setting do not.

**Calculative mindset.** The preceding analysis assumed that the participants in the organizational context condition were more focused on the usefulness of the target in the future whereas the participants in the personal context condition

<sup>1</sup> Although these two items showed acceptable reliability, we also conducted analyses using each item separately and found virtually identical results.

TABLE 2  
Mediated Moderation Results for Study 2

	Model 1 DV: Felt Obligation to Reciprocate	Model 2 DV: Calculative Mindset	Model 3 DV: Felt Obligation to Reciprocate
Context	-.25*	.37**	-.32**
Target instrumentality	.02	.28*	-.03
Context × target instrumentality	.28**	.40**	.21*
Calculative mindset			.18**

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

were not. As we asked people questions about the process underlying their decision about reciprocation, we examined whether self-interest and perceived future benefits played a role in their thinking.

We conducted a parallel ANOVA as that reported above predicting calculative mindset scores. This analysis revealed several findings. First, consistent with our theoretical account, there was a significant main effect for context, such that participants who imagined that they were in an organizational context were more likely to consider their self-interest ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ) compared with those who imagined that they were in a personal context ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ),  $F(1,178) = 9.02$ ,  $p < .01$  (see Figure 2, Lower Panel). Not surprisingly, there was also a significant main effect for target instrumentality, indicating that participants were more likely to consider their self-interest when the target was potentially useful ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ) compared with when the target was described as being less useful ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ),  $F(1,178) = 5.09$ ,  $p = .03$ .

Importantly, these results were qualified by a significant Future Instrumentality × Context interaction,  $F(1,178) = 10.37$ ,  $p < .01$ . Among participants who imagined that they were in an organizational context, those who thought that the target had future value to them ( $M_{useful} = 5.11$ ,  $SD_{useful} = 1.49$ ) showed a stronger tendency to consider their self-interest and future incentives compared with those who learned that the target had little future value ( $M_{lessuseful} = 3.77$ ,  $SD_{lessuseful} = 1.66$ ),  $t(97) = 4.19$ ,  $p < .001$ . By contrast, among participants who imagined that they were in a personal context, learning about the future value of the target had no influence on whether they considered self-interests and future incentives ( $p = .53$ ).

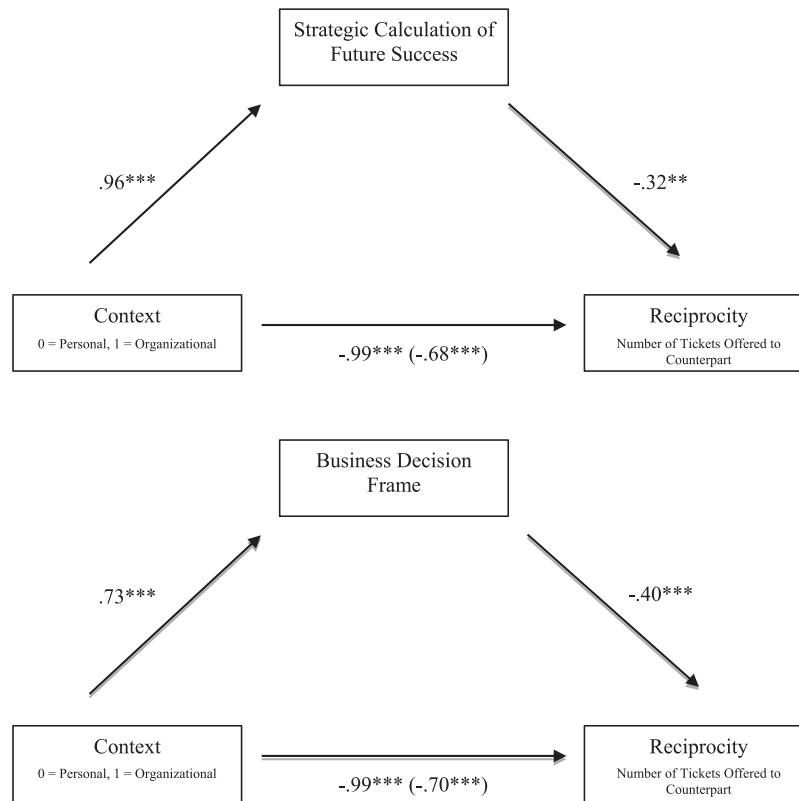
Finally, we conducted a mediated moderation analysis to test whether a calculative mindset

