

---

# Willingness to express emotion: The impact of relationship type, communal orientation, and their interaction

---

MARGARET S. CLARK<sup>a</sup> AND ELI J. FINKEL<sup>b</sup>  
<sup>a</sup>*Carnegie Mellon University* and <sup>b</sup>*Northwestern University*

## Abstract

This research examines the effects of relationship type (close vs. business), a personality variable (dispositional communal orientation), and the interaction of these two variables on individuals' willingness to express emotions to relationship partners. Results supported our predictions that (a) people are willing to express more emotion in relationships likely to be high in communal strength than in relationships likely to be low in communal strength, (b) individuals high in communal orientation are willing to express more emotion than those who are low in communal orientation, and (c) relationship type and communal orientation interact to influence willingness to express two emotions that reveal weakness and vulnerability (fear and anxiety). Specifically, communal orientation had little effect on willingness to express fear and anxiety in business relationships, whereas high relative to low communal orientation was associated with willingness to express more fear and anxiety within close relationships.

Studies on the expression and suppression of emotion are commonplace in psychology. Research has revealed much about how emotion is expressed on the face (Keltner, Ekman, Gonzaga, & Beer, 2003), in bodily postures (Riskind, 1984), in vocal tone (Scherer, Johnstone, & Klasmeyer, 2003), and in verbal

behavior (Reilly & Seibert, 2003). Moreover, much is known about what happens to people's cognition and physiology when emotion is expressed relative to when it is suppressed (Gross & Levenson, 1993, 1997; Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, 2001; Richards & Gross, 1999, 2000). Yet, despite considerable evidence that emotions most often occur and are expressed within social contexts (Babad & Wallbott, 1986; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; DeRivera, 1984; Guerrero & Anderson, 2000; Schwartz & Shaver, 1987), almost all research on the expression and suppression of emotion ignores social context. It is our belief that to fully understand suppression and expression of emotion, social context must be taken into account.

We believe that the nature of the relationship a person perceives he or she has with another person to whom emotion might be expressed is a potent determinant of whether that person will express or suppress emotion. More specifically, we believe people are more willing to express emotions indicative of the state of their welfare (a category that

---

Margaret S. Clark, Department of Psychology, Carnegie Mellon University; Eli J. Finkel, Department of Psychology, Northwestern University.

This research was supported by a pilot grant from the Pittsburgh Mind-Body Center, funded itself by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) (grants HL65111 and HL 65112), by National Science Foundation (NSF) Grant BCS-9983417, and by National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH) Training Grant T32 MH 19953. The ideas and conclusions expressed in the paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NHLBI, the NIMH, or the NSF.

We thank Steve Graham for comments on a previous draft of this article, and Kristin Boyd, Asia Eaton, Tara Hannan, and Khurram Naik for assistance with data collection and data entry.

Correspondence should be addressed to Margaret S. Clark, Carnegie Mellon University, Department of Psychology, Pittsburgh, PA 15213 or Eli J. Finkel, Northwestern University, Department of Psychology, Evanston, IL 60208.

includes most emotions) when they perceive that their partners have assumed a special responsibility for their welfare than when they perceive that their partners feel no special responsibility for their welfare.

The reasons are straightforward. Most emotions convey important information about the needs (or lack thereof) of the person experiencing the emotion. Expressing the emotion conveys that information to others. If a person is with a partner who, the person believes, cares about his or her welfare, then that person is likely to believe expressed emotion will be met with responsiveness to his or her needs. For instance, a fearful person in the presence of a caring partner should have the sense that expressing fear will elicit reassurance, comfort, and/or aid in eliminating the fear-inducing stimulus. A happy person in the presence of a caring partner should have the sense that expressing happiness will elicit a sharing of that happiness and, perhaps, the partner's help in prolonging or repeating whatever it was that made the person happy (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, in press).

If, on the other hand, a person is with a partner who, the person believes, does not care about his or her welfare, that person should be reluctant to express emotion. Emotion expression is unlikely to elicit a supportive response and the partner may even exploit vulnerabilities that are revealed. For instance, a person about to be interviewed for a job may feel fearful but also sense that expressing fear to the interviewer will not elicit support and, indeed, is likely to cause harm. The fear may be suppressed lest it elicit a bad first impression and loss of a job opportunity. Similarly, a person who is happy at having found just the right house to buy may be reluctant to express that happiness to the real estate agent lest the agent use the knowledge to urge the owner to hold out for a high price.

