Communal relational context (or lack thereof) shapes emotional lives ☆

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A case is made that a communal relationship context (or lack thereof) shapes people's emotional lives for three reasons. First, a person's communal partners assume some degree of non-contingent responsibility for the person's welfare. This allows the person, when with or, at times, when thinking about such partners, to drop some self-protective vigilance, appraise situations as less threatening, focus attention outward on to situations and to see those situations through the partner's eyes often enhancing the emotional impact of those situations, express emotions which convey individual vulnerabilities and, in turn, receive and accept emotion regulation from partners. Second, a person is responsive to his or her communal partners' welfare. This leads a person, when with or, at times, when thinking about such partners to attend to partners' welfare and attendant emotions, mimic them, empathize with them and help to regulate them. This may also enhance how threatening situations seem when they might threaten the partner for whom the person feels communal responsibility. Third, communal relationships are valued by people. As a result certain emotions, which we call relational emotions, including embarrassment, hurt, guilt and gratitude commonly arise in the context of communal relationships as signals of the welfare of the relationship per se. In well-functioning communal relationships these emotions elicit partner responses that help to form, build, maintain and repair the relationships. It is more generally noted that other aspects of relational context (e.g. power differentials) also shape emotional lives and that emotion researchers are well-advised to attend to how all aspects relational context may influence emotional lives.

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Imagine you are dining out with your romantic partner. You spill your wine all over the table and your partner harshly ridicules you for having done so. You're likely to feel hurt, perhaps angry, perhaps both. But what if the person who ridiculed you is a total stranger sitting at a nearby table? You're very *un*likely to feel hurt; you may feel angry, or you may just think the stranger is a jerk and brush him off as irrelevant. Our point is that the emotions you experience (or do not experience) in the face of identical ridicule will almost certainly differ if the ridicule comes from a close partner compared to coming from a stranger. Hurt feelings arise when you are harmed by a partner on whom you are dependent, whom you expect to care for you, and with whom you have, or anticipate having, an ongoing close relationship that you value [1]. Ridicule from a close relationship partner violates expectations and threatens the relationship as well as the self. Expressing hurt conveys to the partner that you value the relationship and desire repair [1]. Ideally it elicits partner guilt and repair [2,3•]. Anger is a more individualistic emotion. It does not convey that the relationship is valued, it does not rely on pre-existing dependency between oneself and one's partner, and it does not rely on a desire to repair the relationship. It cedes no control to the other person. Anger is more likely than hurt to result in partner retaliation (see [1,2]) Our point is simple, whether you experience emotion at all, as well as the form the experience takes, will depend on the extent to which and the ways in which you are (and/or wish to be) interdependent with another person.

People connect and become interdependent with other people in the service of different social goals and combinations of goals [4,5]. This leads to different norms and expectations of behaviors across relationships. People form bonds for the purposes of mating, exchanging of goods and services on an economic basis, and of some people leading and others following (see [4,6]). They also form mutually supportive coalitional bonds for purposes of feeling secure and having safe havens to go to in times of stress as well as secure bases from which to venture forth [4,7–9]. Here we contend that the nature and function of relationships shape the nature and function of emotion. In this paper we pick just one dimension along which the nature of relationships vary — namely the extent to which they are communal in nature or not [8] — to illustrate this point. We set the stage for making this point by

briefly noting our constructivist position on the nature of emotions, then describing the nature of communal relationships.

People construct their emotions

In agreement with others [10[•],11,12], we see emotion as arising from people's evaluations of their current situation as the situation pertains to their own, their partner's, or their relationship's, well-being. These evaluations give rise to the core components of emotion: a) valence (something with relatively positive or negative consequences for the self or the relationship has happened or is anticipated to happen) and b) activation or arousal. Beyond that, the nature of emotion is shaped by the person conceptualizing and labeling their internal bodily states and situations in accord with current expectations, goals, and the perceived meaning of their bodily states and current situations for their own well-being. Emotions also are shaped by the meaning of those bodily states and situations for their partner's and their relationship's well-being.

The nature of communal relationships and communal strength

Communal relationships differ from other relationships in that members of a communal relationship assume responsibility for one another's welfare and are responsive to and expect responsiveness from one another on a non-contingent basis. Members strive to understand, validate, and care for their partner. To that end, they keep track of partner's needs and welfare and are responsive to and promote their partner's well-being. Members feel good when they are responsive to partners (and bad when they are prevented from so doing) [13,14]. They do these things non-contingently without tracking who contributes what. These relationships are not completely unselfish. Members do expect and seek similar responsiveness from their partner and are happy when they receive it [8]. They are alert to serious partner neglect of their own needs but, in well-functioning communal relationships, they are not overly self-protective and, indeed, cede some responsibility for their own welfare to partners just as they assume some responsibility for the partner's welfare [8,15].

