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## Noncomparability of Benefits Given and Received: A Cue to the Existence of Friendship

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*In three studies subjects read paragraphs describing one person benefiting another, then the other benefiting the person. In the first two studies, the comparability of the benefits was varied. In the second, length of the delay between benefits was also varied. After reading each paragraph, subjects judged the degree of friendship between the two people. In both studies perceived friendship was greater when benefits were noncomparable than when they were comparable. Delay did not influence perceived friendship. In the third study, subjects read the paragraphs from the second study and explained why the second benefit was given. Benefits comparable to prior benefits were more likely to be perceived as repayments than were noncomparable benefits. Delay did not affect the reasons given. These results are discussed in terms of Clark and Mills's (1979) distinction between communal and exchange relationships.*

How do people decide what kind of relationship exists between people they observe? While they use, no doubt, many pieces of information, some recent theorizing about relationships suggests two possible cues to the existence of friendship: noncomparability of benefits given and received, and a moderate delay between benefits. These potential cues were investigated in the present set of studies. Thus, this research represents both a start at answering the question of how observers attribute friendship to pairs of others, and a partial test of some recent theorizing about relationships.

The initial impetus to this work came from discussions of and work supporting a distinction between two types of relationships: communal and exchange<sup>1</sup> (Clark and Mills, 1979; Mills and Clark, forth-

coming). Communal relationships in this framework are characterized by an implicit agreement between members to take care of one another's needs to the best of their ability.<sup>2</sup> Benefits are given to fulfill needs or when they would be particularly pleasing to the other. Communal relationships tend to be especially valued because people can feel relatively secure in them. Friendships are assumed to be communal relationships. Since at any given time the needs and preferences of members of a communal relationship are unlikely to be exactly the same, members should be unlikely to give and receive exactly comparable benefits within a short period. Indeed, members may actively *avoid* giving benefits directly comparable to benefits they have recently received since doing so might imply a preference for a different and less valued type of relationship. As Schwartz (1967:6) has observed:

Returning "tit for tat" transforms the relation into an economic one and expresses a refusal to play the role of grateful recipient. This offense represents a desire to end the relationship or at least define it on an impersonal, nonsentimental level.

Members of communal relationships may also actively avoid giving each other benefits very soon after having received a benefit. Unless the other has a clear need

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<sup>1</sup> In virtually all relationships, benefits are "exchanged" in a broad sense—that is, members give one another benefits. However, the term "exchange" is used in a narrower sense here to refer to a type of relationship in which the giving of a benefit creates a specific obligation on the part of the recipient to return a comparable benefit.

<sup>2</sup> Other authors have also proposed that some relationships are particularly characterized by members' responsiveness to one another's needs (e.g., Deutsch, 1975; Lerner et al., 1976; Pruitt, 1972; Ridley and Avery, 1979; Rubin, 1973).

for the benefit, doing so might make the second benefit appear to be a repayment for the first and indicate a preference for a different sort of relationship. Blau (1964:99) has commented on this, saying that "posthaste reciprocation of favors" implies "an insistence on a more businesslike relationship." Thus, moderate delays between benefits should characterize communal relationships in general and friendships in particular.

In contrast, in exchange relationships, which often exist between business associates and coworkers who are not friends, members give benefits with the expectation of receiving specific benefits in return. In such relationships, the receipt of a benefit results in a specific debt or obligation to return a comparable benefit. Members are concerned with and keep track of how much they receive in return for benefiting the other and what they owe the other in return for benefits received. Consequently, a member of an exchange relationship who is given a benefit should be likely to return a comparable benefit as soon as possible in order to eliminate the debt.

Assuming that the norms for communal and exchange relationships described above are true, and that observers of relationships implicitly know these norms, it is reasonable to predict that noncomparability of benefits given and received in a relationship and moderate delays between the giving and receiving of benefits may serve as cues to the existence of a friendship.