In the present paper, we provide a brief review of extant literature suggesting that relationship context is likely to be a potent determinant of expressing emotion. We also review extant evidence suggesting that a person's chronic tendency to see close

relationship partners, in general, as caring is associated with freely expressing emotion. Then, we present a study in which we test the hypotheses that (a) people will report being more willing to express emotion in relationships likely to be high in communal strength (i.e., relationships characterized by mutual, noncontingent responsiveness to needs), (b) people high in chronic tendencies to be communally oriented (i.e., high in tendencies to give and expect noncontingent responsiveness to partner needs) will report greater willingness to express emotion, and (c), for emotions that are especially likely to reveal vulnerabilities (e.g., fear, anxiety), relationship type will *interact* with individual differences in people's communal orientation such that level of communal orientation will have a larger impact on willingness to express such emotions in normatively high-strength communal relationships than in relationships that are normatively low in communal strength.

*Prior work suggesting that relationship type should and does matter to expression of emotion*

Consider first arguments and extant evidence suggesting that relationship type should and does influence expression of emotion. Clark and Mills (1979, 1993) and Mills and Clark (1982) draw a distinction between two qualitatively different types of relationships that can exist between two people. In an exchange relationship, one gives benefits to the partner either in response to a previously received benefit from that partner or with the expectation that the partner will repay. In a communal relationship, in contrast, one gives benefits to the partner noncontingently in response to the partner's needs or to demonstrate concern for the partner. In the present article, the term *high-strength communal relationship* refers to a relationship in which individuals do care about (and are likely to be responsive to) each other's needs. The term *low-strength communal relationship* refers to a relationship in which individuals do not assume any special responsibility for each other's welfare, and if they do benefit one another, they most likely do so on an exchange basis.

Importantly, research in this tradition has demonstrated that when a high-strength communal relationship is perceived to exist (relative to when such a relationship is not perceived to exist), partners are more attentive to one another's needs (Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1989; Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986) and respond to perceived needs of a partner with noncontingent helping (Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987). They also feel good about having provided help (Williamson & Clark, 1989, 1992).

The implications of the communal/exchange distinction for expression of emotion follow straightforwardly. If people feel more responsibility for each other's welfare in high-strength communal than in low-strength communal relationships and if emotions convey information about needs, then more emotion should be expressed in high-strength communal relationships. This should happen because the partner is more likely to respond with care and less likely to respond with exploitation.

Of course, this hypothesis being true depends on our second assumption, which is that emotions do convey information about needs. Existing research supports this assumption as well. Emotion researchers have long recognized that whereas emotion, *as experienced internally*, communicates information to the self and may motivate one to attend to one's own needs (Frijda, 1993; Simon, 1967), most emotions as they are *outwardly expressed* convey information about one's needs to others (Levenson, 1994; Miller & Leary, 1992). For instance, expressing fear or anxiety indicates that a person is feeling threatened and might appreciate receiving comfort or assistance in eliminating the source of the threat. Expressing anger indicates that a person feels unjustifiably wronged and could benefit from a partner's empathy or help in redressing the unfair situation. Expressing joy or happiness indicates that something good has happened, the person is not needy, and prolonging or celebrating what is good is likely to be welcomed.

Finally, prior research suggests that people selectively express emotion to close others (see Clark & Brissette, 2000, 2003; Clark,

Fitness, & Brissette, 2001, for reviews of relevant literature). For instance, many studies using a variety of methodological techniques (e.g., retrospective reports, daily diaries, emotion inductions followed by observations of social sharing, and asking participants to decide on topics to discuss with others) have found that sharing of emotional experiences occurs frequently but almost always within communal relationships. That is, emotion tends to be expressed to parents, family members, best friends, and romantic partners and rarely is expressed to people who do not belong to these circles (Clark & Taraban, 1991, study 2; Fitness, 2000; Pennebaker et al., 2001; Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, & Boca, 1991; Zeaman & Garber, 1996). Other studies offer evidence that when emotion is expressed, it is reacted to more positively both in terms of attraction toward the other (Clark & Taraban, 1991, study 1) and in terms of eliciting support (Clark et al., 1987) within the context of communal relationships than within the context of other relationships.

Our first hypothesis, then, is that people will express more emotion to partners with whom they are likely to have communal relationships (e.g., close relationships such as friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships).

*Prior work suggesting that individual differences in tendencies to trust close others ought to influence expression of emotion*

Extant research also supports our prediction that chronic individual differences in tendencies to perceive that close others care will influence expression of emotion over and above relationship type. Bias against perceiving that partners care (or, in other words, a tendency to perceive that others will not be responsive) has been captured in a number of theoretical constructs (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, in press), including avoidant attachment (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996), low self-esteem (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998), and low communal orientation (Clark et al.,

1987). People who are dispositionally low in tendencies to believe that others care should be prone to suppress rather than express emotions.

