Relationship-specific attachment, risk regulation, and communal norm adherence in close relationships ☆

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Abstract

Close relationships characterized by attachment anxiety can result in an approach-avoidance conflict, making it difficult to follow the communal script. This research investigated relationship-specific attachment and adherence to communal norms in established close relationships. Participants were randomly assigned to think about a secure, avoidant, or anxious-ambivalent relationship, and visualized scenarios involving the receipt/payment of social commodities. Behavioral intentions, affect, and reciprocation timing and importance were assessed. Those in secure relationships followed the communal script, and reported comfort with their own and their partner's use of communal norms, whereas those in avoidant relationships used exchange norms and reported distress when their partner used communal norms. Those who felt anxious-ambivalent inconsistently adhered to the communal script: Although they intended to act communal (offer help), they were vigilant about reciprocation (a communal script violation). Moreover, when their partner used communal norms (did a favor), they said they would feel happy but ironically, anxious.
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Introduction

As Murray, Holmes, and Collins (2006) observed, an approach-avoidance conflict in which the desire for closeness and interdependence must be weighed against the risk of rejection is a basic feature of interpersonal life. We have a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and to establish closeness with others, but with closeness comes dependency and the risk of outright rejection or

more subtle forms of disappointment. Murray et al. argue that a risk regulation system is responsible for optimizing assurance when these motives conflict. Specifically, conflict is resolved by assessing the other's regard (if rejection risk low, promote relationship; if rejection risk high, protect self), and adjusting behavior accordingly (increase/decrease dependency). The need to regulate risk varies across situations and individuals, with certain situations more likely to make salient/elicit conflict between these two motives, and certain individuals being more susceptible to experiencing this conflict.

We believe situations involving communal norm adherence should elicit an approach-avoidance conflict, and risk regulation, at least for some individuals. As Clark and colleagues (Clark, 1984; Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986) have demonstrated, communal norms that characterize close relationships are distinguished by responsiveness to need: there is a basic concern for the other's welfare and people help and do favors for each other without concern for timely repayment (Clark &

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Grote, 1998). This is to be contrasted with exchange norms that characterize more casual relationships in which the guiding principle is reciprocity: Benefits are given in return for benefits received or with the expectation of compensation, and people tend to keep track of contributions. In light of the risk regulation model, the desire to seek closeness and to promote the relationship should motivate people to behave communally; however, the degree to which people fully adhere to the communal script should depend on the extent to which concerns about rejection and competing self-protective motives are aroused. Specifically, if there is relational uncertainty, the risk regulation system sets in motion an appraisal system to monitor the other's regard so that behavior can be adjusted to the situation; this appraisal process, however, can lead people to engage in behaviors that appear exchange-oriented despite communal goals. As Holmes (1981, 1991) explains, people use behaviors associated with the exchange of social commodities (e.g., offering help or favors) to signal interest and commitment; similarly, they look for evidence in the other's behavior to gauge interest and commitment. In this way, reciprocity—a violation of the communal script—gains importance because it is a means by which people assess relationship potential. The irony is that the appraisal process, which should let uncertain individuals know whether it is safe to be communal, leads them to engage in exchange behaviors, which may ultimately undermine closeness (i.e., if the other perceives them to be exchange oriented).

Lydon, Jamieson, and Holmes (1997) investigated this idea in a series of studies comparing "would-be friends" (people who hope to establish a relationship with another person) to established friends and acquaintances; the assumption being that would-be friends' uncertainty should motivate them to engage in this appraisal process and, consequently, undermine their adherence to the communal script. As predicted, although would-be friends intended to act like a friend, they experienced more discomfort than established friends following the communal script. Moreover, compared to established friends and acquaintances, would-be friends were more likely to interpret a kind gesture as having special meaning for the relationship, were more anxious to reciprocate favors, and felt that failure to reciprocate a favor (by either party) would have important consequences for the relationship.

These findings support the idea that following the communal script (i.e., give freely without concern for reciprocation) can be difficult when there is relational uncertainty. We believe anxiously attached individuals, who feel chronically uncertain about their self-worth, and/or the reliability of others, also should be susceptible to experiencing an approach-avoidance conflict in communal situations. Like the would-be friends described earlier, they should want to be selfless and to convey genuine care for the other, but should be preoccupied by reciprocity issues because of their chronic uncertainty and need to gauge the other's interest and commitment. Indeed, we have found that differences in attachment security are associated with communal norm adherence in the context of a potential close relationship (Bartz & Lydon, 2006). Specifically, although anxiously attached individuals used communal norms and avoided using exchange norms when interacting with a potential close other, when a potential close other used communal norms, they experienced increased interpersonal anxiety and were more likely than their secure and avoidant counterparts to use discrete behaviors to diagnose relationship potential. Secure individuals, by contrast, were more comfortable in potential communal situations, and avoidant individuals disliked the other when the other used communal norms. The present research sought to extend these findings by investigating whether differences in attachment security are associated with communal norm adherence in established close relationships. Although there should be greater trust (and communal norm adherence) in established close relationships, as Murray et al. (2006) note, in actuality, the risk of dependence should be even greater in established relationships because one has so much more to lose.

Hypotheses

People who feel securely attached feel worthy of love and believe significant others are generally reliable (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). These individuals should be least susceptible to experiencing an approach-avoidance goal conflict in relation to communal norm adherence because of their positive expectations about the other's regard; consequently, they should generally follow the communal script, responding to the other's needs without concern for reciprocation and feeling comfortable seeking support. Moreover, the other's communal behavior should not be distressing to them because of their comfort with closeness. Finally, they should not be overly concerned with signaling interest and/or assessing the other's regard because of their interpersonal confidence; thus, they should not feel the need to quickly reciprocate gifts or aid received and the other's failure to reciprocate on specific occasions should not be especially important to them.

Those who feel anxiously attached desire closeness but feel unworthy of affection. These individuals should be most susceptible to experiencing an approach-avoidance conflict in communal situations, resulting in increased anxiety and inconsistent communal norm adherence. Like the would-be friends in Lydon et al.'s (1997) research, they should be especially likely to act communal (e.g., responding to the other's needs) to signal commitment, but this behavior should arouse concerns about their greater investment and, in an effort to regulate risk, they should be vigilant about whether the other reciprocates their gestures—a violation of the communal script—to verify the other's regard. Moreover, they should feel more anxious about seeking support because of doubts about self-worth. With respect to the other's communal behavior (offering help