mediated the interactive effect of context and target instrumentality on felt obligation to reciprocate (see Figure 3 and Table 2). To this end, we first regressed the dependent variable (desire to reciprocate) on contrast-coded context (Personal = -1, Organizational = +1), contrast-coded instrumentality (Low = -1, High = +1), and the interaction of these two variables. As reported above, the interaction between context and target instrumentality was significant,  $b = .28$ ,  $t(178) = 2.69$ ,  $p < .01$ . Next, we reran this regression model, this time controlling for the proposed mediator (calculative mindset scores). The statistical significance of the interaction term was reduced,  $b = .21$ ,  $t(177) = 2.00$ ,  $p = .05$ , and calculative mindset was a significant predictor in the model,  $b = .18$ ,  $t(177) = 2.82$ ,  $p < .01$ . A bootstrap (1,000 iterations) indicated a significant indirect effect [.01, .14]. These results suggest that a calculative mindset partially mediated the interactive effect of context and target instrumentality on the felt obligation to reciprocate.

## Discussion

Study 2 showed that participants who imagined that they were in an organizational context wanted to reciprocate more to the extent they saw others as useful in the future. However among participants who imagined that they were in a personal context, their motivation to reciprocate was not affected by the future usefulness of others. If anything, participants were even more inclined to return favors performed by people who were not going to be as helpful in the future. We also empirically found that this effect was mediated by the calculative consideration of self-interest and future benefits. These findings support the idea that in organizational contexts, people's willingness to return favors is more based on the anticipated future usefulness of

**FIGURE 4**  
Mediation Analyses for Study 3



Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

relationships as contrasted with the moral imperative of the norm of reciprocity.<sup>2</sup>

In the studies presented thus far, we have seen evidence that people's desire to reciprocate depends in part on whether they believe they are

<sup>2</sup> In Study 2, our goal was to test whether organizational contexts would elicit a greater calculative mindset, which in turn, would make people *feel less obligated to reciprocate to the extent that they don't see others as being useful*. Although Study 2 was specifically designed to test an interaction effect, we also analyzed the results collapsing across target instrumentality. As we posit, organizational contexts have a negative effect on reciprocity ( $b = -.25$ ) and a positive effect on calculative mindset ( $b = .37$ ). However, when calculative mindset was controlled for, the direct effect of context on reciprocity became larger in magnitude ( $b = -.32$ ). This pattern indicates a suppression effect, whereby the positive indirect effect of calculative mindset masks the negative direct effect of context. This suggests that there are additional reasons why people in organizational contexts are less likely to reciprocate (see Studies 1A and 1B), and hints at the possibility that the effect of a calculative mindset may depend on other factors, such as the nature of the interaction.

acting in an organizational or a personal context. We have also seen some evidence that the desire to reciprocate differs across contexts in part because of differences in the attributions made about the favor-doer and also differences in the extent to which, in organizational contexts, people naturally enough employ more calculative, future-oriented, business-like decision making. Because the norm of reciprocity is, by definition, about norms, attitudes about reciprocating are quite appropriate as dependent variables. Nonetheless, in the next two studies, we wanted to examine whether differences in context would yield differences in *actual reciprocating behavior*.

### STUDY 3

In Study 3, we sought to extend the findings of the previous two studies by using a behavioral measure of reciprocation. To do this, we modified the Dictator Game and led participants to believe that they were in an interaction between two people (Personal Context condition), an interaction between two managers (Organizational Context/Manager condition), or an interaction between two

office assistants (Organizational Context/Assistant Condition). We then observed how participants behaved in these situations. We expected to observe lower reciprocity in the two organizational context conditions compared with the personal context condition. Furthermore, we expected that reciprocity would be lower in these conditions because participants would engage in more calculative thinking.

