

4

Resource Allocation in Intimate Relationships *Trying to Make Sense of a Confusing Literature*

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A considerable literature now exists dealing with the rules or norms by which people divide resources in their intimate relationships—that is, in their friendships, family relationships, and romantic relationships. Researchers have often suggested or implied that a single rule is likely to *the* rule governing the giving and receiving of benefits in intimate relationships. They have examined both adherence to various rules in these relationships and satisfaction in the relationship given the apparent use of one particular rule or another.

Unfortunately, however, no clear picture has emerged regarding what *the* rule is. Some claim it is equity; others claim it is equality. Some argue that resources are distributed according to needs. Others say that adherence to no particular rule best predicts satisfaction in intimate relationships. Rather, what really matters is how many rewards a person receives from the other: the more rewards received, the happier the person will be. Not only have different researchers made different claims regarding what *the* resource-allocation rule in intimate relationships is,

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they have also come up with reasonable empirical evidence supporting different and seemingly contradictory rules.

As reviewers of this literature, how can we make sense of it? We could count up the studies that have found support for each view and compare scores. However, there are many problems with such an approach. For one thing, not all studies are equally strong methodologically. Thus, not all studies could be weighted equally. Second, some rules have received more tests than others. Thus, one rule might "win" simply because researchers have checked more often for evidence supporting it. Third, very few studies in this area include tests for the applicability of more than one rule within a given relationship. Thus, it is hard to compare the use of different rules without having subject population, experimenters, and methodologies confounded with support for any particular rule. Finally, even when more than one rule is tested within a given relationship it is not at all clear that the measures tapping use of one particular rule versus another are equally sensitive (see, e.g., discussions of this point by Lujanksy & Mikula, 1983; Michaels, Edwards & Acock, 1984; and Desmarais & Lerner, 1989). As a result, we advocate a different approach to making sense of this literature. We suggest that different groups of researchers independently searching for the one right rule have taken us about as far as they can. We now need to apply new strategies toward clarifying questions about the nature of resource-allocation rules in intimate relationships.

In this chapter we argue that keeping three things in mind when thinking about and evaluating this literature as well as when planning future research will promote progress. First, rather than different groups independently pursuing evidence for or against this or that particular rule, efforts should be made toward *integrating* the currently available empirical evidence. Second, we need to realize that, in a given intimate relationship, it will not necessarily be the case that members believe a single resource-allocation rule should always be utilized. While there may be one primary rule, there are presumably boundary conditions for the applicability of the rule within a particular relationship. We need to identify those boundary conditions. Third, in evaluating the available research, we need to keep an important distinction in mind, that is, the distinction between what people consider to be the ideal rule or rules for resource allocation in intimate relationships and how they actually behave on a day-to-day basis. Undoubtedly these are not always the same. People do not always live up to their ideals.¹

¹Note that, although both the second and third points imply that different resource-allocation rules may be applied in a single intimate relationship, they are distinct points. In the

In this chapter, we address each of these points in more detail. In the process we apply them toward clarifying the literature (with a clear personal bias toward believing that most people hold that a need-based rule as the ideal rule for intimate relationships). None of the sets of issues connected with each point will be (or could be) completely discussed and resolved in this brief chapter. Even so, we hope to convince the reader that keeping each point in mind is important and can help us make sense of this currently confusing literature. Before turning to our three points, though, we provide a brief overview of the existing literature to give the reader a feel for just where things stand now and to provide a basis for discussing the three points.

Existing Research

As already mentioned, different researchers or groups of researchers have found evidence for the use of different resource-allocation rules in intimate relationships. Consider the following sorts of evidence.

Evidence Regarding an Equity Rule

Perhaps the rule most frequently advocated as *the* rule governing all relationships, including intimate ones, is equity. Following an equity rule involves striving to keep the ratio of one's inputs into the relationship relative to one's outcomes equal to the ratio of that of the other person. Supposedly, people in intimate relationships strive to follow this norm, and the closer they come to doing so, the happier they are and the more stable their relationship is (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

One might ask, Do people indeed tend to follow an equity rule in their intimate relationships? Does following such a rule predict satisfaction and commitment in the relationship as well as stability of the relationship? It is somewhat surprising that we could not find work clearly documenting that people actually do tend to follow an equity norm more often than other possible norms in their intimate relationships. However, a large number of studies have yielded results consistent with the idea that

case of the second point, we are suggesting that, while people may have a primary "ideal" rule for intimate relationships, there often may be special circumstances under which they do not believe that rule ought to apply. In the case of the third point, we are suggesting that, even under circumstances in which people believe the ideal rule ought to apply, they may not live up to that rule. In such cases, they ought to feel guilt.

following an equity norm in intimate relationships is *associated* with satisfaction, commitment, and stability in these relationships (e.g., Lloyd, Cate, & Henton, 1982; Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985; Utne, Hatfield, Traupmann, & Greenberger, 1984).

A typical supportive study was reported by Utne et al. (1984). These researchers surveyed a large number of couples who had applied for marriage licenses. Husbands and wives were interviewed separately. Perceived equity was assessed via two measures: the 1977 Walster Global Measure of Equity/Inequity and the 1977 Traupmann-Utne-Walster Scale (both as described in Walster et al., 1978).² Results showed that people classified as following the equity rule scored slightly but significantly higher on measures of marital contentment and stability than did people who rated themselves as being under- or overbenefited.

