The Communal Nature of Friendships

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Brief Abstract

The study explored friendships as a communal process. Participants completed a questionnaire regarding a “good friend,” which included items on communal/exchange friendship orientation and other variables. Results showed friendships are more communal in nature than exchange oriented, with higher communal orientation associated with more liking and friendship commitment.

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Background
In general, friendships have been studied by applying exchange ideologies (e.g., Murstein & Azar, 1986). Few studies, however, have explored friendships using a communal orientation. According to Clark and Mills (1979), communal relationships focus on concern for another’s welfare as opposed to equality of exchange (i.e., tit-for-tat). Applying a communal orientation to friendships might help explain why individuals remain in friendships that appear one-sided or unequal in exchange.

Current Study
The current study explored friendships as a communal process, and how levels of friendship commitment, investment, and liking are affected by this communal process. It was expected that (a) individuals would rate their friendships with more of a communal orientation than an exchange orientation, (b) the level of communal orientation would be positively associated with liking and friendship commitment, and (c) the level of communal orientation would not be related to investment (which is indicative of exchange).

Subjects were 81 college and noncollege students who were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding a “good friend.” Approximately 69% of the sample was female, 64% White, with an age range of 18 to 59 (M = 31 yrs). Study participants were recruited using a network methodology, and were provided survey questionnaires to complete either at home or at work. Questionnaire scales included demographics and information about their good friends, the commitment and investment subscales from the Investment Model (altered for friendship orientation; Rusbult et al., 1998), Liking (Rubin, 1973), and Clark’s (1987) communal/exchange relationship scale.

Descriptive information regarding respondents’ friends showed a median friendship length of nine years, with 93% of the “good friends” being the same sex of the respondent. Respondents became acquainted with their good friends in a variety of settings, including work (26%), college (15%), high school or earlier education settings (43%), or through family linkages (16%). The majority of respondents (90%) reported a communal orientation as evidenced by a positive communal/exchange scale score, and a one-sample t-test revealed the overall sample mean (M = 6.3) was significantly different at the .05 level from zero (indicative of neither communal nor exchange orientation). Liking and commitment were positively correlated with level of communal friendship (p < .05), suggesting that the more communal the friendship, the more individuals like their friends and the more committed they are to their friendships. A nonsignificant correlation (> .05) was noted for friendship investment, thus suggesting that communal relationships do not inherently affect levels of friendship investment.

The findings support the hypothesis that good friendships may best be viewed as a communal rather than exchange process, and that those with a greater communal orientation are more committed in their friendships and like their friends more.

References