Relationship Initiation: Bridging the Gap between Initial Attraction and Well-Functioning

Communal Relationships

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Here we address the question of how people form mutually responsive close

relationships including friendships and romantic relationships that, in turn, may become family

relationships. Getting from the point of initial attraction and interest in another person to having

a committed, well-functioning, communal relationship with that person occurs through complex

intra- and interpersonal processes that comprise a dance of relationship initiation. Each person

must convince the other that he or she is a good choice while also evaluating whether the other is

a good choice for him or her. Each person must protect him or herself from potential rejection

yet also come to be comfortable revealing vulnerabilities, accepting support and freely giving

support. Each person must come to understand, accept, and care for the other and allow the other

to understand, accept and care for him or herself. Ideally the outcome is a mutually responsive

relationship with at least an implicit and, often, an explicit commitment to staying in the

relationship across time. Sometimes that ideal is reached and truly communal relationships are

implemented; oftentimes it is not and people either part ways or remain in relationships we,

personally, would not judge to be ideal for purposes of providing a sense of safety and well-

being.

We begin by discussing characteristics of well-functioning friendships and romantic

relationships. We then consider what conditions in a person and in a potential partner lead to

initial attraction and openness to initiating these relationships. Next, we include a brief review of

some extant theories of relationship initiation. Without disagreeing with these theories we

suggest that they present a more linear, cumulative, and simpler and incomplete view of relationship initiation than is warranted. Moreover, we point out, they do not make clear when relationship initiation is complete. We then present a model of relationship initiation, the Beck/Clark model, which we have been developing (Beck & Clark, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Clark & Beck, 2010). It describes people as starting with an active goal of enhancing their sense of belonging and security and then pursuing three sub-goals in the service of this overarching goal to establish a new communal relationship: Strategic self-presentation as a good and communal partner, self-protection lest they be subject to painful rejection, and partner evaluation. It is within the context of this goal striving, that understanding, acceptance and caring for one another (intimacy as discussed by Reis and colleagues (Reis & Clark, 2013; Reis & Gable, 2015), ideally, emerges. Relationship initiation is complete sufficient trust has grown that these goals are dropped and comfortable, authentic self-presentations and mutual responsiveness are implemented across time.

Well-Functioning Friendships and Romantic Relationships

The terms friendship and romantic relationship are commonly used yet infrequently defined. Therefore, it is important to outline just what is intended when we speak of initiating a "relationship," be it a close friendship or a romantic relationship. Our definition of an optimal relationship starts with it being a relationship in which people assume a special responsibility for one another's welfare, are mutually and non-contingently responsive to one another's needs, desires, and successes, and accept and seek responsiveness from one another (Clark & Aragón, 2013; Reis & Clark, 2013). Members of such relationships track each other's needs and desires (Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1986; Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1989) and are non-contingently responsive to those needs and desires (Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark & Monin, 2006; Clark,

Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987). The mutual responsiveness includes partners understanding, validating, and caring for one another (Reis & Clark, 2013; Reis & Shaver, 1988).   They feel good about providing support (Williamson & Clark, 1989) and bad when they fail to do so (Williamson, Clark, Pegalis, & Behan, 1996). These relationships are not unselfish. Just as people are responsive to their partner's welfare, they expect and desire that their partner will be similarly responsive to their own welfare (Clark, 2011; Clark, Dubash, & Mills, 1998). Yet this is not done on a tit-for-tat basis. It is done non-contingently in response to the partner needs, desires, opportunities to support one's partner.

Partners in successful communal relationships are authentic with one another. They feel safer than when they are alone or with strangers. They and accommodate to one another's flaws and emotions (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Yoo, Clark, Lemay, Salovey, & Monin, 2011). They do not evaluate one another constantly, although they do note when their needs have been neglected Grote & Clark, 2001) and are likely to express hurt feelings when their welfare has been neglected or harmed (Lemay, Overall, & Clark, 2012) and to have partners who respond with guilt and corrective actions (Baumeister & Stillwell, 1994). Those in communal relationships also engage in mutual activities that benefit both partners in important ways, such as increasing their mutual sense of belonging or their mutual enjoyment of activities (Aron, Norman, Aron & Lewandowski, 2002; Boothby, Clark, & Bargh, 2014; Boothby, Smith, Clark, & Bargh, 2016; Caprariello & Reis, 2012). They may even turn what might have been seen as partner drawbacks during relationship initiation (or might be seen that way to outsiders) into strengths in their own minds (Murray & Holmes, 1999), and they hold positive illusions about one another characteristics and past behaviors (Lemay & Clark, 2015; Lemay & Neal, 2013; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996).