Similarly, Sabatelli and Cecil-Pigo (1985) showed that, among already-married subjects, high overall self-reports of equity were associated with more favorable evaluations of outcomes derived from marriage and with higher degrees of commitment to marriage than were lower overall self-reports of equity. In addition, Lloyd et al. (1982) have reported that, among both casually dating and more seriously dating couples, reports of higher levels of overall perceived equity are associated with reports of higher relationship satisfaction. Additionally, Desmarais and Lerner (1989) have reported similar results among married couples as well as among undergraduates in dating relationships (when these researchers have used a global measure of equity). Moreover, Sprecher (1986) found that, among a group of both male and female college students reporting on intimate relationships, respondents holding global impressions that their relationships were equitable experienced more positive and less negative affect in those relationships than did those who held impressions that

²Following a brief introduction, the 1977 Walster Global Measure (described on pp. 234–236 of Walster et al., 1978) asks respondents to estimate their own and their partners' inputs to, and outcomes from, their relationships. Possible answers range from –4 (My/My partners' contributions/outcomes are extremely negative) to +4 (My/My partners' contributions/outcomes are extremely positive). The 1977 Traupman-Utne-Walster scale (described on pp. 236–242 of Walster et al., 1978) was designed to obtain a clearer understanding of daily marital give and take in four areas: Personal concerns, emotional concerns, day-to-day concerns, and opportunities-gained-or-lost. After reviewing a list of 22 specific contributions in each of these areas, respondents are asked to describe their own and their partners' contributions on the following 8-point scale: –4 (Extremely negative) to +4 (Extremely positive). Similarly, after reviewing a list of 24 specific benefits and frustrations in each of the four areas, respondents are asked to describe their own and their partners' outcomes on the same eight-point scale.

their relationships were inequitable. She also found, among a separate sample of college-age subjects also surveyed about their romantic relationships, that perceptions of global equity were positively and significantly associated with reports of commitment to the relationship (Sprecher, 1988).

It should be noted that there are some results that have *not* supported equity theory. Some of the nonsupportive work will be mentioned later as that supporting a different sort of rule. Here we would point to a few other nonsupportive findings, for example, the results of a study by Lujansky and Mikula (1983). They asked male students to complete questionnaires about their girlfriends. Rather than assess equity globally, 28 potential relationship inputs and outcomes were assessed individually, along with respondents' perceptions of the positivity and negativity of these inputs and outcomes. The experimenters calculated a measure of overall equity in the relationships from these ratings. In the study, equity did not predict members' perceptions of the quality of their relationships, nor did it predict whether the relationship was still intact five months later. Moreover, Cate, Lloyd & Henton (1985) also have observed that measures of global equity did not distinguish stable from unstable relationships. Finally, some equity theorists have predicted that, "all things being equal," relationships should become more equitable over time (Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979; Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, 1985). Although some evidence consistent with this notion has been reported (Schafer & Keith, 1981), as Hatfield et al. (1985) themselves point out, this effect is often not obtained (Berg & McQuinn, 1986; Traupmann, Hatfield, & Sprecher, 1981). Interestingly, Berg (1984) has actually observed equity to *decrease* over time in roommate relationships.

Still other evidence suggesting that an equity rule may not be considered the most desirable for intimate relationships comes from work by Clark, Mills, and their colleagues. They have found evidence that, when led to desire a friendship or romantic relationship with another (or when actually having such a relationship) but not when led to expect a more business-like relationship, subjects react negatively to receiving specific repayments for benefits given (Clark & Mills, 1979). They also react negatively to receiving requests for repayments of benefits received (Clark & Mills, 1979). Finally, they do not keep careful track of individual inputs into joint tasks, for which there will be a joint reward that must be divided as one would expect if they were trying to carefully follow an equity rule (Clark, 1984; Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1989). Indeed there is some evidence that they actually "bend over backward" to avoid keeping track of such inputs (Clark, 1984, Study 1).

Evidence Regarding an Equality Rule

Other theorists have argued that it is not equity but rather equality that governs the giving and receiving of benefits in at least some intimate relationships. For instance Deutsch (1975, 1985) has argued that use of an equality norm should promote a sense of solidarity in friendships and thus, presumably, ought to be used in such relationships.³

Advocates of an equality rule as the rule applying to intimate relationships can also cite evidence consistent with their claim. For example, Austin (1980) predicted and found that, when distributing rewards after a task, roommates (who presumably are likely to be friends) tended to divide resources equally, regardless of whether they had contributed more or less to the task than the other person. In contrast, strangers tended to follow an equity rule, or what Austin called a merit rule, if they had contributed more than the other and an equality rule if they had contributed less. In another study, Greenberg (1983) had college students read one of three stories describing a lunch meeting between two persons. In all cases, one student ordered a large meal costing four times as much as the small snack ordered by the other student. In one story each student agreed to pay the exact amount of his or her meal. In a second, they agreed to split the bill equally. In a third, nothing was said about how the bill would be divided. Subjects perceived the diners who divided the reward equally as liking each other more, having a closer relationship, being better friends, and being more likely to be involved with one another in the future than diners who divided their checks equitably or those whose social-exchange rule was unspecified.

Finally, there is some evidence for equality being the preferred norm in intimate relationships among studies in which children have served as the subjects. Lerner (1974, Study 3) has found that instructing children that another child with whom they will be working on a task is their *partner* and member of their *team* (as opposed to mentioning nothing about the relationship) shifts those children's choice of a distribution rule for a jointly earned reward toward an "equality" rule and somewhat away from an "equity" rule. This move held whether the child had contributed considerably more or considerably less to the task. If one assumes that the "partner/team" instructions increased the children's tendency to view their relationship as an intimate one, perhaps as something akin to a friendship, then this too can be taken as support for the applicability of an equity rule to intimate relationships.