Before going on to describe the studies done to test these predictions, however, it should be noted that the same predictions might be made on a different basis, that is, on the basis of equity theory (e.g., Walster et al., 1978). An explanation based on equity theory does not assume that different norms govern the giving and receiving of benefits in intimate vs. nonintimate relationships. Rather, equity theorists (e.g., Walster et al., 1978) would say that in all types of relationships individuals strive to keep the ratio of their inputs to their outcomes equal to the ratio of the other's inputs to his or her outcomes. This may be most easily accomplished if people involved in a relationship

give one another comparable benefits. Therefore, people who know one another only casually may be quite likely to give and receive comparable benefits. On the other hand, people in close, long-term relationships have known one another long enough to work out complicated exchanges of noncomparable benefits and may be more likely to give and receive noncomparable benefits than others (Walster et al., 1978:150). Observers, knowing this, may perceive relationships in which the giving and receiving of noncomparable benefits takes place as close relationships. Equity theorists have further argued that friends trust one another more than do nonfriends (Walster et al., 1978). Thus, friends will not react negatively to delays between giving something and receiving something, while nonfriends may do so. In other words, equity theorists might argue, it is not being specifically repaid that bothers members of a communal relationship and that results in their not giving comparable benefits soon after receiving benefits. Indeed, they *want* to be repaid. Rather, they have had time to work out complicated exchanges and they trust one another. This situation may lead to noncomparability of and delays between benefits being taken as signs of friendship.

The first study tests the hypothesis that noncomparability of benefits is considered a sign of friendship. The second study tests the same prediction and the prediction that a delay between benefits is taken as a sign of friendship. These predictions, as noted above, could be made on either of two bases. The third study attempts to gain insight into *why* comparability of and delay between benefits might serve as cues to friendship.

#### STUDY 1

##### *Method*

*Subjects.* One hundred thirty-six college students volunteered to participate. Each was randomly assigned to one of the following conditions: (1) Comparable benefits—Ride first, (2) Comparable benefits—Lunch first, (3) Noncomparable benefits—Ride first, and (4) Noncomparable benefits—Lunch first.

*Procedure.* Subjects were handed a brief description of one person benefiting another followed by the other benefiting the person. Four descriptions had been prepared, one representing each of the four conditions, and these were randomly ordered in a stack. The description handed to each subject was the one at the top of the stack at the time the subject participated. The experimenter did not look at the description prior to the subject's participation.

In the Comparable benefits-Ride first condition, both benefits were a ride home, while in the Comparable benefits-Lunch first condition, both benefits were lunch. In the Noncomparable benefits-Ride first condition, the first benefit was a ride and the second lunch. In the Noncomparable benefits-Lunch first condition, these benefits were given in the reverse order.

The following is the description presented in the Noncomparable benefits-Lunch first condition (the others can be easily derived from this one):

Mr. John Clark looked at the clock—12:15.  
It was time for lunch.  
He dialed Steve Smith's number. Mr. Smith answered,  
"Hello, Steve Smith."  
"Hi, this is John Clark. Have you eaten yet?"  
"No," replied Steve.  
"I'll treat you to lunch—meet me in 15 minutes on the corner," he offered.  
"See you soon," said Steve as he hung up the phone.  
The next day Steve called John at 5:00 p.m.  
"This is Steve Smith—I'll give you a ride home today. Meet me at 5:30, O.K.?" asked Steve.  
"O.K. See you soon. Goodbye," answered John.

After reading each description, each subject rated the degree of friendship existing between the two people on a five-point scale: 0 = they were not friends; 4 = they were close friends.

### Results

The mean friendship rating for the Comparable benefits conditions collapsed across the Type of benefit given first variable was 2.0. The mean for the Noncomparable benefits conditions collapsed across the Type of benefit given first variable was 2.6. A  $2 \times 2$  between subjects

analysis of variance (Comparability  $\times$  Type of benefit given first) revealed that the predicted main effect of Comparability was significant ( $F(1,132) = 8.01, p < .005$ ). As expected, neither the main effect for the Type of benefit given first nor the interaction between Comparability and the Type of benefit given first was significant.

