



Articles

Communal Strength Norms in the United States and Egypt

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Abstract

Two studies investigated norms related to communal strength in the United States and Egypt. Communal strength reflects the extent to which individuals feel responsible for meeting the needs of relationship partners, varies between relationships, and predicts caregiving. Participants indicated the communal strength marital partners should feel towards their spouse, mother, and best friend. In the United States, women reported wives should feel the most communal strength towards their husbands and mothers, but husbands should feel more towards their wives than mothers or best friends. American men reported both spouses should feel the highest communal strength towards their spouses and mothers. In Egypt, men and women agreed that wives should have the highest communal strength for their husbands and mothers, but husbands should have higher communal strength for their mothers than their wives or best friends. These findings reflect cultural variation in the perception of ideal communal strength following marriage, and highlight the ways in which expectations related to caregiving may differ between spouses.

Keywords: communal strength, cultural norms, interpersonal relationships, marriage

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Expanding relationship research globally is critical to explore the impact of cultural context on close relationships. By doing so, researchers may illuminate practical issues related to pedagogy, therapy, and marital counseling, as well as critical theoretical issues related to understanding the universality versus cultural specificity of interpersonal relationship processes (Burlison, 2003). To date, social psychological research on non-Western family relationships is limited (Mensch, Ibrahim, Lee, & Omaima, 2003; Sherif, 1999). This study examines links between culture and the perception of responsibility in close relationships by comparing norms related to ideal communal strength among young adults in the United States and young adults in Egypt. Specifically, we examined the extent to which spouses are expected to care for one another relative to other communal relationships including their relationship with their mother and a best friend.

Research on Communal Strength

Communal strength represents the degree to which individuals feel responsible for meeting the needs of relationship partners and is likely to vary from one communal relationship to another such that the needs of some relationship partners take priority over the needs of other relationship partners (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). For example, although individuals may feel some degree of responsibility for caring for members of both their immediate family (e.g. their spouse or child) and their extended family (e.g. an aunt or cousin), the needs of an immediate family member are likely to take precedence over the needs of an extended family member (Monin, Clark, &