Relationships are not simply communal or not. They vary along a quantitative dimension of the degree of communal responsibility each person assumes for the other's welfare, as captured in the time, effort, and money members are willing to devote toward promoting the other's welfare [8]. This dimension is the communal strength of a relationship. Felt communal strength toward the partner, as well as perceived communal responsiveness of the partner toward the self, can be measured [16,17[•]]. In any given communal relationship, up to an (usually implicitly) agreed upon level, responsiveness to the partner occurs on a communal basis. Beyond that, save in some emergencies, communal responsiveness generally does not occur or it occurs on an exchange basis [8].

Three categories of reasons why and ways in which communal context shapes emotional lives

A first category of reasons: Communal partners have a person's back

Communal partners are resources. When one is in such a relationship one is not solely responsible for one's own welfare; one's partner is as well. This has at least four important implications for people's experience and expression of emotion. First, being in a communal relationship will affect an individual's appraisal of how a situation affects their own and their partner's well-being and therefore the emotion they feel. Second, being in a communal context affords people the luxury of dropping self-protective vigilance, which allows them to focus attention outward on the environment. This amplifies reactions, positive and negative, to that environment. Third, being in a communal context makes it safe and functional to express emotions which, in turn, can influence felt emotion. Fourth, being in a communal context allows people to cede, some of their own emotion regulation efforts to partners.

Effects on appraisals of situations

As Lazarus pointed out long ago [18], the appraisals which give rise to emotions include not only primary appraisals of how threatening (or beneficial) a stimulus or situation is, but also appraisals of the person's ability to cope effectively with the threat (and, we add here, the ability to savor good situations.) As attachment theorists point out, communal relationships afford people both secure bases and safe havens [7,9]. When a person is in a communal context, appraisals of coping or savoring abilities include a consideration of the support of partners who are present or easily accessible.

One result is that appraisals of objectively threatening situations are likely to be less negative. Likewise, appraisals of positive situations are likely to be more positive when a communal partner is present and can support and celebrate our good fortunes. The positive consequence of this is that negative emotions will often be down-regulated and positive ones up-regulated.

We see evidence for these points in the work of Harber, Schnall and their colleagues [19,20] who have found that challenges, such as the steepness of a hill one might climb or heights that people may fear seem more innocuous when people experience them in the presence of a partner.

Additionally, Coan and colleagues [21] have found that when women held a stranger's hand (with whom most people have very weak, if any, communal relationship) a reduction of the threat/distress of anticipated shocks occurred relative to holding no one's hand. However, holding one's spouse's hand and, especially, holding

the hand of a spouse with whom the woman was satisfied, produced *even greater* drops in threat/distress compared to holding a stranger's hand or holding no one's hand.

Appraisals of pleasant situations also are likely to be heightened when in the presence of caring partners. Evaluations of such situations when with close, caring partners will often include considerations of partner support and the likelihood of the partner helping one to capitalize on successes and good times through sharing [22]. Indeed, Reis and his colleagues report evidence that fun is more fun when it is shared with close others [23•].

Effects on attention to and, consequently, the impact of stimuli

Another less obvious, but important, upshot of communal partners providing safe havens is that they allow one to drop some measure of self-protective vigilance and to focus attention outward on the environment, including on one's partner's experiences of that same environment. Recent research suggests that *co*-experiencing stimuli with a close, likely communal, other results in a different patterning of reactions from that produced by experiencing the stimuli alone or with a partner merely present. Specifically, co-viewing mildly pleasant photographs with a friend amplified the pleasure that resulted (relative to being alone or with a stranger) [24] and having been assigned randomly to submerge one's hand in ice water simultaneously with a friend has been shown to result in greater perceptions of pain than doing the same thing alone or as a friend merely watches [25].

We suspect these amplification effects are due to a combination of two factors. First, as just noted, being in a safe and communal relational context affords people greater opportunities to focus outward onto stimuli in their environment (thereby increasing the impact of the experience) (see [26,27] for supporting evidence). Second, in communal contexts, people likely automatically empathize with and see their environment through their partner's eyes as well as their own. As a result of these processes, we propose, people's emotional reactions to stimuli become more intense [24,27,28,29•,30].