In this chapter, we focus on initiating and committing to this type of well-functioning communal relationship described above. Our comments are not relevant to initiating just *any* relationship that might be called a friendship or romantic relationship in lay language. We write specifically about friendships that operate on the basis just described. They will not be perfect but members strive toward that as a goal. We add this clarification because some relationships people call friendships might consist of merely spending time together at one or another activity, and some relationships people call romantic relationships might consist of sexual relationships with few other strings attached. People may even marry and stay together for years without ever achieving (or even approximating) the sort of relationship we call communal here for reasons that interdependence theorists have long noted. That is, they may remain in and even be committed to remaining in relationships because their expectations are low (i.e. their comparison levels are low), investments have been high and cannot be recouped, alternatives are poor, and/or social and personal prescriptive norms prevent them from leaving (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult, 1980; 1983; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

What Kicks Off Relationship Initiation?

It is tempting to focus just on attributes of a potential partner as being the key to what initiates the formation of a close relationship. Yet reality is more complex. Perceiving that a potential partner has good attributes (e.g., is physically attractive, smart, funny, etc.) is certainly part of the very first moments of a relationship. Yet a person's momentary goals are equally, if not more, important.

A lack of sufficient existing, high quality close relationships and a desire for new ones. We agree with many theorists and researchers that humans are fundamentally social in nature and are built to connect with partners (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Beckes & Coan, 2011).

Going further, we believe that humans strive to connect with a small number of partners through a set of mutually responsive communal bonds – bonds that, once formed, are called friendships if they do not involve sexual attraction and sexuality, and romantic relationships if they involve a special pair bond which may move to becoming a marriage and the basis for a family. Thus, one important factor, perhaps the most important factor, that kicks off relationship initiation is a lack of enough close, communal relationships in a person's life and, consequently, the desire for and goal to form such relationships (Clark, 1986; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister & Schaller, 2007).

Having existing relationships to which one is committed can put the brakes on attraction to new ones. Having existing communal relationships not only decreases the need for more and consequently the goal to form more, but once a relationship forms, its very existence may operate in ways that put the brakes on relationship initiation with others, particularly potential romantic partners. In particular, involvement in committed romantic relationships dampens the ability of attractive others to capture a person's attention (Maner, Gailliot, Rouby & Miller, 2007) and even to be seen as especially attractive (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). Thus, just as the lack of sufficient communal relationships appears to up-regulate appetitive urges and goals to initiate new communal relationships, the existence of such relationships appears to down-regulate such urges and goals.

Existing relationships can block initiation of new relationships in another way, as well. That is, members of existing social networks disapproving of a particular new relationship (or the belief that they would) impedes formation of and undermines commitment to that relationship (Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, & Gaines, 1997; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006).

Being proximal. A mundane factor, proximity, has long been known to play a very important role in regard to the formation of relationships (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2008;

Bosard, 1932; Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950; Segal, 1974). Many scholars have noted that proximity (and in more recent history, virtual as well as physical proximity) sets people up for successful relationship initiation by providing opportunities for people to be attracted to one another and to be rewarding to one another in a variety of ways. We agree and, further, believe there is a second reason why proximity is such an important factor in initiating relationships: Namely, proximity provides some self-protection in the form of cover for interacting with the other person – that is, one is interacting because one is simply present. One need not reveal that one is seeking out another person by making an obvious effort.

The potential partner's attributes. The literature on personal attributes that elicit attraction is large, and not fully reviewed here, but a few factors of note are a person's physical attractiveness (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Huston & Levinger, 1978, Lemay, Clark & Greenberg, 2011; Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966), intelligence, popularity, assertiveness, familiarity (Moreland & Zajonc, 1982), and similarities in attitudes (Byrne, 1971; Byrne & Griffitt, 1973; Newcomb, 1961), demographics (Luo, 2009), and preferred activities (Klohnen & Luo, 2003; Singh, Ng, Ong & Lin, 2008). Yet another mundane but extremely important factor in predicting attraction and relationship formation is simply whether the other person seems to like you (Aronson & Worchel, 1966) and to want to form a new relationship with you (Clark, 1986). This heightens the possibility of being able to form such a relationship and is one of the most important factors promoting relationship initiation because it lessens rejection concerns dramatically, thereby reducing self-protection concerns and propelling initiation efforts forward.

Projecting one's own communal relationship interest onto a partner. Once people are attracted to and desire a communal relationship with a potential partner, they appear to project their own relationship interest onto the partner by seeing the partner as about as interested

in the relationship as they are themselves (Lemay & Clark, 2008; Lemay, Clark & Feeney, 2007; Lemay et al., 2010). People also project their own feelings of compassion onto others (Clark, Von Culin, Clark-Polner & Lemay, 2016). In the case of romantic relationships, projection can take the form of projecting one's sexual interest onto potential partners (Lemay & Wolf, 2016; Maner, Kenrick, Becker, et al., 2005), which, in turn, can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies by encouraging communal actions toward partners which are then reciprocated (Lemay et al. 2007). These projections likely provide much needed courage to continue the relationship initiation process.

What Is Known about Relationship Initiation? Some Existing Theoretical Accounts.

Although considerable research has examined what leads people to be initially attracted to one another and how they think, feel, and behave once in well-established friendships and romantic relationships, far less research has been focused on how people navigate from initial attraction to establish a well-functioning close relationship. However, there are some notable exceptions in terms of theory.