Supporting this idea are two studies examining links between attachment styles and expression of emotion within dating and marital relationships. In a first study (Feeney, 1995), members of dating couples completed an attachment measure as well as a measure of emotional control, which tapped participants' willingness to express or suppress anger, sadness, and anxiety. The more securely attached females were, the less likely they were to report suppressing these emotions when with their partners. The more securely attached males were, the less likely they were to report suppressing anxiety and sadness when with their partners. Similar results were obtained in a second study, this time with a marital sample (Feeney, 1999). More secure spouses reported less of a tendency to control or suppress anger, sadness, anxiety, happiness, love, and pride to the partner both when these emotions were caused by the partner and when they were caused by something not involving the partner (with the exception of wives' willingness to express partner-related pride). Importantly, in both studies, all correlations remained significant after controlling for the frequency and intensity of the experienced emotions (with the exception of wives' willingness to express partner-related love in the second study). These findings suggest that having a dispositional propensity to believe others are likely to care about one's needs should increase the likelihood of emotion expression.

In the present study, we used Clark et al.'s (1987) measure of individual differences in communal orientation (scores on which are typically positively correlated with scores on measures of secure vs. avoidant attachment) to tap people's dispositional tendencies to feel comfortable following communal norms within relationships that are normatively communal in our society (i.e., those relationships we tend to call "close"). Our second hypothesis is that higher levels of communal orientation will be associated with greater willingness to express emotion.

### *A possible interaction of relationship type and communal orientation influencing emotion expression*

We have just argued and presented evidence that both the nature of one's relationship with another person and one's general tendency to believe normatively close others care about one's welfare will influence expression of emotion. We further believe that these variables will interact with one another to influence expression of emotion, particularly when emotions reveal vulnerabilities.

Although we know of no existing evidence for this prediction, our rationale is straightforward. Everyone, no matter how trusting of normatively communal relationship partners, has relationships with many other people whom they do not expect to be especially responsive to their needs. Most strangers, acquaintances, and people with whom one does business fall into this group. People, in general, regardless of their biases to trust or distrust normatively communal partners, should express few emotions that reveal their vulnerabilities to such partners. Few people, for instance, express emotions such as fear and anxiety to casual acquaintances at their place of work. As a result, individual differences in tendencies to trust close others should be unimportant to determining emotion expression in such relationships. Instead, the impact of such individual differences in trust is likely to be manifested primarily within normatively communal relationships (Clark & Finkel, 2004). Our third hypothesis, then, is that willingness to express emotions indicating vulnerabilities will be more dependent upon level of communal orientation in close relationships than in business relationships.

*Choice of emotions to investigate.* Most emotions convey information about a person's needs. However, a limited number were investigated in the present study. We chose five: joy, happiness, anxiety, fear, and irritability. All convey information about needs, and we expected to obtain evidence to support our first two hypotheses with all five. However, these emotions differ in three

conceptual ways, one of which is relevant to our third hypothesis. First, the emotions differ in terms of the extent to which they indicate the presence of unfulfilled needs. Happiness and joy suggest that needs have been satisfied; fear, anxiety, and irritability suggest the presence of unfulfilled needs. Second, they differ in the extent to which they reveal vulnerabilities. Fear and anxiety convey high vulnerability because they are associated with the presence of needs, and they suggest that the person expressing them has a low sense of control and a high sense of uncertainty (Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003; Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Happiness, joy, and anger are associated with low vulnerability because the first two are associated with low levels of need and all three are associated with a high sense of control and certainty (Lerner & Keltner; Lerner et al. 2003; Smith & Ellsworth). Differences in revealed vulnerability account for our assertion that relationship type and chronic levels of communal orientation should interact to influence expression of fear and anxiety but not necessarily the other three emotions. Finally, the emotions differ in terms of the likelihood that they may be directed, malevolently, at one's partner. Anger is the sole emotion of the five that is often (but not always) malevolently directed at partners and may carry with it a negative evaluation of the partner (if that partner was a source of the anger.)

We chose to study all five of these emotions as it seemed to us that demonstrating support for our first two hypotheses across all five emotions, despite their differences, would clearly demonstrate considerable generalizability of our predicted effects.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were both partners from 88 heterosexual romantic couples. All participants met four requirements: (a) they had been involved in the romantic relationship for at least four months, (b) they were fluent English speakers, (c) they were between 18

and 25 years of age, and (d) both partners were willing to participate. Couples were recruited via advertisements in local newspapers, flyers posted on campus and in the local community, and notices placed on electronic bulletin boards. Each couple was paid \$40 for participation. Whereas the conduct of this investigation did not demand use of both members of dating couples, this investigation was part of a larger study dealing with physiological reactivity to stressful tasks that did require both members of dating relationships to participate. Moreover, we would note some advantages of having both members of dating couples participate. First, this ensured an equal number of males and females in the present investigation. More importantly, it provided assurance that our high communal orientation participants were no more likely to be involved in a current dating relationship than were our low communal orientation participants and that all participants had at least one normatively close relationship about which they might think when answering questions regarding willingness to express emotions in such a relationship.