³Note, however, that Deutsch also has suggested that a need-based rule will be applied in relationships such as family relationships.

In addition, Benton (1971) reports some evidence for young girls showing a greater preference for an equality norm when working with friends than when working with nonfriends. (An analogous preference for equality when paired with a friend as opposed to a nonfriend, however, was not observed for boys.) Finally, Pataki, Shapiro, and Clark (1994) have reported a study in which first- and third-grade children worked with a partner on a joint task, performed better than their partner, and were given a reward that they were asked to divide between themselves and their partner. Overall children tended to divide the reward equally. Most important for the present point, though, both first and third graders showed a greater preference for an equality relative to an equity rule when working with a friend than when working with another classmate—an effect that was marginal among first graders but significant among third graders.

Evidence Regarding a Need-Based Rule

Still other theorists have argued that members of intimate relationships, as contrasted with members of other relationships, believe they should adhere to a need-based rule for allocating resources. That is, benefits should be given in response to needs as those needs arise on the part of each person (e.g., Deutsch, 1975, 1985 for family relationships; Lamm & Schwinger, 1980, 1983; Mills & Clark, 1982).

Researchers with this view can also come up with reasonable evidence to support their claim. For instance, Lamm and Schwinger (1980) had subjects read stories about two students who had written an essay together. They put the same amount of effort into it and received a joint monetary reward. Both needed to buy textbooks, but one needed four times as much money as the other. Subjects were asked how they would divide the money between the two. The needier person was awarded a significantly higher share when the recipients were portrayed as friends than when they were described as being casually acquainted. This was true for both male and female allocators and true regardless of whether the cause for the needier person's greater need was internal or external. In a follow-up study, Lamm and Schwinger (1983) used a similar procedure but varied whether subjects were specifically told to allocate the profit justly versus simply being told to allocate the profit. Again, when recipients were friends, the needier person received significantly more than half the profit regardless of the instructions. (When recipients were mere acquaintances, the needier person received more than half the profit only when subjects were specifically requested to allocate justly).

Other research supporting the idea that people believe in a need-based allocation rule in intimate relationships comes from an ongoing program of research conducted by Clark, often in collaboration with Mills (e.g., Clark & Mills, 1979; Mills & Clark, 1982). The two have differentiated communal and exchange relationships. Communal relationships supposedly often are exemplified by relationships between family members, friends, and romantic relationships, in other words, the type of relationships referred to as "intimate" in this chapter. Exchange relationships are supposedly often exemplified by relationships between strangers (who anticipate remaining strangers), acquaintances, and people who conduct business with one another.

In several studies, Clark and her colleagues have observed that subjects led to desire or having existing communal relationships with one another are more responsive to one another's needs than are those led to desire or having existing exchange relationships with one another. For instance, subjects led to desire a communal relationship with one another kept more careful track of the other person's needs when that other was working on a task and there was no clear opportunity for the other to reciprocate than did those led to desire an exchange relationship (Clark, Mills & Powell, 1986). Further, Clark et al. (1989) conceptually replicated this finding in a study comparing the behavior of people in ongoing friendships with that of pairs of strangers. In addition, subjects led to desire a communal relationship have been observed to help the other more and to be more responsive to the other's sadness than have those led to desire an exchange relationship (Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987). Finally, members of communal relationships show greater improvements in mood after having been induced to help the other (Williamson & Clark, 1989; 1992) and react more positively to the other's expressions of emotions (Clark & Taraban, 1991) than do members of exchange relationships.

Evidence Regarding Simple Reinforcements

The confusion regarding which resource-allocation rule best describes what people believe should happen in intimate relationships does not end with those advocating a need-based rule. Still other researchers, such as Cate et al. (1985) and Huston and Burgess (1979), have argued that all that really matters to people is the absolute amount of rewards they receive. The more rewards, the happier are members of the relationship, according to these researchers. There is empirical evidence for this.

Cate et al. (1985) administered questionnaires to a large group of

students regarding their dating relationships. Equity was measured through Walster, Walster and Traupmann's (1978) global measure. Equality was measured through a subset of questions from that scale. In other words, relationships were considered equal when a respondent's and partner's outcomes were seen as equal. Reward levels were assessed simply by counting the amount of rewards participants reported receiving within Foa and Foa's (1980) six resource areas of love, status, services, goods, money, and information. Respondents were contacted three months later and again seven months later, by which time many of the relationships had broken up. At both times neither equity nor equality successfully predicted stability. (Indeed, the results were slightly opposite in direction to what would have supported either rule.) However, higher reward levels at the beginning of the study did successfully predict greater stability of relationships.

In two other similar studies, Cate, Lloyd, Henton, and Larson (1982) and Martin (1985) found that a measure of total rewards received was superior to measures of global equity or equality in predicting relationship satisfaction. Martin found that this was true regardless of whether the couple involved was "traditional" in terms of gender-role orientation (i.e., a male-dominated dyad) or was "modern" (i.e., a shared-responsibilities-and-benefits dyad). Further, Desmarais and Lerner (1989), Michaels et al. (1984), and Hansen (1987) have all reported studies in which the absolute reward level was a powerful predictor of satisfaction or adjustment in romantic relationships or marriages—accounting for more variance than measures of equity or equality in the Desmarais and Lerner and in the Michaels et al. studies.