The results of the first study support the hypothesis that noncomparability of benefits given and received may serve as a cue to the existence of a friendship. However, the results must be interpreted with caution. Since only two benefits were used in the descriptions, the generalizability of the findings to the effects on perceived friendship of the comparability of other types of benefits given and received may be questioned. It is possible that the giving and receiving of rides (car pools) and businessmen treating one another to lunch are perceived to be customs that often occur among people who are not friends, while combinations of giving and receiving lunches and rides do not seem to be customs of convenience and therefore indicate the existence of a friendship. If these possibilities are in fact true, then the comparability of *other* benefits given and received might not result in decreased perception of friendship.

A second study addressed this problem. The experiment was conducted to determine whether comparability of other benefits given and received would decrease perception of friendship. In addition, the hypothesis was tested that a moderate delay between one person benefiting the other and the other benefiting the person would increase perception of friendship.

## STUDY 2

### Method

*Subjects.* One hundred sixty college students volunteered to participate. Each was randomly assigned to one of the following conditions: (1) Comparable benefits-Short delay, (2) Comparable benefits-Moderate delay, (3) Noncomparable benefits-Short delay, (4) Noncomparable benefits-Moderate delay.

*Procedure.* Subjects were given a questionnaire booklet containing four par-

agraphs. For a given subject, all four paragraphs represented the same condition. Each paragraph described two people of the same sex (females in two paragraphs, males in two paragraphs) living on the same dorm floor. One person gave the other a benefit. Then the other gave the person the same thing (Comparable conditions) or something different (Noncomparable conditions). In the Comparable benefits paragraphs, either two pens, two pads of paper, a small jar of coffee, or candy were given and received. Each type of benefit appeared once in the Short delay condition and once in the Moderate delay condition. In the Noncomparable benefits paragraphs, pairs of benefits were (1) coffee first, pens second; (2) pens first, coffee second; (3) candy first, paper second; and (4) paper first, candy second. Each appeared once in the Short and once in the Moderate delay conditions.

Crossed with the comparability variable was a manipulation of the passage of time between benefits. In the Moderate delay conditions, the second benefit was given five days after the first. In the short delay conditions, the benefits were given on the same day.

The order in which subjects read their four paragraphs was randomly determined for each subject. Pairs of names mentioned were distinct in each paragraph so that subjects rated a new relationship each time. The following is one of the paragraphs representing the Noncomparable–Moderate delay condition (the others can easily be derived from this one):

Fred and Jim live on the same floor in a dorm. On Monday Fred asked Jim for some instant coffee because he had run out. Jim gave Fred a small jar full. On Saturday, Fred gave Jim two felt tip pens.

After reading each paragraph, subjects rated the degree of friendship between the two people on a scale from 0 = nonfriends to 4 = close friends.

### Results

A perceived friendship score for each subject was derived by summing the subject's four ratings. The mean scores in each condition were 9.10 (Comparable–

Short delay), 9.07 (Comparable–Moderate delay), 10.48 (Noncomparable–Short delay), and 9.95 (Noncomparable–Moderate delay). A  $2 \times 2$  (Comparability  $\times$  Delay) between subjects analysis of variance revealed a significant main effect only of Comparability ( $F(1,156) = 5.70, p < .03$ ). Perceived friendship was greater when pairs of people gave one another noncomparable benefits than when they gave one another comparable benefits.

### Discussion

The results of the second study provide additional support for the hypothesis that noncomparability of benefits given and received may serve as a cue to type of relationship, and they extend the generalizability of this finding to benefits other than lunches and rides. They do not, however, provide any evidence that a moderate delay between benefits serves the same purpose. Of course, unlike the described delays in the present study, actual delays between benefits may reduce the salience of the first benefit, may have an impact on whether or not a second benefit is perceived to be a repayment for the earlier one, and thus may serve as a cue to friendship.