On average, participants were 21 years old, involved in romantic relationships of 19 months in duration, and saw their partners 25 days per month. The sample was predominantly white (79% Caucasian, 8% Asian American, 4% African American, 3% Hispanic, 1% Native American, and 5% Other), and the highest level of education that most participants had completed was some degree of college (1% some high school, 10% high school graduate/GED, 65% some college, 22% college graduate, 2% master's degree (or similar), and 1% doctoral degree).

### *Procedure*

Participants completed questionnaires to assess the constructs of interest. First, they completed the *communal orientation scale* (Clark et al., 1987; Mills & Clark, 1994), which is a validated, 14-item measure designed to assess the tendency of respondents to prioritize their responsiveness to their partners' needs and to expect the same on the part of their partners. Sample items are

“When making a decision, I take other people’s needs and feelings into account.”, “I believe people should go out of their way to be helpful.”, “It bothers me when people neglect my needs.”, and “I expect people I know to be responsive to my needs and feelings.” Items were assessed on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Analyses revealed good reliability for the communal orientation scale ( $\alpha = .81$ ). Importantly none of the 14 items in this scale ask about the respondent’s willingness to express emotion.

After completing this scale, participants completed a measure assessing the degree to which they express each of the five different emotions (fear, anxiety, anger, happiness, joy) in two different *relationship types*: close relationships and business relationships. We used the term *close relationship* as a proxy for communal relationship and *business relationship* as a proxy for a relationship low in communal strength in which benefits, if given and received, would be likely to be given and received on an exchange basis. We did this because: (a) we did not want to confuse or bias our participants with technical definitions of the terms *communal relationship* and *exchange relationship* and (b) we felt confident that almost all potential participants would interpret the term *close relationship* as compatible with our theoretical definition of a high-strength communal relationship and *business relationship* as compatible with our theoretical definition of a low-strength communal/primarily exchange relationship.

Participants indicated the extent to which they express each emotion within close and business relationships on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*). The questions were each worded in the following way: “When you feel EMOTION (in capital letters), to what extent do you express it in ...”.

For all couples, one participant filled out these questionnaires before completing a laboratory speech task and the other one completed them after completing the speech task. For exactly half of the couples, the man completed the questionnaires before performing the speech task and the woman completed

the tasks in the opposite order. Data from the speech task are not relevant to the present article. All hypothesis tests reported below control for experimental condition and order, which never exhibited significant associations with emotion expression.

## Results

### *Analysis strategy*

Data provided by the two partners in a given relationship are not independent. In addition, the responses participants provided regarding the degree to which they express emotion in each of the two different relationship types are not independent. To account for this non-independence in the data, we used multilevel modeling for all analyses reported below (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). This analytic technique simultaneously examines variance associated with each level of nesting, modeling all sources of variation while accounting for statistical characteristics of the other levels. Our primary analyses employed a three-level data structure in which relationship type (Level 1) is nested within person (Level 2), which is, in turn, nested within couple (Level 3). Follow-up tests of simple effects employed a two-level data structure in which person (Level 1) is nested within couple (Level 2).

As presented earlier, we hypothesized that results would reveal: (a) a main effect for relationship type, (b) a main effect for communal orientation, and (c) an interaction between relationship type and communal orientation. This last hypothesis predicts a cross-level interaction in which a Level 1 variable (relationship type) is moderated by a Level 2 variable (communal orientation). Testing this cross-level hypothesis requires the use of multilevel modeling data analytic procedures.

### *Hypothesis tests*

We performed five separate multilevel multiple regression analyses predicting expression of each emotion from relationship type, communal orientation, and the interaction term.

These analyses controlled for the effects of experimental condition and for the order in which participants completed the questionnaire and experimental portions of the study. The means and hypothesis tests from these analyses are presented in Table 1. As predicted, the main effect of relationship type was significant for all five emotions: Participants consistently reported being willing to express more emotion in close relationships

than in business relationships. Also, the main effect of communal orientation was significant for all five emotions: Participants who were high in communal orientation expressed more emotion than did those who were low in communal orientation.

We hypothesized that significant interactions would emerge in predicting willingness to express fear and anxiety from relationship type and communal orientation. Our rationale

**Table 1.** Predicted means and hypothesis tests examining levels of emotion expression as a function of relationship type and communal orientation

