Social Relationships in Adulthood

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Abstract

The nature of adult close, communal, relationships is outlined. We define high quality, close, adult relationships in terms of the interpersonal processes that, ideally, characterize them rather than in terms of stability, satisfaction, or lack of conflict. We explain why it is desirable to define them in the former rather than the latter manner. Then, factors that result in people being attracted to one another and that motivate them to form such relationships are reviewed. Next, processes involved in initiating such relationships and the importance of, eventual, commitment to relational functioning are discussed. Placement of a communal relationship within a larger hierarchically arranged set of relationships is also discussed. Finally, we briefly touch on how a lack of trust in a potential or existing communal partner undermines the quality of these relationships.

What Is a Close Relationship?

Adults have many types of relationships: brief relationships with strangers, relationships with acquaintances, ones with people with whom they do business, as well as relationships that are commonly called close relationships. This article is about close adult relationships for it is these relationships, including friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships, that have received the most research attention.

Whereas, people will readily agree that relationships with good friends, family members, and romantic relationships often exemplify close relationships; what does the term ‘close’ really mean? Researchers have suggested a variety of definitions.

One definition has to do with the degree to which each person is capable of influencing and does influence the other person’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Berscheid et al., 1989; Rusbult and Van Lange, 2012). This definition picks up those relationships that most impact the nature of our hour-to-hour and day-to-day behavior, thoughts, emotions, and, in turn, well-being. This definition has proven useful for many purposes and, interestingly, it captures both our most important enemies, as well as most important friends (see Friendship during Adolescence and Cultural Variations; Friendship during Childhood and Cultural Variations).

Other researchers define closeness in terms of the extent to which each member assumes responsibility for promoting the welfare of the other member (Clark and Monin, 2006; Clark and Mills, 2012; Monin et al., 2008) or the, overlapping, extent to which people actually do understand, validate, and care for one another (Reis and Patrick, 1996; Reis and Shaver, 1988). Still others define closeness as the extent to which a partner’s attributes, goals, and desires are considered to be a part of the self (Aron et al., 2004) or as the extent to which one is committed to a relationship defined as intending to stay in the relationship for whatever reason, be it satisfaction, lack of alternatives, past investments, or social or personal norms (Rusbult et al., 2006).

No one definition is ‘correct.’ The antecedents and consequences of each type of closeness differ and can (and should) be studied separately. All varieties of closeness likely contribute to a sense that a relationship is important.

For purposes of this article, successful closeness can be considered to consist in: (1) members being responsive to one another meaning that they support one another’s welfare (Clark and Mills, 2012; Reis et al., 2004; Reis and Clark, 2013) and (2) members facilitating their own receipt of responsiveness from their partners by expecting, seeking, desiring, and accepting such responsiveness (Clark and Mills, 2012; Clark et al., 1998; Clark, 2011; see Welfare). Hallmarks of these relationships include support being given in response to partners’ needs or desires and sometimes simply to signal care and, importantly, this support being given noncontingently. That is, the recipient does not owe the donor anything for responsiveness received (Clark and Mills, 1979). Needs are tracked and attended to (Clark et al., 1986) but just what has been actually given and received, ideally, is not (Clark, 1984).

These relationships are communal relationships (Clark and Mills, 2012). Among adults, they are typically mutual and symmetrical meaning that each person (friend, romantic partner) assumes about the same amount of responsibility for the other. Needs and desires as well as partner ability to meet them can differ so the actual giving and receipt of care may differ between partners.

Not All Communal Relationships Are Equally Strong

Successful communal relationships differ in the degree of responsibility members assume for partner welfare. These relationships vary in strength meaning that some close, communal relationships, entail members taking on extremely high levels of responsibility for one another’s welfare (meaning that people expend extreme amounts of their own effort, time, and resources to enhance their partner’s welfare) whereas the members of other, also communal, relationships take on more moderate or even low levels of such mutual responsibility but still treat those in a communal manner (Mills et al., 2004). Communal relationships of a variety of strengths can be successful for they can...
operate on a communal basis (up to a level strength implicitly agreed and acted upon by both members).

Sometimes benefits that exceed that implicit level are given and accepted on a tit-for-tat or exchange basis. In emergency situations that upper bound may be violated.