First, Murstein (1970) published a "Stimulus-Value-Role" stage theory of the initiation of romantic relationships. The first stage consists of potential partners noting aspects of the other person and being attracted to the other person, but not actually interacting. Potential partners then move to appreciating one another based on verbal exchanges regarding what each person's cares and interested. The final stage is a pair's appreciation of one another based on the quality of the mesh between the roles they assume in their relationship.

Another early theory of relationships of relationship initiation, the ABCDE model, was set forth by Levinger and Snoek (1972). During the attraction (A) stage, another person's appearance, dress, or body language in a face-to-face encounter influences attraction. A person

might, for instance, be attracted to another person based on having similar interests, life

philosophies, personality, or appearance. The building (B) stage involves finding common

ground in personality, attitudes, and interests. The continuation (C) stage involves making the

effort to enhance positive factors in the relationship by, for example, displaying affection, trust,

commitment, equality, and mutual satisfaction while inhibiting displays of jealousy. At this

stage Levinger and Snoek (1972) suggest that members start talking in terms of "we." (The later

two stages, deterioration (D) and ending (E)) stages are not relevant to relationship initiation.)

A third early theory of relationship initiation is Altman and Taylor's (1973) theory of

social penetration. This theory suggests relationship initiation is, primarily, a process of

increasing self-disclosure. Relationships presumably develop through increasingly broad and

intimate (deep) interpersonal communication. Through social penetration via self-disclosure,

people allow themselves to be vulnerable to others and become closer. Altman and Taylor

(1973) suggest that penetration occurs quickly at the beginning of a relationship, and then slows,

and that disclosures occur reciprocally. Sometimes the relationship stays shallow; sometimes it

becomes deep.[1]

Although they do not set it forth as a theory of relationship initiation per se, Reis and

Shaver (1988) provide a more sophisticated, dyadic model of the development of intimacy

(which is certainly a part of relationship initiation) in relationships. They describe a process

involving disclosure, but also responsiveness on the partner's part in the form of empathic

listening understanding, acceptance, and care, which elicits further disclosure (and relationship

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[1] We hasten to point out that this is not an exhaustive review of stage theories of relationship
initiation. We refer interested readers to another chapter in this volume by Ogolsky & Monk
(2017, this volume) for their discussion of additional stage theories set forth by Knapp and
Vangelisti and by Lewis and for references to those theorists' work.

growth). They also introduce interpretive filters on each person's part into their model, adding the important point that people perceive their partner's disclosures (and responses to their own disclosures) through those filters which influence how they see or interpret their partner's actions, suggesting that the process will vary along with individual differences in those filters.

Yet another theory relevant to relationship initiation (although she too did not label it as such) is Rusbult's investment theory of commitment to relationships (Rusbult, 1980, 1983). This theory incorporates and builds upon upon the principles of interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Kelley, 1979). Factors contributing to higher commitment (many discussed by Kelley and colleagues and additional ones described by Rusbult), include costs and rewards during interaction contributing to relationship satisfaction, higher investments into the relationship many of which could not be recouped if one were to leave, poorer alternatives to the relationship, and social and personal prescriptive norms against leaving the relationship. Relationship satisfaction itself is driven by the relationship being rewarding (and not costly) for the individual and by the expectations the individual has for the relationship given prior relationships, observations of others' relationships, and explicit teachings (e.g., religious teachings) about what a relationship should be like. According to this view, it is possible to become committed to an objectively poor relationship when a person has a low comparison level, poor alternatives, high investments, and/or strong proscriptive norms against leaving the relationship. Of course, it is also possible that these factors might combine to result in a committed and happy relationship if rewards are high and costs are low.

Without disagreeing with any of the prior theories, we believe there are additional points that any theory of relationship initiation ought to take into account. First, it is important to specify *just what kind* of close relationship is under consideration. After all, one can become

committed (in the interdependence theory sense of intending to stay in the relationship, for instance) to relationships that function in very different and in more or less healthy ways. As already noted, we are interested in how people go about forming well-functioning communal relationships as defined above because we believe such relationships provide a sense of belonging, enjoyment, and security that benefit both partners' mental and physical well-being. The model that comes closest to suggesting the nature of the relationship toward which people are striving is that of Reis and Shaver (1988), which suggests that people strive only toward relationships characterized by mutual understanding, validation, and care – goals that overlap with some of the goals we, too, suggest people strive toward in close relationships.

Second, it is important to consider goals that people actively pursue during relationship initiation that should disappear once relationships are formed. We posit the existence of three such goals: (1) Strategically presenting oneself as a good communal relationship partner to win over the other person, (2) strategically protecting the self from rejection, and (3) evaluating the partner to see if that person will make a good relationship partner. These three processes are normatively and appropriately self-focused in nature. People typically engage in self-presentation and partner evaluation with the goal of benefiting the self by establishing a relationship that will provide a sense of belonging and non-contingent responsiveness (possibly along with other benefits such as status in the community, companionship, and having a sexual partner). They protect themselves to avoid being hurt during relationship initiation and development. It is in the context of such processes that self-disclosures, investments, interdependence, understanding, acceptance, and care grow, as earlier theorists have suggested and their growth is shaped by these processes. Importantly, as these aspects of relationships grow, partners come to trust one another and strategic self-presentation, self-protection, and

partner evaluation all, ideally, diminish. The combination of these processes is not always seamless. They can and do interfere with one another. As one example, too much self-protection can block relationship initiation altogether.