Finally, a study by Hays (1985) also offers support for the idea that the absolute level of rewards received in a relationship is a good predictor of success in intimate relationships—this time in same-sex friendships. He asked new college students to consider two same-sex individuals whom they had just met and with whom they thought they might become friends. Among other things, subjects indicated what benefits they received from these relationships and rated the intensity and intimacy of those relationships at several points during their first semester at school. The number of benefits received from the relationships was highly positively correlated with friendship intensity at all times. Interestingly, however, and contrary to the type of simple reinforcement being discussed here, perceived relationship *costs* were either unrelated or significantly positively related (depending on the particular session) to rated relationship intensity. Indeed, a measure of benefits-*plus*-costs scores was more highly correlated with friendship intensity than was a measure of benefits-*minus*-costs.

Review and Some Questions

So, which resource-allocation rule best applies to intimate relationships? Adherence to which one will be observed most often and will predict satisfaction and stability best? There is evidence for equity, evidence for equality, evidence consistent with the use of a need-based rule, and evidence consistent with the view that only the overall level of rewards makes a difference. To make matters even more complicated, Deutsch (1985) and Reis (1984) have suggested many other possible rules, any of which might also be applied within the context of intimate relationships. For instance, resources *could* be divided according to power or according to status in intimate relationships in which differences in those variables exist. We have little doubt that, if one sought support for the application of distributive-justice norms based on power and status, in at least a subset of intimate relationships, one could find some. So where do we go from here?

Clarifying the Issues

The current state of research on resource-allocation rules in intimate relationships is confusing. However, as mentioned at the start of this chapter, we think keeping three things in mind when trying to make sense of research in this area will help. First, instead of separate groups independently continuing to search for evidence for the one rule that applies to intimate relationships while ignoring the accumulated evidence from other groups, we believe theorists in this area should devote some effort toward *integrating* existing findings and theoretical ideas. That is, we need to ask how all existing data can be explained in a sensible way. With an admittedly clear bias, we will suggest that all such research can be considered to be at least consistent with the idea that a norm of mutual responsibility for needs is the cultural ideal for intimate relationships.

Second, we believe some effort must be made toward discovering the boundary conditions under which people believe their ideal norm or norms *should* hold. Are there simply two categories of relationships—intimate relationships in which a given rule always applies and non-intimate relationships in which different rules may apply? Or are things more complicated? We think the latter is the case and will discuss that after commenting on integrating research. Third, we need to recognize and make use of the important distinction between society's ideal (or our own ideal) regarding the resource-allocation rule for intimate relationships and what really happens in relationships. People do not always live

up to ideals. We need to know when they will and when they will not. We also need to know *who* is most likely to follow the rules and who is least likely to do so. Further, we need to know what happens when they do follow the rules and what happens when they do not. We discuss this issue last.

Fitting Existing Research Together—Are Findings as Inconsistent as They Seem?

We start with the first issue, integration. How can we fit together the diverse sorts of findings reviewed above? Are these results really as inconsistent as they seem on first consideration? No matter what one's *a priori* view, we believe researchers ought to be thinking about this issue.

Our own *a priori* view is that a communal rule, that is, feeling responsible for and responsive to the other's needs without expecting repayments in return, is the ideal that most people hold for their intimate relationships. Each person should benefit the other in response to that other's needs without expecting specific repayments but reasonably expecting the other to be responsive to his/her needs if and when those needs arise and if the other has the ability to do so. Thus, if we take seriously our own advice that integration is needed, our job is to explain existing data that seemingly support different views in a manner consistent with our own view.

We start with equity. How can we account for the fact that people who report a sense of global equity in their relationships also report being more satisfied with their relationship? We acknowledge it is possible that carefully following an equity rule over the entire course of the relationship could account for these observed associations. However, we are skeptical of this explanation for the link between reporting a sense of global equity and relationship satisfaction. Our skepticism is generated by some findings already described. For example, people who are led to desire communal relationships and those having existing communal relationships have been observed *not* to carefully keep track of individual inputs into joint tasks (Clark, 1984; Clark et al. 1989). If people were carefully adhering to an equity rule, this should not be the case since, even if they do not want repayments immediately, they should still keep track of who has contributed what to the relationship.

So what *is* going on? Can we account for these findings in a manner consistent with our own view that mutual responsibility for needs as they arise is the ideal for intimate relationships? We see several possible explanations that all rest at least partially on the fact that all the studies we

could locate supporting the use of an equity rule in intimate relationships were cross-sectional, retrospective surveys. Given this fact, one possibility is that there are two simultaneous consequences of using a rule of mutual responsibility for one another's needs. First, it may result in an increase in satisfaction in the relationship. Second, it may usually (though not necessarily always) result in more objectively equitable than inequitable relationships over the long run (assuming roughly equal needs of most partners). This could explain the observed association between people's overall sense of equity and their overall satisfaction with their relationships without assuming that they actually strove to follow an equity norm in their day-to-day lives.

Alternatively, it is possible that feeling satisfied (for whatever reason) leads one to an overall sense that things are fine with the relationship, and this, in turn, leads to higher reports of overall equity. This view could explain an association between a sense of equity and satisfaction without the assumption that an equity rule per se actually had guided behavior in the relationship or even that partners believe they should follow such a rule. The only necessary assumption is that reporting that one's relationship is equitable seems like a good thing to say when one is asked about one's relationship. (We assume that, if respondents had been asked instead whether they followed a need-based rule for dividing rewards in their relationships, agreement that they did would *also* correlate positively with reports of satisfaction.)