	Close relationships	Business relationships	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Fear</b>					
High communal orientation	<b>6.17</b>	2.11			
Low communal orientation	<b>5.27</b>	2.09			
Relationship type effect			806.34	1, 174	<.001
Communal orientation effect			10.13	1, 174	.002
Type by communal interaction			11.89	1, 174	<.001
<b>Anxiety</b>					
High communal orientation	<b>5.93</b>	2.38			
Low communal orientation	<b>5.20</b>	2.23			
Relationship type effect			566.03	1, 174	<.001
Communal orientation effect			8.06	1, 174	.005
Type by communal interaction			4.39	1, 174	.038
<b>Anger</b>					
High communal orientation	<b>5.78</b>	2.77			
Low communal orientation	<b>5.17</b>	2.46			
Relationship type effect			319.21	1, 174	<.001
Communal orientation effect			7.69	1, 174	.006
Type by communal interaction			0.85	1, 174	.357
<b>Happiness</b>					
High communal orientation	<b>6.77</b>	<b>5.44</b>			
Low communal orientation	<b>6.50</b>	<b>4.31</b>			
Relationship type effect			201.10	1, 174	<.001
Communal orientation effect			25.09	1, 174	<.001
Type by communal interaction			12.35	1, 174	<.001
<b>Joy</b>					
High communal orientation	<b>6.84</b>	<b>5.24</b>			
Low communal orientation	<b>6.49</b>	<b>4.10</b>			
Relationship type effect			249.99	1, 174	<.001
Communal orientation effect			24.03	1, 174	<.001
Type by communal interaction			9.92	1, 174	.002

*Note.* Predicted means are conditioned 1 standard deviation above and below the mean of communal orientation (Aiken & West, 1991). Predicted means for conditions in which the simple slopes for high and low communal orientation differ significantly are presented in bold.

for predicting these interaction effects was that whereas the norms against expressing emotions that reveal vulnerabilities and “pull” on the other to provide support are strong enough in business relationships that even individuals high in communal orientation will be unlikely to express emotions, the norms regarding expression of such emotions in high-strength communal relationships are looser. As such, they provide leeway for individual differences in communal orientation to influence willingness to express emotion. Thus, we predicted that communal orientation would predict significantly greater willingness to express emotions revealing vulnerabilities in close relationships, it would have less of an impact, if any, in business relationships where overall willingness to express such emotions would be generally low.

As shown in Table 1, the hypothesized interaction did emerge for reports of willingness to express both fear and anxiety. The pattern was similar for anger, but the interaction was not significant. Unexpectedly, significant interaction effects in the opposite direction emerged for reports of willingness to express happiness and joy. Specifically, the differences between willingness to express emotion among participants who were high versus low in communal orientation were greater in business relationships than in close relationships. We believe these unexpected interactions were due to a methodological artifact, and we will return to this issue in the discussion section.

To probe the interaction effects further, we analyzed the simple slopes for individuals who were high and low (i.e., 1 standard deviation above and below the mean) in communal orientation. As expected and as highlighted in Table 1, these analyses revealed significant effects for all five emotions in the context of close relationships, such that individuals who were high in communal orientation expressed greater levels of fear,  $r = .22$ ,  $t(87) = 4.89$ ,  $p < .001$ , anxiety,  $r = .18$ ,  $t(87) = 3.59$ ,  $p < .001$ , anger,  $r = .16$ ,  $t(87) = 2.82$ ,  $p = .006$ , happiness,  $r = .08$ ,  $t(87) = 2.34$ ,  $p = .022$ , and joy,  $r = .11$ ,  $t(87) = 3.48$ ,  $p < .001$ . Also as expected, parallel analyses revealed that in the context of business

relationships, individuals who were high in communal orientation did not exhibit significant differences compared with those who were low in communal orientation for all three negative emotions (fear, anxiety, and anger; all  $t$ s  $< 1.30$ ). In contrast, the differences in simple slopes were significant for both happiness,  $r = .39$ ,  $t(87) = 4.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , and joy,  $r = .37$ ,  $t(87) = 4.41$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

As noted in our introduction, we believe that perceiving that a relationship partner cares about one's welfare ought to be a powerful determinant of whether or not one will express emotion to that partner. This is because emotions convey information about needs and vulnerabilities, and those who care about one's welfare are most likely to strive to meet one's needs and, simultaneously, least likely to exploit one's exposed vulnerabilities. Results from the present study yielded clear support for the idea that both relationship type and chronic individual differences in communal orientation toward relationships influence willingness to express emotion. Participants reported more willingness to express emotion within normatively strong communal relationships than within ones that are not normatively communal, and participants who scored high on a communal orientation scale reported more willingness to express emotion than did participants who scored low on the same measure.

What actual relationship type and chronic individual differences in relationship orientation have in common, of course, is that they are both indices of people's perceptions that partners care about one's welfare. That is, the construct we believe to be crucial to determining willingness to express emotion.

Importantly, these effects held across all five emotions investigated—joy, happiness, anger, anxiety, and nervousness—suggesting that the observed impact of perceived caring on expression of emotion has considerable generalizability. We suspect that similar effects would hold for other emotions not included in the present research such as sadness or disgust. Moreover, we suspect that



the effects we observed here might be especially strong for emotions that convey needs (or a lack of needs), which were actually caused by the actions of members of the relationship itself, including emotions such as hurt and jealousy.