## Method

**Participants.** Three hundred ninety-eight individuals (172 Males, 222 Females, 4 Unidentified;  $M_{\text{age}} = 35.59$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.74$ ) recruited from a nationally representative pool maintained by a third party online panel company participated in this experiment. The sample consisted of White Americans (78 percent), Latino Americans (4 percent), African Americans (10 percent), Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (7 percent), and Native Americans (1 percent; two participants did not identify their ethnicity). The sample was also educationally diverse in that there were individuals with high school degrees (21 percent), some college experience (36 percent), college degrees (34 percent), and professional/graduate-level degrees (9 percent).

**Procedure.** At the beginning of the study, participants read that they would complete several tasks for this experiment. We randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions. In the *Personal Context* condition, we asked participants simply to complete the study. In the *Organizational Context/Manager condition*, we instructed participants to imagine that they were a manager working for a mid-sized firm as they completed the study. In the *Organizational Context/Assistant condition*, we gave participants parallel instructions, except we changed the word “Manager” to “Office Assistant.” We used two organizational roles that varied in the level of power and rank implied (i.e., manager and assistant) to test the generalizability of our findings across different power and status contexts. We predicted that participants in these two organizational context conditions would behave similarly on our main dependent measures.

Participants completed several tasks. First, they answered a short personality test; then, they engaged in a short typing exercise. After completing these tasks, participants read that the researchers of the study were interested in online interactions, and as such, their next task consisted of interacting with another online participant. In reality, there was no other participant; all participants completed the activity by themselves.

Participants read that that they had been matched to another person online (Personal Context

condition), to another office assistant (Organizational Context/Assistant condition), or to another office manager (Organizational Context/Manager condition). Throughout the rest of the interaction, we explicitly referred to the “other” participant as *the other person*, *the other manager* or *the other office assistant* to reinforce our context manipulations. Participants then read that this online interaction consisted of two rounds. At the beginning of the first round, the other participant will receive 10 Lottery Tickets and will divide the lottery tickets between the two parties in any manner the other participant wished. Then, during the second round, participants will receive 10 Lottery tickets that they then get to divide between the two parties. Importantly, we told participants that these lottery tickets entitled them to a \$50 gift card from an online retailer if selected, to make them feel that their behavior in this interaction would have a meaningful impact on their economic outcomes (Colquitt, 2008).

After confirming that they understood the instructions, we reinforced our context manipulation one last time by having participants type in their name (Personal Context condition) or their role (Organizational Context conditions). Then, the “interaction” began. We told participants to wait a few seconds while the other party formed an offer. Participants then received a message indicating that they received seven tickets from the other participant and that the first round was over. Then, participants read that the 2nd round would begin—it was now their turn to divide the 10 lottery tickets between themselves and the other participant. Participants indicated how many tickets they wanted to send to the other participant. After they had made and indicated their choice, the “interaction” ended.

Participants then answered several measures. First, using a 7-point scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very), participants answered the question, “How generous was the other person’s offer to you in the first round?” This question served as a *manipulation check* to determine whether the participant construed the behavior of their partner as a favor—an act of generosity granted freely toward someone (Merriam-Webster, 2013).

Second, participants answered two measures from prior research that assessed a *calculative mindset*. The first calculative mindset measure was a 2-item measure that tapped into *the strategic contemplation of future success*: (a) “I considered what would be best for my interests in the future;” and (b) “I considered what would increase my chances of being a successful person in the future” ( $r = .83$ ;  $\alpha = .91$ ). Again, we created these two items as an

TABLE 3  
Results of Supplementary Analysis for Study 3

	DV: Reciprocity	DV: Contemplation of Future Success	DV: Business Decision Frame
Condition (planned contrast)	-.28***	.29***	.24***
Gender	.44*	-.41*	-.08
Ethnicity	.31	-.34	-.82***

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

attempt to capture a rational and calculative decision-making process (e.g., Wang et al., 2014; Zhong, 2011). The second calculative mindset measure (adapted from Kouchaki et al., 2013; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999) was a 1-item measure that assessed *strategic business thinking*: “My offer in the 2nd round was purely a business decision, not based on personal considerations.” Participants answered these two measures using a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree).