Still another explanation for the results supporting the application of an equity rule is that it is *dissatisfaction* in a relationship (perhaps created by a partner's lack of responsiveness to one's needs) that leads people to begin calculating exactly who contributes what to a relationship and who gets what benefits from it. Such calculating may in turn lead to global perceptions of inequity (which may often be well-founded, particularly if one person's needs are being selectively ignored). This process too could produce the observed positive correlations between perceptions of overall equity and satisfaction without the assumption that following an equity rule leads to satisfaction.

We cannot be sure what the correct explanation is. Our point is simply that results revealing that a global sense of equity is associated with satisfaction in a relationship or with the stability of relationships are not necessarily at odds with people holding the view that resources in intimate relationships ideally should be distributed according to the respective needs of members of that relationship.

What about equality? Is a finding such as Austin's (1980), that observers recommend dividing jointly earned resources equally, at odds with a norm of mutual responsibility to needs? We do not think so. Is a finding such as that of Greenberg (1983), that if diners divide the cost of

a meal equally they are perceived as better friends than if they divide checks equitably or if no method of division is mentioned, at odds with a norm of mutual responsibility for needs? Again, we do not think so. After all, if one adheres to a need-based rule but has no information about needs, as was the case for the allocators in Austin's study and the judges in Greenberg's study, then it seems reasonable to assume that needs are equal and that rewards and costs ought to be divided equally.

To really test a need-based rule *versus* an equality one within the paradigms used by Austin or Greenberg, a manipulation of needs would have to be included in the design of the study. If equality was the preferred allocation strategy *even* in the presence of information that needs were *unequal* (in a study similar to Austin's) or if use of an equality norm led to greater perceived friendship than use of a need-based norm (in a study such as Greenberg's), then we would start to question whether a need-based rule is the ideal for intimate relationships. We do not believe that would happen.

Finally, can we deal with the data that have been taken to indicate that all members of intimate relationships really care about is the absolute number of rewards they receive? We think so. First consider the fact that in most studies supporting this view (i.e., Cate et al., 1982, 1985; Martin, 1985) the researchers tested whether measures of equity, equality, or rewards best predicted satisfaction with relationships or stability of relationships. In *none* of the studies we located that simultaneously assessed support for a number of different rules were measures of responsiveness to needs collected. So, to begin with, we note that if a good measure of mutual responsiveness to needs *had* been collected it might have been an even better predictor of relationship satisfaction and stability. Second, we also point out that advocates of a need-based rule would expect the number of rewards received to predict satisfaction and stability since the extent to which the other benefits one seems a reasonable measure of the extent to which the other is responding to one's needs. Thus, the results of the Cate et al. (1982, 1985) and Martin (1985) studies actually can be viewed as entirely consistent with a need-based rule governing intimate relationships.

Third, it is noteworthy that the norm of mutual responsivity to needs suggests that a measure that takes into account not only what a respondent receives from his or her partner but also what that person gives to his or her partner should be an even better indicator of relationship success than should a measure of rewards alone. This implies that a measure of rewards *plus* costs ought to be an even better predictor of relationship satisfaction than a measure of rewards *minus* costs—interestingly, just the opposite of what an advocate of a simple reinforcement view might predict. In this regard, it is interesting that both Rusbult (1980) and Hays

(1985) have reported studies in which measures of costs did not negatively predict relationship success, as one might expect from the reinforcement view. Further, and more important for our own argument, as already noted, Hays actually found that an index of rewards *plus* costs was a better predictor of relationship success than was an index of rewards minus costs. This fits well with our view of mutual responsiveness to needs being the ideal most people hold for their intimate relationships. After all, if both people follow this rule, they will not only receive rewards from the other (which is why rewards should predict relationship satisfaction), they will also incur costs in the process of benefiting the other (which is why rewards *plus* costs should be an even better predictor, as Hays observed).

In sum, the existing literature on what norm prevails for distributing rewards in intimate relationships *is* quite confusing. However, none of the research to date is clearly inconsistent with the idea that the prevailing norm for such relationships is that each member ought to be responsive to the other's needs to the best of his/her ability.

Establishing Boundary Conditions

To this point, we have argued that mutual responsiveness to needs is the prevailing norm for allocating resources in intimate relationships such as friendships, family relationships, and romantic relationships. In other words, we have argued that these types of relationships are what Clark and Mills (1979; Mills & Clark, 1982) have called communal relationships. But do people believe these rules should *always* apply in each of these types of relationships? We do not think so. This leads to our second point: we believe that to make even better sense of this literature and to make research progress, we need to establish what people believe to be, implicitly or explicitly, the boundary conditions for the applicability of this norm.

Let us give an example of what we mean by this. While Clark and Mills have talked about family relationships, romantic relationships, and friendships as often exemplifying communal relationships (in which members feel a mutual responsibility for one another's needs), this is *not* the same as saying that communal rules are always followed in these relationships. It is not even the same as saying that people feel these rules should always be followed in these relationships regardless of circumstances. Boundary conditions on the applicability of communal norms exist in most relationships—even those considered to be intimate.