Strategic Self-Presentation

After initial attraction, the focus, in part, shifts to people strategically presenting themselves in hopes of eliciting and maintaining the potential partner's interest. A central goal will be for people to convey that they will be good, communally responsive partners to the person with whom they are pursuing a relationship. People will be motivated to present themselves as wanting to understand, accept, and care for the desired person (Reis & Clark, 2013; Reis & Shaver, 1988). They will be especially kind to those to whom they are attracted (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). Offering support is central to such self-presentation, as it shows that one is kind, compassionate, capable, generous, and attentive to the other's needs. Indeed, in a longitudinal daily diary study, adults forming new relationships explicitly stated that they presented themselves as good relationship partners by showing that they were "good listeners so that the other person would see that you cared about what he or she had to say," or strove to "show that you understood and accepted this person." This relational self-presentation increased initially, then dropped off once relationships had been formed (Aragón, Clark & Beck, 2013).

One way people demonstrate that they are desirable relationship partners is by offering more support than they seek (Beck & Clark, 2010; Beck, Clark & Olson, 2016). Doing so conveys that people wish to be non-contingently supportive to the potential partner while not appearing to be a burden to that partner. Of course, eventually, for a communal relationship to work, and for each partner to received needed support, people must both give and seek support

support in roughly equal measure (assuming needs are equal). Therefore, one marker of successful completion of relationship initiation is that people no longer offer more support to partners than they seek. Supporting this reasoning, two sets of studies have shown that relationships start out with people offering more support to partners than they seek for themselves, but on average, this asymmetry evens out once they have established a close relationship (Beck & Clark, 2009b; Beck et al., 2016).

Not only must people who are strategically presenting themselves as desirable communal relationship partners make efforts to behave in accord with communal norms (e.g., to be especially and non-contingently responsive to their potential partner's needs and desires), they also must convey to the partner that they do *not* desire an exchange relationship in which benefits are given contingently on a tit-for-tat basis. In this regard, when giving support, it is important that the donor *not* convey that repayment is expected or desired or even needed, thereby making it easy for the recipient to accept without offering repayment or without even having to engage in an internal debate about whether he or she should offer repayment. One way to accomplish this recently has been documented by Clark and Kriszan (2017, in preparation). Specifically, donors in pursuit of a relationship can lower their apparent costs of supporting the potential partner. This conveys to the recipient that repayment is not needed, and doing so increases the chance that the recipient will accept. For instance, a person could offer to give the recipient a ride to the train station when it is needed, but the offer will be more likely to be accepted if the person makes the offer and comments, "I was going by there anyway." Across time, such comments should become less necessary, willingness to provide and accept costlier benefits should increase.

If a potential partner accepts offers of responsiveness and does not offer specific repayment, then that partner has conveyed interest in a communal relationship and the strategy has been effective. Indeed, accepting such offers non-contingently is another important means of strategic self-presentation in and of itself. It signals willingness follow communal norms and comfort in so doing. Accompanying acceptance with an expression of gratitude may be an even more effective self-presentational strategy as it more strongly conveys communal gestures are welcomed (Algoe, Fredrickson & Gable, 2013). Notably, recent research has shown that expressing gratitude appears to be an especially effective strategy when the expresser specifically praises the other's action (e.g., "You are such a nice person to have helped me") as opposed to simply noting the benefit to the self (e.g., "This really helped me." Algoe, Kurtz, & Hillaire, 2016).

Evidence for yet another way to strategically convey that one is interested in a communal, *not* an exchange, relationship emerged in studies reported by Clark (1984). In this series of studies people who were just getting to know an attractive other who was available for a communal relationship bent over backwards not to keep track of individual inputs when performing a joint task for which there would be a reward. This should signal a lack of interest in following an exchange norm. Members of established relationships placed in the same situation, however, neither kept track of benefits nor bent over backwards not to do so suggesting that intentional avoidance of any behavior that might be interpreted as exchange in nature disappears in established relationships.