So far, on the basis of our distinction between communal and exchange relationships, it has been assumed that the comparability of benefits given and received in relationships affects perceived friendship because it affects the perception of the reason why the second benefit was given. To gain more insight into this assumption, Study 3 was conducted.

### STUDY 3

#### Method

*Subjects.* Eighteen college students who were enrolled in their first psychology course at the university served as subjects. Their participation in the experiment partially fulfilled a course requirement.

*Procedure.* The stimulus materials were the same as those used in Study 2. The only changes in procedure were that subjects were asked to give a reason why the second benefit was given rather than

to judge the degree of friendship existing between the two people, and the design was a within subjects design.

After all subjects had responded to each paragraph (16 in all), each answer was typed on a separate index card. A judge, who was unaware of the conditions, compiled the following list of types of responses: as a thank you, out of appreciation, as a repayment, to fulfill a need, out of obligation, to start a friendship, to please the other, out of kindness, as a replacement, to return a favor. There were also some answers the judge found difficult to classify, such as: "No reason" and "Not enough information."

Three answers on the list seemed to indicate that the second benefit was given because the first benefit had created a debt that the person was obligated to fulfill. These were "as a repayment," "out of obligation," and "as a replacement." Prior to further examination of the data, these were considered to be exchange answers. Six others seemed to indicate a concern for the other and, again, prior to further examination of the data, they were considered to be communal answers. These were "as a thank you," "out of appreciation," "to fulfill a need," "to start a friendship," "to please the other," and "out of kindness." "To return a favor" seemed to be an ambiguous answer and was placed in neither category. People may "return favors" because they feel they have a debt to repay *or* because they want to demonstrate their appreciation.

Two additional judges who were unaware of the experimental conditions the responses came from assigned subjects' answers to one of the categories named above or to a "Miscellaneous" category if they felt an answer did not fit into any of the available categories.

### Results

Prior to performing statistical analyses, the data were compiled in the following manner. All subjects had read and responded to sixteen paragraphs: four representing each of four conditions. The two judges individually placed each of the resulting sixteen responses into one of the above categories. Since every category

had been classified communal, exchange, or neither, every subject could be assigned a communal score and an exchange score for each condition from each judge. These scores could range from 0 (indicating that the judge had placed none of the subject's answers for that condition in that set of categories) to 4 (indicating that the judge had placed all of the subject's answers for that condition in that set of categories).

The correlation between subjects' communal scores from the two judges was +.83. The correlation between judges' exchange scores was +.67. Since agreement was reasonably high, the judges' ratings were averaged to provide a communal and an exchange score for each subject in each condition. Means of these measures are presented in Table 1. A two-way within subjects analysis of variance on the communal scores revealed a significant effect only for Comparability ( $F(1,17) = 31.34, p < .001$ ). The communal scores were higher in the Noncomparable than in the Comparable conditions. A two-way within subjects analysis of variance on the exchange scores also revealed a significant effect only for Comparability ( $F(1,17) = 19.82, p < .001$ ). The exchange scores were higher in the Comparable than in the Noncomparable conditions. There were no effects of delay.

### Discussion

The results of Study 3 support the assumption that noncomparability of benefits increased perceived friendship in the

Table 1. Mean "Exchange" and "Communal" Reasons for Giving the Second Benefit as a Function of Comparability of and Delay Between Benefits

	Comparability		
	Noncomparable	Comparable	
Short	Exchange Score	1.33	2.69
	Communal Score	1.86	.69
Delay	Exchange Score	1.55	2.69
	Communal Score	1.83	.36

Note:  $N = 18$  per condition. The higher the number, the greater the communal or exchange score.

first two studies: the more comparable benefits were, the more the second was perceived as a repayment for the first (something more appropriate to exchange than communal relationships) and the less it was perceived as an attempt to fulfill a need or to please the other (something more appropriate to communal than to exchange relationships). Thus, the results support the proposed distinction between communal and exchange relationships.

