



Culture and the role of exchange vs. communal norms in friendship



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We test the claim that collectivism is linked with an emphasis on communal norms.
- Indians adopt long-term need-based reciprocation with friends more than Americans.
- Americans treat acts of appreciation as reducing future need based responsiveness.
- Greater communal strength is found in friendship among Indians than Americans.
- In the US, exchange assumes a relaxed form that is compatible with friendship.

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ABSTRACT

We conducted three studies among European-American and Hindu Indian populations examining cultural differences in the norms underlying social support in friend relationships. Study 1 investigated the role of communal norms as compared with reciprocal exchange in real-life helping interactions among friends; Study 2 compared respondents' evaluations of contrasting modes of reciprocating help; while Study 3 experimentally tested whether reciprocation reduces readiness to respond to future need. We found that Indians give greater emphasis to communal norms in friend relationships than Americans do, with this effect unrelated to socioeconomic status; and that Americans place greater emphasis on reciprocal exchange, a relaxed form of exchange that is compatible with close interpersonal ties. Our results point to cultural variation in the strength of communal relationships and imply that reciprocal exchange assumes a more prominent role in close relationships than what has been previously observed in the communal/exchange tradition.

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Introduction

Theorists in the communal/exchange tradition (Clark & Mills, 1979, 2012; Mills & Clark, 1982, 1994) assume that close relationships are dominated by communal norms and that exchange norms involve rigid features that make them non-compatible with close relationships. These claims differ, however, from positions held by theorists in the exchange theory tradition who argue that exchange assumes a relaxed form, known as reciprocal exchange that plays a major role in close

relationships (Molm, Schaefer, & Collett, 2007; Molm, Whitham, & Melamed, 2012). However, to date no effort has been made to reconcile these contrasting assertions through a direct comparison of the role of communal norms vs. reciprocal exchange in close relationships. Also, despite theoretical links drawn between communal concerns and collectivism, little empirical exploration has been undertaken of cultural variation in the emphasis placed on communal norms.

We address both of these issues in the present investigation. Our research compares the norms structuring friend relationships among European-Americans and Hindu Indians. In testing the hypothesis that Americans will emphasize reciprocal exchange more than Indians do, we seek to identify respects in which exchange may play a greater role in close relationships than taken into account in the communal/exchange tradition. Furthermore, testing the hypothesis that Indians will emphasize communal norms more than Americans do we seek to identify cultural variation in communal strength.

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Claims made in communal/exchange tradition

Theorists in the communal/exchange tradition draw a sharp distinction between communal and exchange norms (Clark & Mills, 1979, 2012). In the case of communal norms, individuals are seen as being responsive to the other's needs over time when and if such needs arise without expectation that a return be made. Communal norms entail relaxed patterns of interaction in which the individual does not monitor reciprocation but rather operates out of a concern for the other's welfare. In contrast, exchange norms are based on the giving of benefits in return for benefits received. It is not the specific benefits that distinguish communal from exchange norms but rather the motives involved. The same benefits may be given in communal contexts as in exchange contexts. In cases involving communal norms, however, individuals are motivated to be responsive to the other's welfare and thus the benefit given is need-based. In cases involving exchange, individuals are motivated to make a return and the benefit returned is non-need-based in being offered regardless of the presence of a need (Clark & Mills, 1979, 2012). In addition, whereas expectations of comparability have no place in the case of communal norms, in the case of exchange norms benefits returned are expected to be comparable in instrumental value to the benefits received. Finally, whereas communal norms are non-time dependent since they involve being responsive to future need when and if such need arises, exchange norms involve making a return soon after receipt of benefits. As Clark (1984) notes in describing how people act in the case of exchange relationships, "When they receive a benefit, they incur a debt to return a comparable benefit soon afterward" (p. 549). Exchange norms, in this view, involve a rigid quid pro quo orientation that is associated with affective distance and distrust.

According to theorists in the communal/exchange tradition, relationships differ in communal strength, with the level of communal strength affecting the cost that individuals are willing to incur to benefit the other person and whether individuals are likely to adopt communal as compared with exchange norms (Mills & Clark, 1982). It is assumed that individuals have weak communal relationships with many individuals, including strangers. Thus, for example, individuals might respond to a stranger's request for low cost help in terms of communal norms, but would tend to respond to the stranger's request for high cost help in terms of exchange norms. In contrast, individuals are seen as typically having stronger communal relationships with friends and family, as seen in their willingness to incur higher cost in helping without the expectation of any return. It is assumed that individuals may maintain both communal and exchange relationships with the same person within different cost ranges. Illustrating this kind of situation, Clark and Mills (2012) give the example of a person who acts in a communal way in giving their friend a ride or advice but in an exchange way in selling their car to their friend.