What about the possibility of self-presentation as a seeker (as well as a giver of) responsiveness? Shouldn't that be a way of strategically presenting the self to partners? Whereas seeking support and depending on partners is just as important to well-functioning,

committed, communal relationships as is giving support, it should not be and is not as common early in relationships as is offering support (Beck & Clark, 2009b; Beck et al., 2016). We suspect the strategic self-presenter does not wish to look selfish nor appear to be burdensome early on in relationship initiation. Indeed, avoiding such appearances should be a part of relationship initiation. Thus, a normative need to self-protect early in relationships likely drives the imbalance between giving versus seeking support early on. We do believe that conveying that one is willing to depend upon the other is a part of strategic self-presentation during relationship initiation, but that it is exercised cautiously early on, typically taking the form of being willing to accept spontaneous support without repaying first, and only later moving to actively seeking support. Not only does this strategy avoid making a person appear burdensome, it also protects the self from the sting of rejection should be request be turned down (a point we will emphasize again later). Of course, an offer of help can be turned down, too, but it still conveys generosity and, interestingly and potentially self-protectively, can be attributed to the other person not wanting to burden the self.[2]

Some types of strategic self-presentations even may be non-conscious and automatic. For example, the combination of liking and attending closely to a partner with whom one desires

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[2] In connection with these ideas regarding strategic self-presentation being a normative and important aspect of relationship initiation, it is worth noting research conducted by Crocker and colleagues (e.g., Crocker & Canevello, 2008) suggesting that strategic self-presentation is an egoistic approach to relationship formation that ought to be (and is) less effective in winning people over than is a more eco-centered, compassionate approach of focusing upon the potential partner and having compassionate goals to benefit that partner. We agree that self-presentation *can* be a self-defeating strategy when forming relationships if it consists of bragging (in this regard, see also Scopelitti, Loewenstein & Vosgera, 2014), but here we talk about a different sort of self-presentation, which is presenting oneself as having good communal relationship skills and being motivated to use them. These efforts seem to be focused on partner welfare and, indeed, in a sense are, but during relationship initiation they may well be motivated by self-presentational concerns rather than by true concerns about the partner.

a relationship may elicit mimicry of that person's expressive behaviors and gestures which, in turn, if the partner is interested, facilitates their liking of the person engaging in mimicry (see Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). Furthermore, recent research suggests that people socially tune their implicit attitudes in ways that make themselves compatible with desirable potential friends (Melnikoff, Von Culin, Bargh & Clark, 2016). This, too, may propel people forward in relationship initiation as similar attitudes are known to promote attraction.

Self-Protection

As a person strategically presents him or herself as a desirable communal relationship partner, that person also strives to protect him or herself from the very real possibility that the potential partner will not reciprocate interest. Whereas the very nature of communal relationships requires partners to depend upon one another for support and therefore to reveal vulnerabilities and display needs (Clark & Aragón, 2013), risking such dependency is not easy (Stinson & Cameron, 2015). One's needs and desires may be ignored. Worse, one's needs and desires may be mocked or even exploited. It can even feel risky to offer a potential partner support because that conveys one's interest in a relationship and such overtures can be declined. Even mild rejection hurts (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). As Murray, Holmes and Collins (2006) have noted in their risk-regulation model, people must balance a desire to form a close relationship with another person against a need to protect themselves from rejection.

The dance between putting oneself forward as a good partner and self-protection starts soon after a person's initial interest in a relationship arises. In established, high quality relationships, confidence in a partner's understanding, validation, and care protects its members against the threat of rejection. It allows them to risk relational dependence on one another and, in turn, reap the benefits thereof (Murray et al., 2006). Those high in self-esteem and attachment

security likely are especially adept at establishing such relationships in which self-protection can be dropped; avoidant and anxious people struggle with so doing (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010)

However, it is important to point out that during relationship initiation—especially at its earliest points—*no one* knows for sure that a potential partner will be interested in forming a communal relationship and will be motivated to care. Thus, during relationship initiation it should be *normative* for people to be wary of the potential partner and self-protective. Indeed, starting high in self-protectiveness and moving toward dropping it is a normal stage of relationship initiation, even for those high in self-esteem. It is difficult to assess care and regard without risking rejection (Holmes, 1991). A need to protect the self from rejection is surely the most important reason why a powerful determinant of interest in forming a relationship with another person is whether you have reason to believe that person likes you (Aronson & Worchel, 1966; Curtis & Miller, 1986; Kenny & La Voie, 1982; Secord & Backman, 1964), and also why those who are particularly anxious appear to be particularly sensitive to a potential partner's liking for them (Sperling & Borgaro, 1995). It is also likely why, in a study by Muehlenhard and Miller (1988), only 3% of participants reported that they would ask an attractive woman on a date if they had no information about how she might respond and why negative feedback confirming one's negative self-views is particularly threatening during relationship initiation (Campbell, Lackenbauer & Muise, 2006; Swann, de La Rond & Hixon, 1994).

Combining Efforts to Self-Present and Self-Protect

A need to present oneself as interested in a relationship while simultaneously protecting oneself during relationship initiation is a balancing act. This need to balance self-presentation as a good and interested relationship partner and self-protection is captured in some modern dating

practices. Speed-dating events build into their procedures the ability to self-present while simultaneously protecting the self from rejection. Merely by showing up to the event, a person conveys interest in meeting others. However, the person simultaneously has the self-protective and reassuring knowledge that that the others who have appeared at the event share that general interest and that saying "yes" (that they are interested in someone) will only be revealed to that someone if he or she also says "yes."   That such events provide opportunities for self-presentation while simultaneously providing self-protection is likely one reason why such events are so popular and have formed the initial basis for many relationship initiations and eventual marriages (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, & VanderWeele, 2013; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012).