Mills and Clark (1982; Mills, Clark, & Ford, 1992; Clark & Mills, 1993) have pointed out that although the communal/exchange distinction *is* a

qualitative one (i.e., the communal norm *is* in our view qualitatively distinct from the exchange norm), there is also an important quantitative aspect to communal relationships. In particular, communal relationships vary in strength—an idea that implies some boundary conditions for the applicability of communal (need-based) norms for distributing benefits in intimate relationships.

What is meant by strength? The stronger the communal relationship, the greater the obligation one feels for the needs of the other and the more motivated one is to meet those needs. Also, in strong communal relationships the needs of the partner take precedence over needs of others with whom one may have weaker communal relationships. Consider the fact that, while one may have a communal relationship with one's neighbor, one's best friend, and one's child, these relationships are not equally strong. The relationship with the best friend is probably stronger than that with the neighbor. The relationship with the child is probably stronger than that with the best friend. So the child's needs take precedence over the friend's, which take precedence over the neighbor's.

The strength of a communal relationship can be thought of in terms of the costs one would be willing to bear to benefit the other. The stronger the relationship, the greater the costs one will incur to meet the other's needs without expecting specific repayment. Thus, one might be willing to take the neighbor, the friend, and the child each out to lunch on their respective birthdays. However, it seems likely one would only be willing to pay college tuition for the child. The cost of tuition clearly exceeds the "cost boundary" for the others. And, as soon as one crosses that boundary, one either switches rules or avoids the transaction altogether. Thus, for instance, if one's neighbor needed college tuition, one would either not discuss the possibility of providing it at all (which seems most likely), or at most one might loan it to her, expecting specific repayment and perhaps even interest. The sort of "cost boundary" that we are discussing is depicted in Figure 1.

Our general point here is that, regardless of which rule a researcher promulgates as applicable to intimate relationships, it is likely to be productive to attempt to specify boundary conditions on the applicability of these rules. We have specified one such boundary condition on the applicability of a communal rule—that is, the cost of providing a benefit to the other. Within certain cost bounds communal rules will apply. Beyond those costs, no rule or exchange rule applies. Other boundary conditions could surely be identified. Whatever boundary conditions turn out to exist, knowing about the boundaries should allow one to explain why we may observe more than one sort of rule being used in one person's interactions with another.

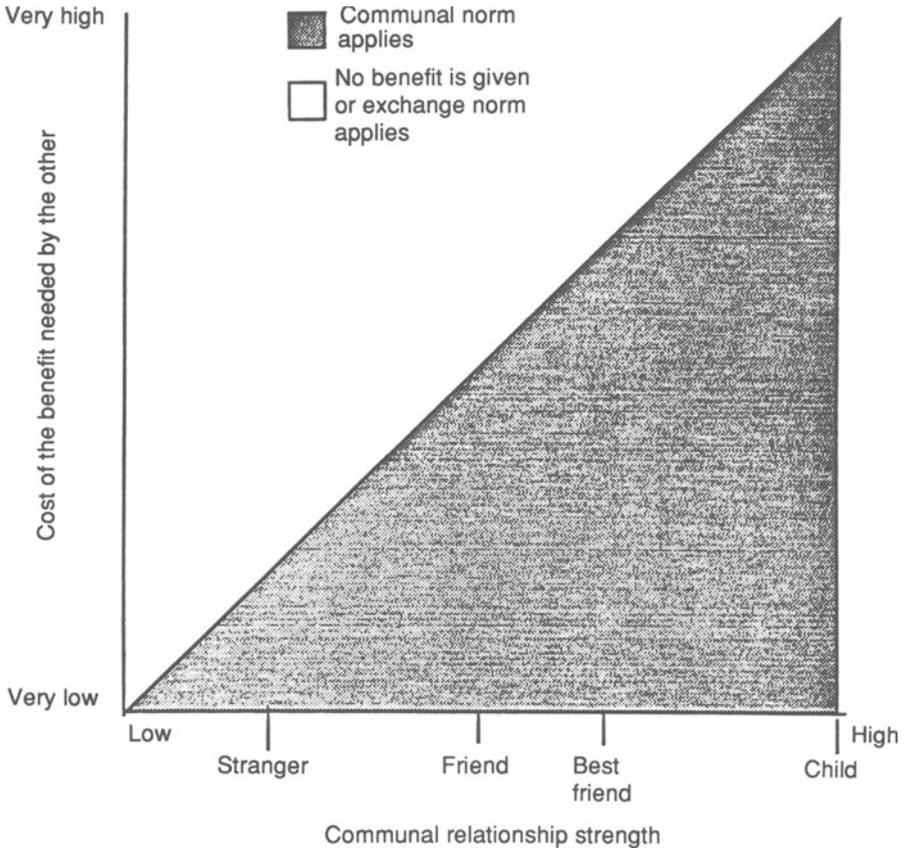


Figure 1. Willingness to follow communal norms (i.e., to provide a benefit to meet the other's need without expecting repayment) as a function of strength of the communal relationship and cost of the benefit.

Distinguishing Ideals from Reality

Now we turn to our third point: if we really want to understand norms governing resource allocation in intimate relationships, we need to go even further than the attempt to explain others' results in terms of our theoretical framework and the establishment of the boundaries within which people think a given rule ought to be applied. Specifically, we also need to recognize in our research that, although society and individuals may have an ideal norm for intimate relationships and although following that norm may predict satisfaction, people simply do not always follow

ideals. As Deutsch (1985) has pointed out, "Even when strong, clear, normative frameworks exist, some individuals will be more strongly motivated by other concerns than by their moral obligations. This might reflect a weak commitment to the relationship or it might indicate other concerns that are sufficiently strong to override a moral commitment." (p. 100).