Because power differences can influence attributions for behavior in ways that can reduce reciprocity (Inesi et al., 2012), we wanted to examine the alternative possibility that varying the context affected feelings of power. Although this is less plausible because all participants regardless of the experimental condition had an opportunity to decide about allocating lottery tickets in the second round, and there was no information that would induce them to think that the other person had more power (in fact, the instructions explicitly told participants that they were interacting with another person with the same role), we nonetheless examined the possibility by asking participants, “During the interaction, I had a great deal of power” (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree).

After completing these measures, participants answered a demographic questionnaire. Then, they were thanked and debriefed.

### Empirical Strategy

To test our hypothesis, we created two dummy-codes with the personal context condition chosen as the baseline (Aiken & West, 1991). We then regressed our relevant dependent variables on these two dummy-coded condition variables. This allowed us to test how each organizational context condition differed from the personal context condition.

**Perceived generosity of the offer.** Participants thought that the first offer was highly generous ( $M = 6.45$ ,  $SD = .86$ ), with the grand mean being

significantly different from the midpoint,  $t(396) = 56.65$ ,  $p < .001$ .<sup>3</sup> The perceived generosity of the offer did not vary by condition ( $ps > .65$ ), as it should not.

**Perceived power.** Context had no effect on perceived power during the interaction ( $ps > .30$ ), as it should not. Consequently, differences in perceived power cannot explain any observed differences in the results across the conditions.

**Reciprocity.** Participants in the Organizational Context/Manager condition ( $M = 6.06$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ;  $b = -.54$ ,  $t[395] = -2.39$ ,  $p = .02$ ) and participants in the Organizational Context/Assistant condition ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 2.58$ ;  $b = -1.47$ ,  $t[395] = -6.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ) offered significantly fewer tickets to their counterpart on the 2nd round compared with participants in the Personal Context condition ( $M = 6.60$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). A separate planned contrast analysis (Personal Context condition = -2, Organizational Context/Manager = +1, Organizational Context/Assistant = +1) revealed that participants in these two organizational context conditions offered significantly fewer tickets to their counterpart on the 2nd round compared with participants in the personal context condition ( $b = -.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Calculative mindset.** We analyzed our two measures of calculative mindset separately. First, on the measure of strategic contemplation of future success (e.g., Wang et al., 2014; Zhong 2011), results revealed that participants in the organizational context conditions ( $M_{Manager} = 4.58$ ,  $SD_{Manager} = 1.58$ ;  $M_{Assistant} = 4.42$ ,  $SD_{Assistant} = 1.79$ ) showed a stronger tendency to consider their future success than did participants in the personal context conditions ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ;  $ps < .001$ ) when they formed their own offers. A planned contrast analysis also revealed that participants in the organizational context conditions were more likely to contemplate their future success compared with participants in the personal context condition ( $b = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

<sup>3</sup> One participant was excluded from this analysis because he did not answer the perceived generosity measure.

Second, on the single-item strategic business thinking measure (Kouchaki et al., 2013; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999), results revealed that participants in the organizational context conditions were more likely to decide based on business considerations ( $M_{Manager} = 4.52$ ,  $SD_{Manager} = 1.88$ ;  $b_{Manager} = .92$ ,  $t[395] = 4.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{Assistant} = 4.13$ ,  $SD_{Assistant} = 1.98$ ;  $b_{Assistant} = .53$ ,  $t[395] = 2.28$ ,  $p = .02$ ) compared with participants in the personal context condition ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ). A planned contrast analysis revealed that participants in these two organizational context conditions were more likely to decide based on business considerations compared with participants in the personal context condition ( $b = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Next, we conducted a mediation analysis to examine whether calculative thinking accounted for the tendency to reciprocate less in an organizational context. To this end, we first dummy-coded condition (0 = Personal, +1 = Organizational); then we estimated the significance of the indirect effect using a bias-corrected bootstrap with 1,000 iterations (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; see Figure 4). First, we examined the two-item measure on the strategic contemplation of future success as a mediator. The 95 percent confidence interval did not include zero [-.52, -.18]. Next, we examined the single-item measure of strategic business thinking as a mediator. The 95 percent confidence interval also did not include zero [-.50, -.13]. Therefore, we conclude that both measures of calculative mindset mediated the effect of context on reciprocity.