The research on people offering more support than they seek early in relationships mentioned above (Beck & Clark, 2009b; Beck et al., 2016) also provides an example not only of strategic self-presentation during relationship initiation, but also of balancing strategic self-presentation with self-protection. Offering (but not requesting) support allows the self-presentation opportunity to convey an intent to be responsive (Reis & Clark, 2013) while not revealing one's own vulnerabilities. Whereas such offers can feel a bit risky because they can be turned down, a declined offer of support does not involve a failure of the potential partner to be responsive to a person having put his or her own desires, need for support, and dependency "out there" and then being turned down. Moreover, an easy dissonance-reducing appraisals exist (Festinger, 1957). Donors can reason that the potential partner did not need the help, or even, that the potential partner is being kind by not wishing to be a burden. A declined request for support is far harder to dismiss.

The self-protection built into offering support is likely even more sophisticated. For instance, we suspect that small levels of instrumental support (e.g., holding doors open or carrying a package), informational support (e.g., giving directions, sharing information), and emotional support (e.g., asking someone how he or she is doing, wishing someone a good day) are likely given early in relationships, as they self-protectively imply less interest in the relationship from donor and also are easier for the recipient to accept. Another technique recently investigated in our laboratory is for the donor to offer support to a potential partner and to indicate that it is not costly to the self. One can say, for instance, "I can give you a ride home; I was going that way anyway." This technique, we have found, conveys just as much interest in the potential partner as does offering the same support without the reduced cost message, but it is more likely to be accepted by the potential partner, presumably because the partner need not worry about whether that support should or should not be repaid (Clark & Kriszan, 2016). A person also can offer support to a potential partner and say that it benefits oneself. For instance, "I'd be happy to walk your dog. I really need the exercise." If the offers are accepted the donor then can move more confidently to making more direct and larger offers of support.

Yet another technique people can use to indicate interest in another person without revealing vulnerabilities and without that person feeling pressure to repay them is offering inclusion in joint activities, such as issuing an invitation to an event one is holding to which others are invited as well. Even including a person in a conversation can be benefit non-contingently given to another. Social psychologists have long emphasized and demonstrated how important a sense of belonging and inclusion is to people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), so mere inclusion likely constitutes a highly desirable benefit. Simultaneously, such offers do not require much vulnerability on the part of the donor.

Partner Evaluation: Do I Like This Person? Will This Person Be Responsive to Me?

Along with self-presentation and self-protection, partner evaluation is a third process central to relationship initiation. It occurs alongside self-presentation and self-protection, contributing to the complex "dance" of relationship initiation. Partner evaluation is often intertwined with the other processes of relationship initiation.   Of course, initial attraction, as discussed above, is the start of partner evaluation (and, to date, it is the most researched aspect of partner evaluation.

Yet, as soon as there is actual interaction with a potential partner, the nature of partner evaluation changes. The question changes from, "Does this person's attributes appeal to me?" to "How does this person interact *with me*? Does he or she like *me*? Does this person understand, validate and care for *me*?" This progression of partner evaluation from an individual process to an interdependent dyadic one can account for a seeming paradox in the literature. That is, factors that people claim drive their attraction to others in simple self-report studies often do not necessarily drive actual attraction to others in dyadic sessions (cf. Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Eastwick, Finkel & Eagly, 2011). Why not? The answer likely is that the impact of dyadic factors influencing partner evaluation quickly swamp the impact of early, individually judged characteristics. For example, the physical attractiveness of a potential partner might have a large impact on initial attraction, but if an attractive person indicates no interest in one, or shows themselves to be unkind to one, one's evaluation of him or her will plummet.

Notably, evaluation of potential partners remains largely covert in the early stages of relationship initiation, for at least two reasons. First, such evaluation overtly pursued, would indicates self-interest and, if negative, is insulting to the potential partner. Therefore it will interfere with efforts to strategically present the self as focused upon and responsive to the

partner. Second, evaluation of the partner, especially if it is positive, conveys interest in that partner, and individuals likely wish to hide such interest, at least at the earliest stages, to protect themselves from possible rejection.

To some extent, people can evaluate whether a potential partner will be a good, communally responsive relationship partner without actually interacting with that person. For instance, people can ask about potential partners' reputations or people can glean information from merely observing potential partners' behaviors. Yet, to a great extent, people's evaluations of a potential partner depend upon how that partner interacts with them in particular. Our discussion so far suggests that the first information in this regard likely consists of that potential partner's strategic self-presentations to the person. Observing another person attempt to be responsive —no matter how strategic that responsiveness is perceived to be —is crucial to judging whether the potential partner has an interest in a relationship with the person, as well as whether the potential partner is sufficiently socially skilled and savvy to know that it is wise to self-present as as a responsive person instead of, say, bragging about the personal attributes. Later it becomes important also to ascertain if the potential partner will continue to be responsive when one authentically reveals vulnerabilities and weakness (and, of course, to do so requires dropping some of one's own self-protection. To be ideally responsive to a partner that partner too must drop some self-protection and people likely evaluate partners on this ground too.