Effects on expression of emotions which convey vulnerabilities and needs

Expressing many emotions (e.g. sadness, fear, happiness) reveals information about oneself, which exposes vulnerabilities and desires. Choosing to do so involves balancing possible advantages versus risks. On the one hand, emotion expression can elicit support [31,32•]. On the other hand, a person's emotional expressions may be ignored [33] or cause others to distance from that person [34] each of which can be painful [33]. Worse, information conveyed by expressed emotion could be used to exploit the expresser by taking advantage of the vulnerabilities and personal likes or dislikes that are revealed [35,36]. Thus,

it makes good sense to express emotions to communally responsive, caring partners but to suppress them in non-communal relational contexts.

Recent work by Von Culin *et al.* [37•] documents that people, indeed, are more willing to express emotion to partners the more they perceive those partners to be communally responsive to them. In one study, participants rated the communal strength of their relationships with various partners and their willingness to express happiness, sadness and anxiety to each of these people. Within each category of partners (ranging across degrees of communal strength), greater communal strength was significantly and positively correlated with greater willingness to express emotion. Those individuals who reported the strongest communal relationships across all partners were also those who reported the highest willingness to express emotion across all partners. In a second study, both members of romantic couples participated. Those whose partners reported feeling more communal strength toward them independently reported they were willing to express more happiness, sadness, anxiety, disgust, anger, hurt, and guilt to that partner. Other studies show that people selectively express emotion to partners and friends over others [38]. Finally, the wisdom of such selective expression is supported by findings that emotion expression is, indeed, more likely to be met with greater partner attraction and support in communal than in non-communal relational contexts [39,40].

The fact that willingness to express emotions is greater in more communal contexts may prove to be yet another way relational context shapes emotional lives, namely via shaping people's emotion experiences. Specifically, the mere act of expressing emotion should produce feedback from nonverbal facial and bodily expressions that help to elicit emotional experience [41,42]. This should cause the expressers to re-experience the emotion, partially because of this feedback and partially because verbally recalling and describing emotional incidents itself elicits emotion (cf. [43], and many other studies).

Impact on emotion regulation

The fact that partners have one's back also affects one's emotion regulation. In particular, communal partners will often regulate one another's emotions, choosing situations for them, distracting them, and reappraising situations for them, in order to regulate their emotion in manners analogous to individualistic emotional regulation strategies pointed out by Gross and his colleagues [44]. There is not much research on this yet but we and, others [45] have begun to investigate how and when this occurs.

A second category of reasons: people have communal partners' backs

Communal relationships involve mutual responsiveness. People in well functioning communal relationships have

flexible foci of relational attention [46]. Thus, when an opportunity to be responsive to a communal partner arises, attention shifts from the self to the partner and what one can do for one's partner. This can, and often does, make a difference in what emotions will be experienced and expressed when one's partner experiences good or bad fortune and one's attention is drawn to that partner.

Feeling more empathic and less self-focused emotion as a result of a partner's good or bad fortune

When a partner experiences success or good fortune, focusing upon that person and his or her welfare should lead to empathic joy and, in turn, to actions taken to capitalize on that partner's good fortune [47]. In contrast, focusing on the self (as is more likely in a less communal relational context) may elicit social comparison when a partner experiences success or good fortune and, in turn, the experience of envy, or, perhaps, jealousy or sadness. In other words, being motivated to communally shift focus of attention to a partner can flip the valence of emotion felt in response to a partner's good fortune [48].

Alternatively, if the partner is closely connected to the self in the sense of seeming to be in a "unit" relationship (e.g. a child, romantic partner), but not necessarily a strong communal one, one's focus remaining on the self may result in the construction of a more self-absorbed happiness arising from basking in the partner's reflected glory [49]. This is an emotional state that is constructed quite differently from empathic happiness and does not require that the relationship be a strong communal one, just a "unit" that is visible and salient to outside observers.

In communal relationships, when one's partner experiences failure or bad fortune, attention should shift to the partner's welfare and one should feel empathic distress (which Batson has described as feeling sympathetic, moved, compassionate, tender, warm, and soft-hearted). In less communal or non-communal relationships one's focus of attention should remain on the self, and when another experiences failure or bad fortune, one is more likely to feel personal distress (feeling personally alarmed, grieved, upset, worried, disturbed, perturbed, and troubled) — feelings which Batson and his colleagues have shown to be distinct emotions from empathic distress. Indeed, Batson and his colleagues have shown that a person being similar to the self (which promotes communal relationships) or being concerned for the welfare of the person who has experienced bad fortune is linked to empathic distress while low levels of similarity and concern for the partner are tied to personal distress [50–52].