Finally, we reran these analyses controlling for gender and race (see Table 3), and found that the results remained robust after controlling for these demographic differences.

## Discussion

Using a behavioral measure, Study 3 showed that people reciprocated less in an organizational context compared with a personal context. Study 3 also showed that this occurred because, as we had demonstrated previously in the scenario studies, people in an organizational context were more calculative. They considered their future individual interests and made decisions based on strategic business thinking more than did people in a personal context.

## STUDY 4

Although economic games have been used extensively in studies of cooperation and even in studies of reciprocity (e.g., Cox, Friedman, & Gjerstad, 2007; Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Johnson & Mislin, 2011), we nonetheless wanted to conduct an

additional study that would use a different behavioral measure of reciprocating. Furthermore, we wanted to use an experimental paradigm in which there was a high degree of psychological realism (e.g., Colquitt, 2008). To do this, we placed participants in a real situation where their decision to reciprocate would have implications for their time and economic outcomes. Specifically, in this study, we provided participants with an unsolicited favor, and asked them later on to comply with a request that would require a small portion of their time and that yielded no economic incentives for doing so. As in the previous studies, we created a situation in which participants thought they were in an organizational context or a personal context, and expected that participants in the organizational context would feel less obligated to comply with the request after having received a favor.

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred twenty individuals recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (70 Males, 50 Females;  $M_{age} = 30.63$ ,  $SD_{age} = 8.68$ ) participated in this experiment. The sample consisted of White Americans (75 percent), Latino Americans (8 percent), African Americans (7 percent), and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (10 percent). The sample was also educationally diverse in that there were individuals with high school degrees (22 percent), some college experience (38 percent), college degrees (33 percent), and professional/graduate-level degrees (7 percent).

**Procedure.** We told participants at the beginning of the study that they would earn \$0.50 for participating. After obtaining their consent, we randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions. In the *organizational context condition*, participants saw an introductory message on the screen from the *X-university Behavioral Lab*<sup>4</sup>: “The X-University Behavioral Lab is hiring employees who are interested in providing data by taking surveys and participating in other sorts of studies.” We then told participants to place themselves in the role of an Office Assistant as they completed the activities for this study. By contrast, in the *personal context condition*, participants saw an introductory message from *the experimenter of the study*: “Hi, I am \_\_\_\_\_,<sup>5</sup> a doctoral student from X University. I am looking for *people* who are interested in taking

<sup>4</sup> In the actual study, participants saw the name of an actual university, which we excluded for the blind review process.

<sup>5</sup> Participants read the name of the first author of this paper, which we excluded for the blind review process.

surveys or participating in other sorts of studies as part of the research for my doctoral dissertation.” Then, participants advanced to the next page of the survey.

As in Study 3, participants completed personality tests, engaged in a typing exercise, and answered a demographic questionnaire. When they finished, participants received a “thank you” message. In the organizational context condition, participants read a message from the X-University Behavioral Lab: “Thank you for completing today’s study. Although we are not obligated to do this, we would like to do you a favor and thank you for your service as an *Assistant* today by giving you an extra \$1.50. Today, you will receive \$2.00!” In the personal context condition, participants read a parallel message from the experimenter of the study: “Thank you for completing today’s study. Although there is no obligation to do so, I wanted to do you a favor as a way of thanking you *personally*, so I am giving you an extra \$1.50. Today, you will receive \$2.00!”