**Defining High-Quality Relationships in Terms of Good Interpersonal Processes**

Trusting, noncontingent, and sustainable communal responsiveness can and does take on many forms: mutual tracking of needs and desires, expressions of one’s emotions allowing partners to most easily infer needs and desires, efforts made to understand and validate partners, the giving and receiving care, and the inclusion of the partner and mutual engagement in satisfying activities. Whereas, much past work has suggested that high-quality close relationships can be defined in terms of their stability (persistence across time), high individual ratings of satisfaction, and/or absence of conflict, we suggest that use of such markers as indices of well-functioning communal relationships may often be flawed. First, not all stable relationships are happy ones. People often stay in poorly functioning relationships because they have poor alternatives or because they have invested much in the relationship that cannot be recouped (Rusbult, 1983). Second, people can be satisfied with a poor relationship because they have low standards (comparison levels) for the relationship given abusive past histories (Rusbult, 1983). Finally, conflict can be absent from a relationship simply because one person dominates over another who fears him or her. To evaluate relationships, therefore, it is best to directly observe whether they are characterized by trust, understanding, validation, and by acts taken to promote partner welfare given on a noncontingent basis along with an openness to reveal vulnerabilities and to accept help from one’s partner.

**Responsiveness Is a Key to the Existence of High-Quality Relationships, but What Is Responsiveness?**

Communal care, often called responsiveness, takes many forms. A person can provide help to a partner in clear need by, say, helping him or her move his or her furniture into a new apartment. So too can take care the function of supporting one’s partner in attaining his or her goals either actively by taking steps to support goal attainment such as helping a friend who wishes to get him or her license study for a driver’s test or by giving a person time and space to pursue a good (Feeney, 2004; see Social Support, Psychology of). It can involve celebrating another person’s successes, a process known as capitalization (Gable et al., 2004). It can involve satisfying a partner’s need to belong by including him or her in conversations (Aron et al., 2000) or in games (Williams, 2007). Responsiveness also can be primarily symbolic. One partner, for instance, may tell a partner that he or she is a good friend, send a card, or simply smile at a partner’s comments (Drigotas, 2002; Swann, 1987). Yet other forms of responsiveness involve putting up with a partner’s bad behavior without reacting negatively, a process known as accommodation (Rusbult et al., 2005) or suppressing one’s own needs when a partner has needs that surpass one’s own.

Both giving and accepting care contribute to feelings of responsiveness in adult relationships. Another way to put this is to say that all behaviors that are intended to result in members of a relationship promoting one another’s welfare contribute to responsiveness.

**What Drives the Formation of Close Adult Relationships?**

The existence of well-functioning communal relationships in a person’s life contributes to that person’s physical and mental well-being, a fact now well known and reported by psychologists and epidemiologists alike (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 2011).

From infancy on, we all have a need to belong, to connect with other, and to form supportive relationships (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007; Baumeister and Leary, 1995; see Infancy and Childhood: Emotional Development). Indeed our own self-esteem appears to be based upon our acceptance by others (Leary and Baumeister, 2000). Thus, perhaps the most important factor motivating people to form new adult communal relationships is a current lack of a sufficient number of effectively functioning communal relationships resulting in feelings of loneliness. For instance, those who have lost a romantic partner will likely seek another. Those who are a new one will seek new, local, friends. A person who becomes estranged from one family member may turn toward initiating or, more likely, strengthening the communal relationship with another family member (see The Family as Institution). Supporting the claim that lack of sufficient number of communal relationships is a driving force toward forming new ones, researchers have found that reminding people of social rejections from a current partner, on average, increases their interest in meeting new people (Maner et al., 2007: studies 1 and 2; Williams and Sommer, 1997). Mirroring this, so too is it true commitment to current close relationship partners decreases both attention and attraction to new potential partners (Johnson and Rusbult, 1989; Lydon et al., 2003; Maner et al., 2009, 2008) and having a sufficient number of communal relationships with friends and family should reduce a drive to form new communal relationships.