Effective partner evaluation requires entering what we call socially diagnostic situations, in which one's needs are revealed so that the partner can respond with understanding, validation, and care. Early in relationship initiation, the most important diagnostic situations are likely ones that people create or enter, which can provide evidence about whether a partner is interested in responding and developing the relationship (Beck & Clark, 2009a). For instance, a person may

invite a potential partner to join him or her for lunch. Whether or not that potential partner accepts is an important, diagnostic piece of information. If the partner accepts, that likely builds one's confidence in pursuing the relationship and encourages further invitations on both people's parts.

Creating or entering socially diagnostic situations is likely done in simple, relatively non-threatening ways at first. Importantly, one can create simple socially diagnostic situations by seeking small amounts of support, beginning with small requests that perhaps simultaneously compliment the other (e.g., asking for advice in a domain relevant to the potential partner). One also may ask a partner to begin spending time together in ways that would benefit the self but also, if a relationship is desired, would benefit the partner, too. For instance, one may ask a partner to join him or her for meal, a party, or a study session. Both types of approaches will suggest to a partner that one is interested in pursuing a relationship and in receiving support and inclusion, without revealing vulnerabilities.

Beck and Clark (2009a) report a series of studies which suggest who can most easily enter socially diagnostic situations and who struggles with doing so. In two studies they found that people who scored low on measures of avoidant attachment were better able to enter such situations than were those high on avoidant attachment. In a third study they found that merely thinking about times when others were not responsive to one, temporarily renders one less likely to enter socially diagnostic situations when someone completely new to one.

Later in relationships, a different type of socially diagnostic situation becomes increasingly important for purposes of partner (and relationship) evaluation – that in which two people have conflicting interests. Put in interdependence theory terms, two people can find themselves in a situation in which they have corresponding interests. For instance, they both

want to see the same movie. If so, they are likely to go to that movie, but doing so will not

provide much information about whether one's partner especially cares about one's welfare nor

about whether one's partner understands and accepts one, for he or she may be going just

because he or she personally wishes to see the movie. However, situations in which two

individuals' interests conflict become especially important for evaluative purposes (Holmes &

Rempel, 1989; see also Agnew & Le, 2015). These situations involve seeing if a partner will be

responsive to one when doing so will conflict with that partner's own self-interest. They provide

evidence not only of the partner's responsiveness, but also of the partner's flexibility in focus of

attention (Clark, Graham, Williams & Lemay, 2008). Can they switch their relational focus of

attention from the self and whether the partner will meet their needs to the partner and to meeting

the partner's needs? Will the partner make a sacrifice?   If a partner comes through for a person

in conflict of interest situations, it can convey to a person that the partner has gone through a

transformation of motivation (a term from interdependence theory, Kelley, 1979) wherein the

partner places the other's interests above their own. Knowing that a partner is willing to focus

on one and to sacrifice for one is a very important part of partner evaluation, as sacrifices and

accommodations are crucial to the smooth and successful functioning of communal relationships.

A discussion of the importance of entering socially diagnostic situations, particularly

ones in which conflicts of interest exist for partner evaluation, highlights a natural tension

between all three processes we have discussed in this chapter. To enter diagnostic situations in

the first place requires people to drop some self-protection. People will receive feedback

regarding the partner's nature and stance toward the relationship, but that feedback could be

disappointing. Fortitude, confidence, and optimism are all necessary. Of course, as evaluations

of the partner and relationship improve that should reinforce and encourage more dropping of

self-protection. Deteriorating evaluations of the partner and relationship should have the opposite

effect. Entering many diagnostic situations also will require dropping some strategic self-

presentation. No one is a perfect individual or a perfect communal relationship partner.

Revealing imperfections is necessary for a person to know that a partner still accepts him or her

and can forgive him or her. Revealing imperfections also is necessary for a person to relax and

benefit fully from a relationship. That requires not just dropping self-protection but dropping

some strategic self-presentation. At some point, continuing partner evaluation must end for a

communal relationship to enter an implementation phase. This does not mean that evaluation

will not "pop up" occasionally, just that it will no longer be an ongoing enterprise that

determines whether the implementation phase will be reached

Is Relationship Initiation *All* about Strategic Self-Presentation, Self-Protection, and

Partner Evaluation?