Then, participants advanced to the next page of the survey. Participants in the organizational context condition read: “There are some other surveys that the X-University Behavioral Lab needs to get completed, but unfortunately these DO NOT offer any compensation for doing them. Would you like to help the Behavioral Lab with these additional surveys?” In the personal context condition, participants read a parallel prompt: “I also need to conduct other surveys, but unfortunately, these DO NOT offer any compensation for doing them. Would you like to help me with these additional surveys?” Participants then indicated whether they would like to help or not (1 = “Yes, I would like to help with these additional surveys. I also understand that I would not get compensated for doing these additional surveys.” 2 = “No, thank you. I would like to finish and collect \$2.00.”) Participants who indicated “no” were thanked for participating. Participants who indicated yes were redirected to a new page, where they answered a battery of personality tests. Then, they were thanked for participating.

## Results

Thirty-three percent of participants complied with the request to complete additional surveys without extra monetary compensation. However, compliance rates significantly varied by condition ( $\chi^2 [1, n = 120] = 5.40, p = .02$ ). Whereas almost half of participants (43 percent) in the personal context condition complied with the request, only 23 percent of participants in the organizational context condition did so.

We again examined whether these results held after controlling for gender and race. Using logistic

regression, we regressed compliance with the request (0 = No, +1 = Yes) on condition (0 = Personal, +1 = Organizational) controlling for gender (0 = Male, +1 = Female) and race (0 = Ethnic Minorities, +1 = Whites). As predicted, participants in the organizational context condition were less likely to comply with the request,  $b = -.91, z = -.2.23, p = .03$ , even after controlling for gender and race. Moreover, neither race nor gender was a statistically significant predictor of willingness to help.

## Discussion

Using a different experimental paradigm in which people had to behaviorally demonstrate their willingness to offer help after having received a (unanticipated) favor, we found that people in the organizational context condition were significantly less likely to reciprocate than were people who thought they were interacting with a person.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In five studies, using both attitudinal and behavioral measures, we consistently found that people primed to think of themselves in an organizational context (e.g., co-worker) felt less motivated to reciprocate (Studies 1A, 1B, and 2), and *did* reciprocate less (Studies 3 and 4) than those in an otherwise parallel personal (e.g., friend or acquaintance) situation. We also found empirical support for some possible psychological mechanisms that we argued might account for this result. People primed to think of themselves in an organizational context were more calculative and self-interested (Studies 2 and 3), thought somewhat more about the future and future benefits from reciprocating (Studies 2 and 3), used a business decision frame in thinking about whether to reciprocate (Study 3), and were more likely to discount the possibility that the favor they received was driven by enduring characteristics or personal qualities of the favor-doer (Studies 1A and 1B).

Our results are consistent with research demonstrating that people’s inferences about favors they have received can influence their subsequent response (e.g., Ames et al., 2004; Inesi et al., 2012), and that how people frame the situations they are in can affect their decisions to compete or cooperate (e.g., Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004). Our results are also consistent with emerging scholarship that shows that contexts that promote calculative (Wang et al., 2014), deliberative (Zhong, 2011), and business-like decision-making (Kouchaki et al.,



2013) can promote less ethical intentions and behaviors. In the present research, we showed that organizational contexts reduce people's obligation to follow the moral imperative of the norm of reciprocity.

### Limitations

We have studied the effects of organizational versus personal context using only experimental methods. On the one hand, experiments permit greater inferences about causality. On the other hand, experiments are necessarily quite short, raising the question of whether the effects we observed would persist over time or occur in more naturalistic settings that have a larger variety of simultaneous contextual effects.

There is also an issue of the ecological validity of our findings because of the particular experimental manipulations we employed. To some extent, this limitation is inherent in the question that we pose: Does "organization" weaken the norm of reciprocity? To explore this question, we necessarily have to use either scenarios or experimental procedures that invoke behaviors and situations that could plausibly occur in *both* personal and organizational contexts and implicate psychological mechanisms that could operate in both settings. This necessity limited the range of behaviors and situations we could use, although others may be more creative in thinking of additional situations that might help overcome this limitation.