If a person is closely tied to the other (again, if a unit relationship exists), but the relationship is not strongly communal, a person's focus may remain on the self, which

may elicit vicarious embarrassment resulting from fear that the partner's failure or bad fortune reflects on the self [53•]. Again, though, the more communal the relationship the more attention should be directed toward the partner and the more empathy, rather than vicarious embarrassment, should result.

If one is in competition with the other person, a focus on partner success (if the partners are in a highly communal relationship) can still support the elicitation of empathic happiness for the other. If the communal context is less strong, there is likely to be a greater sustained focus on the self, which then creates a greater chance of experiencing envy. In this case, relational focus of attention being on the partner's welfare (and what one can do for that partner) versus on one's own welfare (and the implications of the partner's success or failures for the self) can actually change the valence of the emotion experienced, as discussed above. Interestingly, Greitemeyer and colleagues [54] report evidence that merely having played prosocial video games (a manipulation that should push participants toward thinking in more communal ways) increased empathic emotional responding and decreased schadenfreude following exposure to another's misfortune.

In the case of guilt, if one has harmed a partner a focus on the partner may elicit a distress that takes the form of empathic concern and a desire to repair the harm to the other. However, a focus on the self may elicit a self-focused distress and a desire to repair the harm merely in the service of not being judged negatively or not losing the relationship [55,56]. Although both experiential states may be labeled as guilt, Baumeister and colleagues [55] long ago noted that these are fundamentally different types of guilt and the experience of them are almost certainly distinct. Of course, in constructing emotions labels matter. When different labels are used when constructing other versus self-focused emotions, there should be a distinction in how the emotions are experienced. For example, some might call other-focused guilt elicited by having harmed a partner empathic guilt whereas self-focused guilt elicited by having harmed a partner ought to have more of the characteristics of fear. The more communal the context, the more empathic guilt and the less self-focused guilt should occur.

Importantly, these different emotions lead to distinct behavioral responses directed toward one's partner. Emotions such as empathic happiness, for instance, lead to celebrations for and support of partners, whereas emotions such as envy or jealousy lead to withdrawal of support. Lemay and Clark [57] find that people high in self-esteem (who likely have stronger communal relationships and more flexibility in relational focus of attention) react to partner failure with increased warmth and support and to partner success by maintaining warmth and

support. Those low in self-esteem (who face more challenges to establish communal relationships) react to both partner failure and partner success with decreased warmth and support (presumably due to vicarious embarrassment in the former case and painful social comparison and envy in the latter).

Effects on appraisals of situations

Just as appraisals of environmental threats to the self (and attendant emotion) can be dampened when communal partners have one's back, so too may appraisals of environmental threats to partners be heightened as a result of having assumed communal responsibility for a partner. Eibach and Mock [58], for instance, report evidence of parental responsibility heightening perceptions of risks in one's environment and, presumably fear in response to those heightened risks.

Increased mimicry of partners

Finally, the enhanced focus on partners that characterizes communal relationships combined with the greater tendency of communal partners to express emotions to communal relationship partners (as discussed in the prior section) should lead people to mimic partner facial expressions, gestures and postures more within a more communal context. This should lead to more felt emotion and more matching of emotion across the partners in communal than in non-communal relationships because the mimicked emotional expressions in combination with knowledge of the relational context and goals associated with those expressions contribute to the mimicker's own emotional experiences [59]. Indeed, people do mimic liked and cared for partners more than others [60•,61] and mimicry of emotional faces and bodies does elicit emotion in the person engaging in the mimicry [62].

A third category of reasons: Relational emotions are common (probably most common) in communal relationships

Individuals depend upon relationships to survive and to thrive. Thus threats (and boosts) to the welfare of the relationships *are* threats (and boosts) to the welfare of the self. Threats and boosts to relational welfare elicit a class of emotions we call relational emotions.[1] These include emotions such as hurt feelings, guilt, and gratitude. These emotions simply do not exist outside the context of relationships. The likelihood of their occurrence and their very nature are dependent upon the nature of relationships.

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[1] These emotions have sometimes been called secondary, moral or social emotions. We introduce and prefer the term *relational emotions*. Not all link to morality and we believe them to be constructed, not derived from other, more basic emotions. (They *are* basic to survival.) Moreover, as pointed out in this paper, all emotions can and often do serve social functions and are influenced by social factors. (Note that others have used the term relational emotions but not, to our knowledge, to refer to this particular set of emotions.)