We believe that goals to self-present, to self-protect, and to evaluate partners play

important roles in relationship initiation. Yet, as noted earlier, we do not believe that prior

cumulative descriptions of what is involved in relationship initiation are incorrect. As these

three relational processes play out across time, people experience rewards (and costs) from their

growing relationships, and these do accumulate, influence satisfaction, and contribute to people's

desire to remain in those relationships (Rusbult, 1980). So, too, do investments grow and

contribute to the desire to remain in those relationships (Rusbult, 1983). Our views also are

entirely consistent with the idea that disclosures (Altman & Taylor, 1973), responsiveness (Reis

& Clark, 2013), and felt intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988) and satisfaction (Rusbult, 1980; 1983)

all increase across time if relationship initiation proceeds smoothly and successfully. All these

factors will play into relationship initiation, with intimacy, responsiveness, satisfaction and, to

some extent, investments, all likely contributing to improvement in partner (and relationship)

evaluation. Ideally, as the communal nature of a relationship emerges, self-presentation, self-

protection, and partner evaluation are all dropping.

Of course, all this may not occur, especially for those who are low in self-esteem (Leary

& Downs, 1995), low in attachment security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) or high in rejection

sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996) (all overlapping constructs). It is these people who will

struggle most with issues of self-protection and, consequently, with relationship initiation.

When Is Relationship Initiation Complete? How Do We Define Commitment?

When is relationship initiation complete? When do people move from initiating a

communal relationship to simply implementing a communal relationship, in which two people

are mutually responsive to one another's welfare and engage in joint activities and routines that

benefit both partners' mental and physical health? There are two sets of markers. The first set

includes the presence of mutual, non-contingent responsiveness to partner needs balanced with

the presence of seeking and accepting responsiveness from the partner. It includes being one's

authentic self, revealing dependencies and needs, and attending to the partner's dependencies and

needs. It further includes participating in mutually enjoyable and beneficial activities. The

second set is not often mentioned, but we have suggested it here. It includes dropping strategic

self-presentation to the partner, dropping self-protection, and dropping partner evaluation. It is

the absence of these three processes that truly signals comfort in and commitment to a

relationship.

Concluding Comments

Relationship science is a large and active research field. Those within the field have

accumulated much knowledge about the determinants of initial attraction and the dynamics of

ongoing close relationships. Yet the question of how people negotiate their way from initial

attraction to commitment and mutual understanding, acceptance, and care has not received much

attention. We have suggested that relationship initiation is characterized by an overarching goal

to form relationships to enhance one's belonging and security, and that that overarching goal

gives rise to three subgoals: (1) strategic self-presentation to partners as a good, communally-

oriented partner, (2) self-protection from the pain of rejection, and (3) partner evaluation.

Pursuit of these three goals simultaneously then combines to produce a dance of relationship

initiation.

   With good fortune and personal fortitude, this dance can and often does result in the

formation and implementation of a strong, well-functioning communal relationship characterized

by the disappearance of all three goals, and commitment to an authentic, mutually responsive,

communal relationship. Yet the dance may fail. First the relationship may never get to the point

of people dropping these goals and people may go their separate ways. Second, the relationship

may reach a point of commitment (of the sort that interdependence researchers have discussed to

factors such as high investments, poor alternatives, and social and personal norms against ending

it without reaching the point of a well functioning communal relationship in which people feel

sufficiently safe with one another to have dropped self-presentation (and achieved authenticity of

self-presentations to one another), dropped self-protection (and willingness to reveal

vulnerabilities to one another) and ceased constant partner evaluation. The three initiation

processes outlined, if they persist beyond firm commitment (in the interdependence sense) to

relationships may evidence a variety of pathologies. To give just one example, some people,

particularly women, engage in what Helgeson & Fritz (1998) called unmitigated communion in

their marriages. This involves being overly attentive to a partner's needs, neglecting one's own

needs and not seeking or even expecting sufficient responsiveness from a partner. We suspect reflects remaining high in strategic self-presentation as being a good communal partner but not dropped self-protection to the point necessary to reveal vulnerabilities and, perhaps never have really adequately evaluating their partners because they simply haven't allowed themselves to be vulnerable or to seek responsiveness. Other examples could be given as well. For instance maintaining too much self-protection and self-focus after having dropped strategic self-presentation may result in comparing oneself to friends who have succeeded rather than celebrating with them and distancing from friends who have failed lest they reflect poorly on one rather than supporting them (cf. Lemay & Clark, 2009). Sadly, failing to reach a point of being able to commit to and implement a high quality communal relationships is likely common among marriages and friendships as well.

Importantly, relationship initiation will always involve some anxiety (due to *normatively* elevated levels self-protection during this stage of relationships). Also important to understand is the fact that relationship initiation is *not just* a slow building of such things as self-disclosure, the matching of values, the accumulation of investments which, at some point and in some amount, result in commitment. It involves the *dropping* of most self-focused strategic self-presentation, of most self-serving partner evaluation and of most self-focused self-protection as trust grows. Along with the dropping of these three naturally self-focused processes and the rise in communal behaviors also comes a flexible relational focus of attention (Clark et al, 2008), wherein each person focuses on the self and what the partner can do for the self (when the self has a need or desire), the partner and what the self can do for the partner (when the partner has a need or desire), and joint and mutually beneficial activities (when neither person has a particular need or both have the same need or desire simultaneously).

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