We need to document when and by whom the norms people believe are ideal for intimate relationships are most closely followed and when and by whom they are not followed. To date, we have not done much of this in the area of rules governing intimate relationships. However, to give the reader a feel for the kind of thing we think would be helpful, we can draw on work in a related area.

In particular, equity has been fairly well established as the ideal norm for allocating pay in business or business-like settings. One can find good and clear evidence of its use in such settings. But the ideal does get violated. For example, Rusbult and her colleagues have conducted a number of studies showing that, even though resource allocators in business situations believe pay should be based on merit, they in fact take employees' mobility into account (Rusbult, Lowery, Hubbard, Matavankin, & Neises, 1988). Given two employees with equal merit, the one perceived to be more mobile (perhaps because her spouse is not anchored in the area) will receive a higher raise. In other words, while allocators may have ideals, they do violate them, given sufficient incentives to do so.

Certainly the same must happen in intimate relationships. That is, although in our view mutual responsiveness to one another's needs is the ideal for intimate relationships and although its use may be correlated with satisfaction, it is nonetheless an ideal. It undoubtedly does get violated. In other words, other principles for resource allocation *will* be used in friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships, even though members of those relationships, if pinned down, would probably readily acknowledge that they ideally ought not do this. What we need to discover is *when* the ideal is likely to be followed and when it is not. We also need to know *who* tends to follow it well and who does not. While, as already noted, not much work has been done in this regard, we can give the reader some preliminary thoughts on this.

One factor that may strongly influence how closely individuals will adhere to the ideal rule is the stage of development of their relationships. We believe the ideal rule, within boundaries, for friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships is a communal rule of mutual responsiveness to needs. However, we think how closely members of such relationships will adhere to this ideal rule will vary over the course of development of normal and potentially stable friendships and romantic

relationships—and not in the manner we have most often heard suggested. What others have often suggested in response to hearing about the communal/exchange work is that relationships destined to become communal probably start out following an exchange rule and then gradually become more communal over time.

We do not share that belief. As Berg and Clark (1986) have pointed out, we often know whether we desire or are destined to have a communal relationship (as opposed to an exchange or no relationship) with a particular other person soon after meeting that person. Certainly, most parents anticipate a communal relationship with their child even before that child is born. Freshman college students who are placed together as roommates undoubtedly hope they will be friends even before meeting. A person who is available and anxious for a new romantic partner and/or a person seeking new friends may come to desire and/or anticipate a communal relationship with an attractive, friendly other soon after meeting that other.

Thus, we often *start out* a relationship by closely adhering to communal rules and avoiding use of other rules (in part to establish the relationship, in part because that is the sort of continuing relationship we want). We may also be especially attentive to the other's responsiveness to us early on in the relationship in order to assess the other's interest in us. Moreover, we suspect people bend over backward *not* to behave as though they were following other rules at the beginning of the relationship, lest the partner get the wrong idea. Likewise, they will probably be especially attentive to whether the other shows signs of following the "wrong" rule early in a relationship. Later, as the relationship is more established, people may become less vigilant about their own violations of communal rules and more tolerant of the other's violations.

Some evidence exists for a decrease in vigilance about following (or at least appearing to follow) other norms. Specifically, in some work on record keeping during joint tasks for which there will be a joint reward we included three studies (see Clark, 1984). In one study, desire for a communal or an exchange relationship was manipulated; in two studies, the behavior of members of real pairs of friends was compared with that of strangers. In these studies we gave pairs of subjects a task on which they were to work jointly. If they worked with different-color pens it was obvious who had done what. If they worked using the same-color pens it was unclear who had done what. All subjects were provided with two pens, one of the same color as that used by their partner, one of a different color. If they just picked one by chance, the color should be the same half the time and different half the time. That is not what happened. When pairs were composed of strangers who expected to remain strangers, they

almost always kept track by using different color pens. When they anticipated or had communal relationships, however, they actually tended to avoid choosing different-color pens. In other words, they were avoiding exchange behaviors, and this effect was significant. What is important for the present point is that the avoidance effect was particularly pronounced in the “just beginning” communal relationships as compared with the established communal relationships as shown in Figure 2.