Relational emotions should be more frequent and stronger the more central, important and difficult to replace a relationship is to a person's life. Because well-functioning communal relationships (including many, but not all, family relationships, friendships, romantic relationships) take considerable effort and time to form, to maintain, and to replace, and because well-functioning communal relationships are among people's most valued relationships, threats to their formation and maintenance are especially likely to elicit relational emotions (e.g. guilt, hurt, or embarrassment). So too should boosts to the formation and maintenance of communal relationships be especially likely to elicit positive relational emotions as well (e.g. gratitude).

Literature supports the idea that relational emotions occur more frequently in communal contexts than in other relational contexts. See, for instance, Baumeister and colleagues review of the literature on guilt in this regard [56]. Guilt can occur in any relationship as a result of violating norms for that relationship, but Baumeister and Leary review evidence that guilt appears to be most frequent in communal contexts. Similarly, gratitude can occur in any relationship as a result of surprising and welcomed adherence to the appropriate norms of the relationship. Yet studies of gratitude overwhelmingly focus on close, communal relationships [63–65].

Second, the antecedent conditions that will constitute a threat or boost to a relationship will depend crucially on the type of relationship in question and the norms and goals of the relationship. For instance, failure to be non-contingently responsive to a partner, say by forgetting a partner's birthday, constitutes a violation of relational norms in communal relationships and should elicit guilt in a communal partner. However, this does not constitute a violation of norms in a non-communal relationship and should not elicit guilt. Receiving a card expressing love should elicit gratitude when a communal relationship is desired or exists — as it exemplifies non-contingent responsiveness to the partner — but when such a relationship is not desired the card will not elicit gratitude. Indeed, it would likely elicit distress.

Third, the very nature of the emotions elicited by the same action taken by different people will vary by relational context. Returning to the example with which we opened this article, consider again what happens when a partner fails to live up to one's expectations by being critical rather than supportive when one has spilled one's wine. Hurt feelings and/or anger may arise, but hurt feelings, according to research reported by Lemay *et al*. [1] appear to require the existence of a communal context. That is, hurt feelings are associated with feeling dependence on a partner and vulnerability toward that partner (both characteristics of a highly communal context). Hurt feelings further are associated with having a goal to

restore the perpetrator's constructive, communal behavior toward one. Moreover, perpetrators seem to know this and to respond to hurt feelings with guilt and empathy and constructive responses, which allows hurt to have positive consequences for the communal relationship [1,2]. Anger, on the other hand, is a differently constructed emotion. It is not associated with the communal characteristics of a relationships and is, instead, associated with feeling personal control, invulnerability, and low dependence on others, as well as with destructive behaviors directed toward others [1]. Perpetrators at whom anger is directed seem to know this and respond with less commitment, reciprocate with anger of their own, and enact further destructive behaviors. In other words, communal contexts, especially strong ones, combined with a goal to maintain the communal relationship, set a person up for feeling hurt; a less communal context and a goal to maintain personal control set a person up for feeling anger. Hurt feelings are distinct from anger and have different consequences for the relationship [1].

Concluding comments

We have argued that the communal nature (or lack thereof) of relationships shapes emotional lives in important ways. Yet our overarching point is far more general. There are *many* types, dimensions, characteristics, and stages of relationships that shape the nature and expression of emotion in that relationship. To give just one more, of many additional possible examples, power differentials in relationships shape emotional lives in predictable ways, and the interested reader might see Tiedens [66,67], Stamkou *et al.* [68•] or Bombari *et al.* [69•] for empirical evidence that this is true.

Our take-away point is simple: To truly understand people's emotional lives, researchers must consider, understand, and take into account relational context.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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The authors take a social functional approach to understanding who pays attention to which emotions expressed by partners within relationships in which power differentials exist. The mixed nature of prior research on this question is clearly reviewed and their own new research demonstrating that when power roles are illegitimately assigned or mismatched with one's trait power, leaders are fast in detecting anger in partners and slow in detecting its offset; whereas subordinates' accuracy in detecting fear in leaders is high.

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The authors discuss past theory and findings links between power and felt emotion, noting inconsistencies in the literature. Then four studies are reported in which positions of power (or lack thereof) are manipulated to be high or low and felt power is measured. Feeling higher power was consistently linked to feeling more positive emotion. Assigned position power was not consistently linked to feeling more positive emotion but was found to influence emotional experience through the mediating role of felt power.