It might be argued that because this study used a within subjects design, the comparability of benefits was very salient to the subjects, and this is why comparability affected their ratings. In the first two studies, however, a between subjects design was used, and comparability also had significant effects. Thus, it seems unlikely that subjects responded to the variations in comparability only because a within subjects design was used. Further, if a within subjects design really did force subjects to pay attention to and to differentiate their responses on the basis of variations in the independent variables, one would have expected an effect of the delay variable; yet, as in Study 2, no such effect was found.

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION

In summary, the first two studies provide support for the hypothesis that non-comparability of benefits given and received in a relationship serves as a cue to the existence of a communal relationship. Still, the paragraphs utilized as stimuli in this study were very simple. The comparability of benefits given and received was one of the few pieces of information subjects *could* use as a cue to the existence of a friendship. Thus, this research leaves open the question of whether or not noncomparability of benefits given and received by two people in natural settings actually is used by observers as a cue to the existence of a friendship. In such settings, many other pieces of information are available as well. To answer this question, and to extend the generalizability of the findings reported here, it would be necessary to replicate the present studies using more complex stimuli. Instead of reading brief paragraphs, sub-

jects might be asked to watch an actual, extended interaction between two people and then to rate the degree of friendship between the people. These interactions could be standardized with only the comparability of benefits given and received varying between conditions.

Perhaps the most important implication of the results of all three studies taken together is that, as predicted, observers do make a distinction between relationships in which benefits are given as specific repayments for past benefits and relationships in which benefits are given to fulfill needs or to please the other. Thus, these results provide indirect evidence for the actual existence of communal and exchange relationships. They also fit well with several previous findings: that people anticipating communal relationships like others *less* who repay them for a benefit than those who do not repay, while the reverse is true for people expecting exchange relationships (Clark and Mills, 1979: Study 1); that requesting a benefit after having given aid increases attraction in exchange relationships, but decreases attraction in communal relationships (Clark and Mills, Study 2); and that failure to repay a benefit is more likely to create feelings of exploitation in exchange than in communal relationships, while failure to fulfill a need is more likely to create feelings of exploitation in communal than in exchange relationships (Clark and Waddell, unpubl.).

The possibility suggested in the introduction to this paper that noncomparability of benefits has an impact on perceived friendship for a different reason—that is, because friends have had time to work out complicated exchanges of benefits and nonfriends have not—cannot be ruled out on the basis of the present data. However, it does seem implausible for at least two reasons. First, this explanation cannot account for the results of the third study—i.e., why are noncomparable benefits not as likely as comparable benefits to be perceived as repayments? The assumption that different rules govern the giving and receiving of benefits in different kinds of relationships does account for those results. Second, to keep track of and balance, using ratios of inputs to out-

comes, the huge number and variety of benefits given and received in any close relationship, such as a friendship, is a formidable task. As such, it is a task that people, having imperfect memories and limited capacity to process information, seem unlikely to perform. An implicit agreement to be responsive to one another's needs seems more likely. Of course, such an agreement has much the same result as keeping track of benefits when the needs of the people involved in the relationship are approximately equal.

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## Scope Conditions and Crucial Tests: Comment on Lee and Ofshe

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In a paper that appeared recently in this journal, Lee and Ofshe (1981) proposed to test two competing theories of social influence in task groups: expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1977) and the two-process theory. Each of these theories attempts to account for the empirical generalization "status organizes interaction," but they postulate different explanatory variables and make what appear to be mutually exclusive predictions.

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Expectation states theory argues that members of collectively organized task groups are responsive to status cues because of the task-ability information implied by such cues. Given the task of solving a problem under conditions of uncertainty, task group members develop beliefs about relative capacities to perform based on the states of the status characteristic that they and other members possess. In the expectation states model, then, status is seen as the primary causal factor in producing behavioral inequalities in task groups. A series of ex-