Although we followed widespread practice in social psychology in testing for the effects of mediating psychological processes, the mediator and the outcome were measured at the same time. And, because participants were not randomly assigned to different levels of the mediating constructs, we are limited in our ability to draw stronger causal inferences (Coffman, 2011; Coffman & Zhong, 2012).

Another limitation of the present research is that it was conducted only in the United States. Although there is no reason to believe that the psychological processes we have proposed would be culturally-bound, Americans are particularly exposed to news articles and stories about organizations breaking implicit psychological contracts with their employees. This may lead U.S. respondents to be more sensitive to actions occurring in organizational contexts and less likely to reciprocate in such contexts compared with people in countries where there are higher levels of trust in employers. Clearly one important extension of the present research would be to conduct similar studies across countries that varied in leader and organizational trust and distrust, and in the history of

employers keeping or violating implicit and explicit promises.

Our measures of the mediating processes such as the emphasis on future instrumentality and a calculative mind-set, while derived from other measures of such constructs, are inevitably imperfect approximations of the underlying constructs. It is possible that other measures of the psychological processes might produce different results.

Finally, although we used two different scenarios and two different behavioral settings, our studies certainly do not capture the full range of possible scenarios or games that might be employed to study reciprocating behavior. It is possible that other scenarios or games could produce different results, although there is no particular theoretical reason to expect such an outcome.

### Some Implications for Future Research

There are numerous implications of the ideas developed in this paper for future research. Not all relationships are the same. Clark and Mills (1995: 684) distinguished between communal and exchange relationships on the basis of "the rules or norms that govern the giving and receiving of benefits." Exchange relationships are premised on providing benefits with the expectation of a payoff, while in communal relationships, such as those found in families and among close friends, concerns for other people's well-being motivate the provision of benefits. This distinction could possibly help account for the differences we observed, as exchange relationships would presumably dominate inside workplaces. However, as one study of teachers demonstrated (Moolenaar, Slegers, Karsten, & Daly, 2012), even in workplaces there are both instrumental (exchange) and expressive (presumably more communal) networks of relations. One extension of the present research would be to explore differences in the norm of reciprocity across a wider range of communal and exchange contexts besides the "personal" and "organizational" used here.

Not all organizations are the same, and the mechanisms we have identified suggest some moderating or contingency conditions for our results that might be explored in subsequent research. For instance, work organizations differ in the extent to which they focus on, recognize, and reward future rather than past contributions. Workplaces also vary in the extent to which they utilize a business-oriented decision frame, in the extent to which they have a culture that emphasizes a business-oriented as contrasted with, for instance, a relationship-oriented mind-set (Kouchaki et al., 2013), and in

the extent to which they emphasize and induce their employees to use a calculative, rational calculus of decision-making, something prior research has shown to affect ethical behavior (Zhong, 2011). To the extent that organizations recognize and honor past contributions to their well-being, emphasize social relationships and obligations and not just rational, economic calculations, and evaluate and promote people on the basis of their ethical and moral behavior, we would hypothesize that the differences in the degree of reciprocation between organizational and personal settings would be diminished.

As already noted, when leaders and employers violate reciprocity norms, employees respond negatively by decreasing their performance and commitment (e.g., Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). Another extension of the present research would be to explore whether exposure to non-reciprocation can create a “spillover effect” that generalizes to people’s attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs in other settings. There is existing research consistent with this idea. For example, some studies suggest that people who feel they have been treated unfairly in one setting are more likely to engage in deviant behavior in a completely unrelated setting (Inzlicht & Kang, 2010; Mullen & Nadler, 2008). In a similar vein, repeated exposure to non-reciprocation might prompt individuals to rethink their attitudes and beliefs about reciprocity and their mental models of the social world. For example, they might develop a general distrust toward all employers and distaste for all types of work organizations. Perhaps, and at a more extreme level, they may even develop a more cynical view of cooperation and social interaction. Exploring such possibilities would require not only experimental and field data, but also longitudinal data to understand the effects of non-reciprocating on people over time.

