Communal and Exchange Relationships

Integration

Based on Erving Goffman’s (1961) differentiation of social and economic exchange, two kinds of relationships in which people give benefits to one another could be distinguished, communal relationships and exchange relationships (Clark and Mills 1979). The basic distinction between communal and exchange relationships is based on the norms that govern the giving and receiving of benefits (Clark and Mills 1993). In different relationships, people follow distinct norms and different affective reactions arise when they give and receive benefits (Clark and Mills 1979; Williamson and Clark 1992).

In exchange relationships, people follow the norm that benefits are given with the expectation of receiving comparable benefits in return (Clark and Mills 1993). Giving a benefit without repayment may make someone experience a sense of inequity and distress (Walster et al. 1978) and decrease liking or other positive affect when an exchange relationship is expected (Clark and Mills 1979; Williamson and Clark 1992). Furthermore, because of the sense of being a gullible person for agreeing to help, one’s affect would be less improved or even deteriorated when one has chosen to help (Williamson and Clark 1992). In general, any behavior violating the norm that a benefit is given in response to the receipt of a benefit would make people feel no good in exchange relationships.

In contrary to exchange norms, communal norms indicate that a benefit is given in response of the other’s need (Clark and Mills 1979). In communal relationships, such as relationships among families and friends, members concern about the needs or welfares of others and care less about the repayments of benefits given (Clark and Mills 1979). People in communal relationships feel good when they help the other in the absence of prior aid from that other (Clark and Mills 1979; Williamson and Clark 1992). It is believed that communal relationships are the most important relationships for most people (Mills and Clark 1982). People consider themselves to have weak communal relationships with everyone (Mills and Clark 1982), and the degree of costs they are willing to incur to meet others’ need depend on the strength of the communal relationships they have with those others (Clark and Mills 1993).

Based on the basic principles of the communal/exchange distinction, other variables such as differences in closeness, selfishness, altruism, breadth of benefit exchanged and etiquette could not be appropriate explanations for the distinction (Clark and Mills 1993). People in communal relationships are not supposed to be closer to each other than those in exchange relationships, and the motivation that one follows the communal norm is not necessary to be unselfish or altruistic. In addition, communal relationships could not be regarded as long-term exchange relationships owing to the existence of long-term exchange relationships such as relationships between business partners (Clark and Mills 1993). The basic idea of the distinction is the difference in norms that people follow in communal and exchange relationships. Other variables unrelated to the norm could not account for the explanation.
Integrative Comment

In Clark and Mills’ article (1979), repaying for the aid given by others is not appropriate in a communal relationship since it may imply that one does not desire involvement in such a relationship. However, it may depend on whether the strength of a communal relationship perceived by the other is as high as that one perceived and whether the benefit given exceeds one’s expectation at certain level of a communal relationship.

Taking the difference in views of each partner in a communal relationship into account, we could better explain the appropriateness of the repayment. In a communal relationship, when someone asked us for a big favor that exceeded the obligation of meeting his need in our perception, we may consider it appropriate for him to give us a benefit in return. Conversely, repayment from the other for a favor that is perceived to be in the range of one’s obligation may not be considered to be appropriate.

Therefore, there may be a “zone of deserving it” in our mind when we have a communal relationship with someone else. When the benefit given is in the zone, we would take it as an obligation of meeting others’ needs. In such conditions, the repayment of that other may be considered to be inappropriate hence decreases liking. When the benefit goes beyond the zone, the repayment may be perceived to be appropriate and increases liking.

Clark and Mills (1993) indicate that the degree of costs one is willing to incur to meet the other’s need depends on the strength of a communal relationship. For instance, people are willing to incur greater costs to meet the needs of their child than to meet the needs of their best friend. However, the cost perception may vary according to the strength of the communal relationship one has with the other. That is, the same benefit given may incur different cost perception on different recipients.

Based on the discussion in prior research, a characteristic of intimate relationships is that intimates, through identification with and empathy for their partners, come to define themselves as a unit; as one couple (Walster et al. 1978). Regarding the intimate relationship as a typical strong communal relationship, we propose that people in strong communal relationships consider others’ need rather than their obligations. Thus, the cost of giving benefits in such relationships may be perceived to be lower than that in weak communal relationships.

Williamson and Clark (1992) emphasize the difference in affective reactions between choosing to help and being required to help in both communal and exchange relationships. The author states that if seeing oneself as a good person plays a role in elevating affect among communal helpers, then affect should be more improved when one has freely chosen to help than when one has helped simply because one was required to. However, the stress of having to help the other may also play an important role in a communal relationship. Sometime people choose to help others simply because social norms suggest that they have to do so. Thus, choosing to help may not be the same as willing to help.

People follow the norm that one has to meet the other’s need in a communal relationship. Sometimes we don’t want to help others, but it is just difficult to reject their requests. In such conditions, people may feel stressful when others ask them for
favors which they don’t want to do. Hence, choosing to help the other may increase one’s stress and alleviates positive affective reactions when one is not willing to do so. Further, social visibility may also account for this effect. People may feel much more stressful when their decision to help or not is social visible since they don’t want to be regarded as stingy people. Thus, choosing to help when one is not willing to may result in negative affective reactions when the decision is social visible.

Extension for Further Research

*When will a communal relationship hurt you?*

Previous research discusses the affective reactions when people help others in communal and exchange relationships. In communal relationships, people follow the norm that people concern about others’ needs and welfare and feel happy when they help others. However, in some cases, the existence of communal relationships may cause people’s negative affect. Taking this into account, we can further discuss when people’s negative affect would be evoked in communal relationships.

Williamson and Clark (1992) suggest that in communal relationships, affect should be improved more when people choose to help the other than when they are required to. However, choosing to help may not be the same as willing to help. Sometimes people in communal relationships help the other simply because the communal norm suggests them to do so. In such conditions, the *stress* that one should help the other may play an important role. When being requested to help, the existence of a communal relationship may increase one’s stress and therefore evokes negative affective reactions if one is not willing to help.

Furthermore, the effect of stress may be moderated by social visibility. In the communal norm, it is considered to be inappropriate to reject others’ request. To some degree, refusing to help others may be taken as an indication that one does not desire involvement in a communal relationship. Therefore, people may feel much more stressful when their decision to help or not is social visible since they are worried to be regarded as stingy people. Hence, affect may be more deteriorated when one is not willing to help and the decision is social visible.