Unresolved issues

Distinguishing between reciprocal exchange versus communal norms

Contemporary exchange theorists maintain a more differentiated view of exchange than is held by theorists in the communal/exchange tradition. Exchange theorists point to the existence of a relaxed form of exchange, termed "reciprocal exchange," that is non-rigid in nature (Molm, 2010; Molm, Whitham, et al., 2012) and that contrasts with the form of exchange, termed "negotiated exchange," that is rigid in nature. As may be seen in Table 1, reciprocal exchange differs from negotiated exchange in the emphasis placed on the unilateral as compared with bilateral flow of benefits. Bilateral flow of benefits involves the terms of exchange being specified in advance (a) with the return expected to be comparable in instrumental value to the benefits received, and (b) made within a rigid short-term time frame. Thus, for example, in selling a car to a friend both parties agree to the terms of the exchange before giving any benefits, with the act of return specified by this prior agreement and the price paid to the friend comparable to the value of

the car and made close in time to taking possession of the car. In contrast, the unilateral flow of benefits involves actors giving benefits with the terms of the exchange not having been specified in advance, and thus with moderate delay acceptable in the timing of return and less unease associated with unpaid debt (Molm, Collett, et al., 2007; Molm, Schaefer, et al., 2007; Molm et al., 2012). As Molm and her colleagues describe this type of interaction, "actors initiate an exchange by performing a beneficial act for another (for example, providing assistance or advice) without knowing whether, when or to what extent the other ... will reciprocate in the future" (Molm, Schaefer, et al., 2007, p. 202). Given the absence of any prior agreement about the terms of the exchange, considerable uncertainty exists over whether or not a return will be made in cases involving the unilateral flow of benefits. By serving to reduce this uncertainty, the partner's act of reciprocation contributes toward building trust in the relationship. Also, reciprocation involving the unilateral flow of benefits is more individualized than in the case of negotiated exchange, given the absence of any prior agreement about the terms of reciprocation. Thus, this reciprocation may assume symbolic forms that are not comparable in instrumental value to the resources received, but rather that have communicative expressive value. As Molm, Schaefer, et al. (2007) note, in such cases returns assume the form of "token gifts" that convey appreciation — i.e., they involve "acknowledging and conveying appreciation for benefits received, showing that the partner cares for the actor and their relationship, and demonstrating willingness to invest in its continuation" (Molm, Schaefer, et al., 2007, p. 201). Given this potential for engendering affective warmth, reciprocal exchange is viewed by exchange theorists as being compatible with and prominent in close relationships (Molm, Collett, et al., 2007; Molm et al., 2012). In this regard, Molm et al. (2012) assert, "reciprocal exchanges characterize the vast majority of exchanges among family and friends..." (p. 143).

As also may be seen in Table 1, communal norms resemble reciprocal exchange in that they give rise to trust, social solidarity and closeness, although communal norms are based on mutual responsiveness and not on return. Communal norms, like reciprocal exchange, engender uncertainty about receipt of future benefits since, in the case of communal norms, individuals have considerable discretion about when, how, or whether they will respond to the other's future needs. Since benefits are freely given in the case of communal norms, they also enhance the strength and closeness of the relationship.

While there is thus some commonality in the affective aspects and relaxed flow of benefits characterizing communal norms and reciprocal exchange, the two types of norms are distinguishable given that reciprocal exchange involves expectations of return not present in the case of communal norms. Thus, in the case of communal norms all benefits given are need based since they are responsive to the other's welfare, while in the case of relaxed exchange, the benefits returned are non-need based, reflecting the requirement that some type of return be made even in the absence of a need. Also, in the case of communal norms, giving of need based benefits is non-time bound and does not give rise to discomfort or unease since no debt of return is involved. In contrast, in the case of reciprocal exchange the return of benefits is made within a moderately short-term time frame, with failure to return associated with some discomfort or unease associated with this unpaid debt.

Although, as noted, theorists in the communal/exchange tradition emphasize the central role of communal norms in family and friend relationships and exchange theorists emphasize the central role of reciprocal exchange in family and friend relationships, no empirical attention has been given to reconciling these contrasting claims. Empirical studies undertaken by Molm and her colleagues empirically distinguish between reciprocal versus negotiated exchange using game theory approaches (e.g., Molm, Schaefer, et al., 2007; Molm, Takahashi & Peterson, 2000, 2003), but give no empirical attention to distinguishing between reciprocal exchange and communal norms. Also, we are not aware of any research by investigators in the communal/exchange tradition that comparatively assesses both communal norms and reciprocal exchange.

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