An important extension of the present research would entail examining additional mechanisms that might account for why reciprocation can be less in organizational contexts. Haran’s (2013) research on the moral reactions to people violating contracts suggests one such mechanism—the fact that individuals breaking promises is seen by observers as a moral transgression while this is less true for organizations. Haran’s research suggests that one reason that people may not reciprocate as much in organizations, then, could be because they do not anticipate others seeing them as behaving unethically and inappropriately. Consequently, exploring how others react to and attribute instances of non-reciprocation would appear to be a useful avenue to explore. This would include examining the consequences of non-reciprocation rather than

its occurrence and how those consequences differ across contexts.

Another difference between organizational and other settings is the presumed basis for interpersonal relationships. Personal relationships inside work settings are likely to be seen as more instrumental rather than expressive, and this difference in the nature of social interaction could provide another, complementary mechanism to account for why reciprocation differs between contexts. We would predict that the norm of reciprocity would operate with more force in more personal and less instrumental relationships because in instrumental relationships there would be greater concern with what the other could do in the future rather than in reciprocating past behaviors.

Because the norm of reciprocity is functional in many ways for building cooperation (Gouldner, 1960; Goldstein et al., 2011), it is important to understand how reciprocating behavior could be strengthened in organizational contexts. Thus, an additional extension of the present arguments would be to explore whether the negative effect of organizational context on reciprocation could be mitigated. Some ways of doing so might include priming a consideration of the past, inducing an ethical mindset, or by focusing people’s attention on the dispositions and attributes of the favor-doer. For instance, Haran (2013) found that when the word “promise” was added to the experimental setting, contract breaches were perceived similarly regardless of whether a person or organization was involved. Haran’s result suggests that priming the moral obligation to reciprocate might reduce the influence of organizational context on reciprocation. The ability to design interventions that would increase reciprocation in organizational contexts so that they were at levels more similar to personal settings would also increase confidence that the mechanisms we have identified are, in fact, correct.

### Practical Implications

The implications of our results for practice depend importantly on one’s perspective. From the point of view of employees, the implication is not to expect the norm of reciprocity to operate with as much force in organizational settings—subject to testing the various organizational variables already discussed that would make this statement more or less true—and therefore, not to be surprised when loyalty and efforts are not reciprocated. This implication provides social science evidence and the psychological processes consistent with recommendations made by others (e.g., Hirsch, 1988).

From the point of view of managers, our results, particularly if they are extended to consider the moral outrage and willingness to punish non-reciprocation as these differ between organizational and personal contexts, suggest that inside organizations, reciprocation is less expected and therefore managers and their employers can get away more easily with defying norms, including the norm of reciprocity. This conclusion echoes that of Haran (2013) with respect to breaching contracts.

As such, our results suggest why organizations may more readily and easily ignore the norm of reciprocity and, therefore, do so, as the work of Rousseau (1995) and others illustrates. The real payoff from this line of inquiry, however, will come only after we understand differences in the norm of reciprocity across contexts and the social psychological processes that help explain and produce these differences *and* then empirically examine possible ways to mitigate or reduce the ability of work settings to reduce normative behavior. The studies reported in this article raise some interesting possibilities for understanding many contemporary organizational actions, but using these insights to intervene to build workplaces that adhere to the norm of reciprocity requires a next step of seeing how to reduce the distinction between organizational and other contexts—something that applies also to the research on calculative decision making and money priming.

## CONCLUSION

We have argued that the norm of reciprocity often operates with less strength in organizational contexts and demonstrated some possible psychological mechanisms for why this might be true. There are numerous important differences between organizational and personal situations that might account for differences in reciprocation that need to be theorized and investigated. What seems clear is that people spend a lot of their time in organizations, organizations differ in important ways from other contexts in ways that affect the strength of the norm of reciprocity, and because reciprocity norms are so fundamentally important, we need to better understand how organizational contexts affect reciprocation norms and behavior.

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