Finally, we expect that the effects of relationship type and communal orientation observed here would also hold for both the experience and the expression of emotions one feels as a result of caring about a relationship partner's welfare, that is, emotions such as guilt, empathic sadness, and empathic happiness. This is because caring for a partner's welfare is likely a necessary antecedent to experiencing these partner-centered emotions in the first place. These emotions, once experienced, should signal the presence of such caring to the self and, once expressed, should signal the caring to one's partner as well. Of course, assessing these possibilities must await further research.

*An interaction effect of relationship type and communal orientation for expressing fear and anxiety*

Our third hypothesis was that stable individual differences in communal orientation would interact with relationship type to drive willingness to express emotions that reveal vulnerabilities, in the case of this study, fear and anxiety. As a result of societal dictates against revealing needs and vulnerabilities in formal, noncommunal relationships being quite strong, we suspected that virtually everyone, regardless of communal orientation, would be unwilling to reveal fears and anxieties to business partners. Thus, we had expected that individual differences in communal orientation would be most likely to exert their influence within social contexts in which expression is appropriate (i.e., close, communal relationships) but is not strongly mandated. This is just the pattern of results that was obtained on our measures of willingness to express fear and anxiety, and the expected interaction was significant.

Interestingly, the results for willingness to express anger showed a similar pattern, that is, communal orientation tended to have

a larger impact within close relationships (.61 units) than it did within business relationships (.31 units). However, the interaction of relationship type and relationship orientation on willingness to express emotion was not significant for this measure. We suspect the lack of such an interaction effect was due to the fact that expression of anger conveys needs and a lack of vulnerability rather than needs and the presence of vulnerability. The fact that anger conveys needs may account for the pattern of results for this measure, bearing some similarity to that for our measures of willingness to express sadness and anxiety. The fact that it also conveys a lack of vulnerability (high control) may account for the absence of a significant interaction.

*A different type of interaction of relationship type and relationship orientation for willingness to express happiness and joy*

Our results showed that relationship type and communal orientation also interacted to influence reported willingness to express joy and happiness such that the impact of communal orientation on reported willingness to express happiness and joy was greater in business than in close relationships. As shown in Table 1, relative to individuals who were low in communal orientation, those who were high in communal orientation were willing to express .27 units more happiness in close relationships, and a full 1.13 units more happiness in business relationships. Parallel examinations of joy revealed the same general trend (.35 units vs. 1.24 units). It is important to note that the simple slopes for communal orientation always differed significantly in the business relationship condition and in the close relationship condition. Thus, this pattern shows that communal orientation is associated with greater willingness to express happiness and joy in both close relationships and business relationships.

Our overall theoretical position regarding how perceiving that others care influences emotional expression cannot explain the observed interactions for reported willingness to express joy and happiness. Instead, we

think there is a simple methodological explanation for these interactions. This explanation is that a ceiling effect for the joy and happiness measures existed in our close relationship conditions. Note that our rating scale of willingness to express emotions ranged from 1 (*low willingness*) to 7 (*high willingness*). As Table 1 reveals, the predicted mean ratings of low communal individuals' willingness to express happiness and joy in close relationships were very close to the top of this scale (6.50 and 6.49). This left very little space for high communal persons to indicate that they would express more happiness. At most, they could only score + .50 and + .51 units above the means for low communal participants for willingness to express happiness and joy, respectively, and this could only occur if every high communal participant scored a marked 7 on the scale—an unlikely occurrence given that many people avoid the extreme ends of scales. On the other hand, the predicted means for the low communal people rating willingness to express happiness and joy in business relationships were not close to the top of the 7-point scales. They were 4.31 and 4.10 for happiness and joy, respectively. It was, therefore, possible for those high in communal orientation to rate their willingness to express happiness and joy 2.69 and 2.90 units higher, respectively. Thus, communal orientation might have appeared to have more impact in business relationships than in close relationships, simply because there was more room to move up on the scale.

In actual interaction with close relationship partners, of course, there typically is no cap on expressed happiness. Thus, it would be unwise to conclude based on the present results that communal orientation, in fact, has less impact on expressed happiness in communal than in noncommunal relationships generally.

### *Conclusions and wider implication*

Perceptions of a partner's care as captured in relationship type and in individual differences in communal orientation appear to drive willingness to express emotion. This carries

implications that go far beyond simply understanding when and by whom emotion is most likely to be expressed. For example, it is now commonplace for health researchers to demonstrate among the existence of relationships, the quality of relationships, and/or the perception of having support available with the presence of better mental and physical health. Links are often clearest when stress (and presumably felt emotion) is high. The present results suggest one possible pathway through which relationships might lead to better health. Specifically, perceiving that relationship partners care (as picked up directly by measures of perceiving social support and indirectly by indices of having close, high-quality relationships) may afford people with the opportunity to freely express emotion. This, in turn, may elicit tangible and emotional support. It may simultaneously preclude the physiological and cognitive costs that are known to accompany active suppression of emotional expression (Gross & Levenson, 1993; see Clark & Finkel, 2004, for an extended discussion of this possibility). In turn, these effects may promote health.