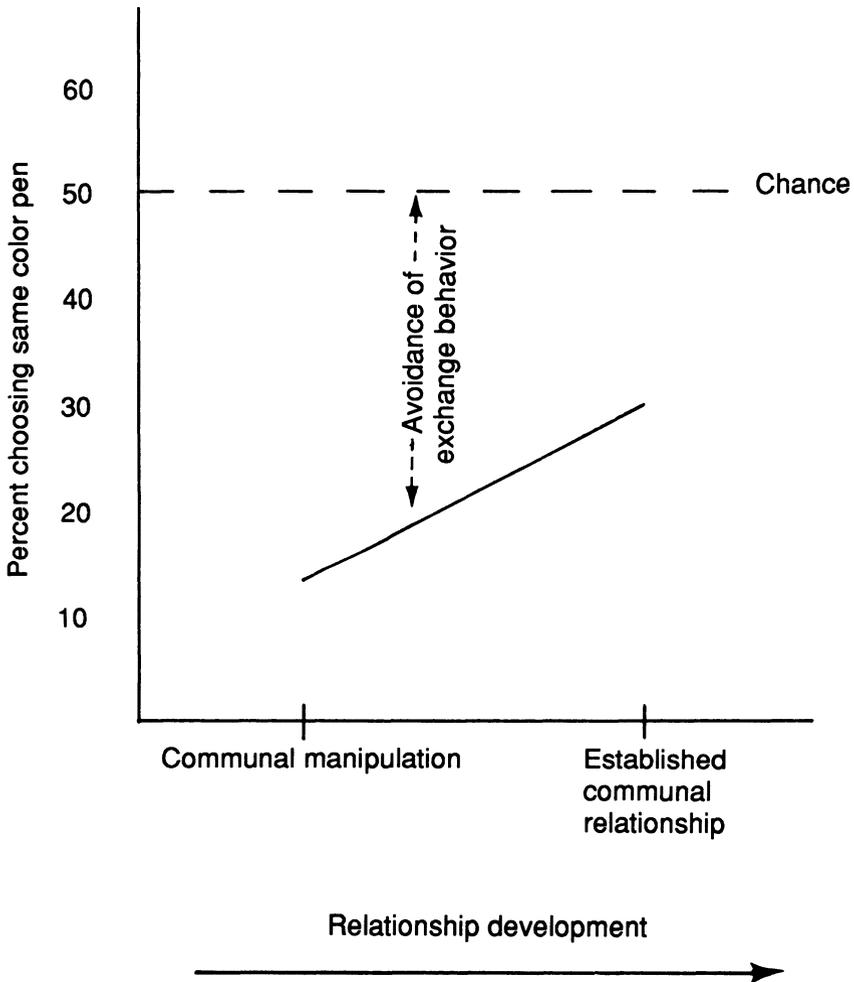


Figure 2. Avoidance of appearing to follow an exchange norm (by keeping track of inputs into joint tasks) as a function of length of the communal relationship.

Thus, one determinant of following the ideal of mutual responsivity to one another's needs and avoiding following other rules may be stage of relationship. There are undoubtedly many other such determinants. For instance, we suspect the ideal will be more closely adhered to the more we like the other. We may have two grandmothers, one of whom is much more likable than the other. We may feel strongly *obligated* to treat them both in equal terms communally. However, we may *actually* be more responsive to the needs of the one we like.

Another factor likely to influence adherence to the ideal is our current level of satisfaction with a given relationship. We suspect that low levels of satisfaction with an intimate relationship will sometimes prompt violations of the ideal norm of mutual responsiveness to needs and sometimes prompt closer adherence to that norm. Consider dissatisfaction prompting violations first. If one is dissatisfied with the relationship, perhaps because the other is not attending to one's needs (despite the ability to do so), one may become unhappy and less motivated to live up to the norm oneself.⁴

Trust that the other cares for the individual and will meet his/her needs may drop. As a consequence, with or without explicitly discussing it the couple may shift to an exchange norm. They will only do things for the other if they anticipate being repaid or in response to benefits given to them in the past. At this point, one may still have a marriage, and the *ideal* both people hold for marriage may still be one of mutual responsibility for needs; but the relationship is no longer a communal one. There has been a qualitative shift in the nature of the relationship. Often the deterioration may go even further, with each member behaving in a purely self-interested way. At this point, we suspect, the relationship may well disintegrate (see Holmes, 1981, for a compatible view regarding distressed intimate relationships). Alternatively, if the relationship is particularly valued a person may react to dissatisfaction by adhering *more* closely to the ideal norms in order to improve or to save the relationship.

⁴It is important to note that this is not the same as saying that the basis for the communal relationships in which need-based norms apply is really the same as following an exchange norm with a longer time frame and broader set of benefits given and received as some might interpret responding to the other's lack of attention to one's needs by failing to meet their needs to mean. We believe that in a communal relationship, as long as the other meets one's needs to the best of his or her ability, one will be satisfied *even if* one benefits the other more than the other benefits one. It will only be when one's own needs are neglected that one will become dissatisfied. Further, we believe that in a communal relationship one will become dissatisfied if one's needs are neglected by the other even if, in an exchange norm sense, such neglect would be justified on the basis of the level of benefits one had given the other in the past in response to his or her needs.

To reiterate, our third point is that, no matter what general resource-allocation rule one advocates as the ideal that applies to friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships, we need to ask under what circumstances it is most and least likely to actually be followed and who is most and least likely to follow it. We also need to ask what the consequences are of not living up to the norm. Undoubtedly, the violations will often be tolerated and even considered normal. At other times, they will lead to relationship deterioration or even dissolution or to efforts to improve the relationship.

Summary

We began this chapter by noting that the literature on resource-allocation rules that apply to friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships is quite confusing. Evidence supports use of an equity norm, use of an equality norm, and use of a norm of mutual responsibility for needs. Evidence also suggests that the only thing that makes a difference to relationship satisfaction is the number of reinforcements people receive from the other. Given the state of the literature, it may appear that researchers taking various perspectives are at a stalemate.

We then addressed the question of how we might begin to make some progress toward resolving issues in this area. We suggest three strategies. One involves researchers with differing viewpoints paying more attention to others' data and attempting to integrate it with their own views. A second involves establishing the boundary conditions within friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships that people implicitly or explicitly apply to whatever rule is being advocated. The third involves clearly recognizing the distinction between the norm or ideal that people believe should apply to intimate relationships within whatever boundaries have been established and what really happens. With a clear bias toward believing that a norm of mutual responsibility to one another's needs—sometimes with implicit or explicit boundary conditions—is the ideal for friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships, we have tried to illustrate how each of these strategies may prove useful.

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