Our present theoretical position and results also suggest that the oft-posed question of whether it is better to express or to suppress emotions, particularly negative emotions, is too simplistic. It is likely to be the case that it is sometimes wise to express emotions (i.e., in caring relationships) and sometimes wise to suppress them (in other relationships when expressing emotions could lead to rejection and/or exploitation). Thus, we join with a growing number of emotion researchers who suggest that an important part of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Meyer, 1990; Salovey, Woolery, & Mayer, 2001) will likely prove to be the ability to flexibly choose to express or to suppress emotion depending upon context (Bonanno, Pap, O'Neill, Westphal, & Coifman, in press; Feldman Barrett & Gross, 2001).

Finally we acknowledge the limitations of this research. We have only examined reported willingness to express five emotions. Generalizing our results to other emotions and to observations of actual expression of emotion awaits further research. Moreover, it

is important to keep in mind that expressions of emotions serve functions other than communicating needs. For instance, expressing anger serves to intimidate others and to display power. A consideration of such other functions will suggest yet other criteria people use in deciding to express or to suppress emotion. The point of the present paper was simply to make the case that perceiving relationship partners care (or do not) is one important criterion for purposes of deciding whether to express or to suppress emotions. We suspect it is one of the most important such criteria.

## References

- Ainsworth, M. D., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: Assessed in the strange situation and at home*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Babad, E. Y., & Wallbott, H. G. (1986). The effects of social factors on emotional relations. In K. R. Scherer, H. G. Wallbott, & A. B. Summerfield (Eds.), *Experiencing emotion: A cross-cultural study* (pp. 154–172). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Bonanno, G. A., Pap, A., O'Neill, K., Westphal, M., & Coifman, K. (in press). The importance of being flexible: The ability to enhance and suppress emotional expression predicts long-term adjustment. *Psychological Science*.
- Clark, M. S., & Brissette, I. (2000). Relationship beliefs and emotion: Reciprocal effects. In N. H. Frijda, A. S. R. Manstead, & S. Bem (Eds.), *Emotions and beliefs: How feeling influence thoughts* (pp. 212–240). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, M. S., & Brissette, I. (2003). Two types of relationship closeness and their influence on people's emotional lives. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. 824–838). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, M. S., & Finkel, E. J. (2004). Does expressing emotion promote well-being? It depends on relationship context. In L. Tiedens & C. W. Leach (Eds.), *The social life of emotions*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, M. S., Fitness, J., & Brissette, I. (2001). Understanding people's perceptions of relationships is crucial to understanding their emotional lives. In G. J. O. Fletcher & M. S. Clark (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology: Interpersonal processes*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Clark, M. S., & Mills, J. (1979). Interpersonal attraction in exchange and communal relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *37*, 12–24.
- Clark, M. S., & Mills, J. (1993). The difference between communal and exchange relationships: What it is and is not. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *19*, 684–691.
- Clark, M. S., Mills, J., & Corcoran, D. (1989). Keeping track of needs and inputs of friends and strangers. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *15*, 533–542.
- Clark, M. S., Mills, J., & Powell, M. (1986). Keeping track of needs in two types of relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *51*, 333–338.
- Clark, M. S., Ouellette, R., Powell, M. C., & Milberg, S. (1987). Recipient's mood, relationship type, and helping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *53*, 94–103.
- Clark, M. S., & Taraban, C. (1991). Reactions to and willingness to express emotion in communal and exchange relationships. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *27*, 324–336.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Larson, R. (1984). *Being adolescent: Conflict and growth in teenage years*. New York: Basic Books.
- DeRivera, J. (1984). The structure of emotional relationships. In P. Shaver (Ed.), *Review of personality and social psychology: Emotions, relationships, and health*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Downey, G., & Feldman, S. I. (1996). Implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*, 1327–1343.
- Feeney, J. A. (1995). Adult attachment and emotional control. *Personal Relationships*, *2*, 143–159.
- Feeney, J. A. (1999). Adult attachment, emotional control, and marital satisfaction. *Personal Relationships*, *6*, 169–185.
- Feldman Barrett, L., & Gross, J. J. (2001). Emotional intelligence: A process model of emotion representation and regulation. In T. J. Mayne & G. A. Bonanno (Eds.), *Emotions: Current issues and future directions* (pp. 286–311). New York: Guilford.
- Fitness, J. (2000). Anger in the workplace: An emotion script approach to anger between workers and their superiors, co-workers and subordinates. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *21*, 147–162.
- Frijda, N. (1993). Moods, emotion episodes, and emotions. In M. Lewis & J. M. Haviland (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (pp. 381–404). New York: Guilford.
- Gable, S. L., Reis, H. T., Impett, E., & Asher, E. R. (in press). What do you do when things go right? The intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of sharing positive events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.
- Gross, J. J., & Levenson, R. W. (1993). Emotion suppression: Physiology, self-report, and expressive behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *64*, 970–986.
- Gross, J. J., & Levenson, R. W. (1997). Hiding feelings: The acute effects of inhibiting negative and positive emotion. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *106*, 95–103.
- Guerrero, L. K., & Anderson, L. K. (2000). Emotion in close relationships. In C. Hendrick & S. Hendrick (Eds.), *Close relationships: A sourcebook* (pp. 171–183). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Keltner, D., Ekman, P., Gonzaga, G. G., & Beer, J. (2003). Facial expression of emotion. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. 415–432). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Bolger, N. (1998). Data analysis in social psychology. In D. Gilbert, S. T.

- Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (Vol. 1, 4th ed., pp. 233–265). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lerner, J. S., Gonzalez, R. M., Small, D., & Fischhoff, B. (2003). Effects of fear and anger on perceived risks of terrorism: A field experiment. *Psychological Science, 14*, 144–150.
- Lerner, J. S., & Keltner, D. (2000). Beyond valence: Toward a model of emotion-specific influences on judgment and choice. *Cognition and Emotion, 14*, 473–493.
- Levenson, R. W. (1994). Human emotion: A functional view. In P. Ekman & R. J. Davidson (Eds.), *The nature of emotion: Fundamental questions* (pp. 123–126). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, R. S., & Leary, M. R. (1982). Social sources and interactive functions of emotion: The case of embarrassment. In M. S. Clark (Ed.), *Emotion and social behavior* (pp. 202–221). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Mills, J., & Clark, M. S. (1982). Exchange and communal relationships. In L. Wheeler (Ed.), *Review of personality and social psychology* (Vol. 3, pp. 121–144). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Mills, J., & Clark, M. S. (1994). Communal and exchange relationships: Controversies and research. In R. Erber & R. Gilmour (Eds.), *Theoretical frameworks for personal relationships* (pp. 29–42). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., MacDonald, G., & Ellsworth, P. C. (1998). Through the looking glass darkly? When self-doubts turn into relationship insecurities. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75*, 1459–1480.
- Pennebaker, J. W., Zech, E., & Rimé, B. (2001). Disclosing and sharing emotion: Psychological, social and health consequences. In M. S. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, W. Stroebe, & H. Schut (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement research: Consequences, coping, and care* (pp. 517–543). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Raudenbush, S. W., & Bryk, A. S. (2002). *Hierarchical linear models: Applications and data analysis methods* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Reilly, J., & Seibert, L. (2003). Language and emotion. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. 535–559). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Reis, H., Clark, M. S., & Holmes, J. (in press). Perceived partner responsiveness as an organizing construct in the study of intimacy and closeness. In D. Mashek & A. Aron (Eds.), *The handbook of closeness and intimacy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Richards, J. M., & Gross, J. J. (1999). Composure at any cost? The cognitive consequences of emotion suppression. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 24*, 1033–1044.
- Richards, J. M., & Gross, J. J. (2000). Emotion regulation and memory: The cognitive costs of keeping one's cool. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*, 410–424.
- Rimé, B., Mesquita, B., Philippot, P., & Boca, S. (1991). Beyond the emotional event: Six studies on the social sharing of emotion. *Cognition and Emotion, 5*, 436–466.
- Riskind, J. H. (1984). They stoop to conquer: Guiding and self-regulatory functions of physical posture after success and failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 47*, 479–493.
- Salovey, P., & Meyer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality, 9*, 185–211.
- Salovey, P., Woolery, A., & Mayer, J. D. (2001). Emotional intelligence: Conceptualization and measurement. In G. Fletcher & M. S. Clark (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Interpersonal processes* (pp. 279–307). Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Scherer, K. R., Johnstone, T., & Klasmeyer, G. (2003). Facial expression of emotion. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. 433–456). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schwartz, J. C., & Shaver, P. R. (1987). Emotion and emotion knowledge in interpersonal relationships. In W. Jones & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Advances in Personal Relationships*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Simon, H. A. (1967). Motivational and emotional controls of cognition. *Psychological Review, 74*, 29–39.
- Smith, C. A., & Ellsworth, P. C. (1985). Patterns of cognitive appraisal in emotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 48*, 813–838.
- Williamson, G. M., & Clark, M. S. (1989). The communal/exchange distinction and some implications for understanding justice in families. *Social Justice Research, 3*, 77–103.
- Williamson, G. M., & Clark, M. S. (1992). Impact of desired relationship type on affective reactions to choosing and being required to help. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 18*, 10–18.
- Zeaman, J., & Garber, J. (1996). Display rules for anger, sadness, and pain: It depends on who is watching. *Child Development, 67*, 957–973.