Of course, once a person feels the drive to establish new communal relationships, that person must decide with whom to establish such a relationship. One important determinant of whom adults form close, communal, relationships is kinship. People feel most responsiveness toward and expect most responsiveness from those with whom they have the closest biological ties (Monin et al., 2008). Attachment theorists suggest that parents and their infants are hardwired to form attachment bonds (which lead to noncontingent responsiveness caretakers) ( Bowlby, 1969). Mothers experience surges in oxytocin at the birth of a child and also in conjunction with lactation that appears to assist them in bonding with their children (Feldman et al., 2007; see Prenatal and Infant Development: Overview, Current Trends, Future Directions). For their part, infants spontaneously cry when distressed eliciting care from caretakers. Moreover, their very cuteness (including
having large round heads and eyes) elicits both liking and care and precision in movement (Zebrowitz and Montepare, 1992; Sherman et al., 2009). These features, even when they occur on adult faces, elicit both judgments of physical attractiveness and responsiveness from others (Berry and McArthur, 1985). Culture also dictates high levels of responsiveness to kin as indicated in the saying, ‘Blood runs thicker than water.’

Other factors also promote the formation of close relationships. Many have to do with qualities of the potential partner. People are attracted to physically attractive others (Eastwick and Finkel, 2008) an attribute that seems to consist in having features that are similar to the average of many faces (Langlois and Roggmann, 1990; see Face Recognition, Psychological and Neural Aspects). This may be because averageness in this sense signals (or at least did signal in our evolutionary past) health and a lack of threat of contagion, and fertility (Langlois and Roggmann, 1990; Thornhill and Gangestad, 1999; see Fertility Theory: Embodied-Capital Theory of Life History Evolution). Beyond this, researchers have found that people associate physical beauty with positive personality traits such as intelligence, popularity, and kindness (Dion et al., 1972). Something that may occur because people desire close relationships with attractive others and project that desire onto others (Lemay et al., 2010). So too may such inferences be based on the fact that, when people perceive partners to be attractive, they treat those partners in more positive ways which, in turn, brings out the best in those partners (Snyder et al., 1977). Finally, we may prefer attractive partners to others because they reflect positively on us when we are seen together (see Sigall and Landy, 1973 for men reflecting positively on women).

Perhaps the most mundane but simultaneously powerful determinant of becoming attracted toward others and, ultimately, forming close, responsive relationships with others is mere physical proximity. We are more likely to form close relationships with those who live quite close by to us than with others (Bosassard, 1932; Festinger et al., 1950). Even very small differences in physical proximity can make in determining the formation of close relationships. We are more likely to form a relationship with a person in an apartment next door to us than merely two doors away (Festinger et al., 1950) and less likely to form relationships with someone seated next to us than one seat away or in our row of seats relative to another row (Back et al., 2008). Perhaps, this is because rejection hurts (MacDonald and Leary, 2005). Whereas it is natural and does not reveal one’s interest in others or risk feeling rejected to talk with someone to whom one merely ‘bumps into’ whereas clearly making an effort to contact others reveals that one is trying to start a relationship and, therefore, makes one vulnerable to rejection. Protection from rejection may also be why another’s liking for us is a potent determinant of our liking for that other (Lowe and Goldstein, 1970).

Other factors known to influence initial attraction include the other’s similarity to us in attitudes, race, socioeconomic status, education, and activity preferences (Byrne, 1971; Newcomb, 1961; Klohnen and Luo, 2003; Singh et al., 2008); even similarity in birth date and name (Jones et al., 2004), familiarity (which may signal safety) (Moreland and Beach, 1992; Moreland and Zajone, 1982), and attributes that remind us of people with whom we have had good (or bad) close relationships in the past (Andersen and Chen, 2002; Andersen et al., 1996).

**How Do We Initiate, Then Maintain, Close Relationships?**

Relationships with kin typically require little initiation and such relationships may be supported in ways that may have evolved (e.g., we may be hardwired to like physically similar people and to like familiar people) (see Partnership Formation and Dissolution in Western Societies). Other communal relationships, such as those with friends and romantic relationships, however, require complex dance of relationship initiation. After initial attraction has taken place, if we wish to establish a close, communal relationship we must promote ourselves as desirable relational partners while simultaneously evaluating the potential partner’s communal attributes and protecting ourselves from the pain of potential rejection (Clark and Beck, 2011; Beck and Clark, 2010).

When it comes to self-promotion, recent research suggests that self-promotion featuring bragging about our own accomplishments or such things as our connections is not a good idea (Crocker and Canavello, 2008). Indeed, doing so to backfire makes people like the self-promoter less (Canavello and Crocker, 2010). Yet not all self-promotion is bad; work on responsiveness suggests it just has to be the right sort of self-promotion. To initiate close, responsive relationships one must have compassionate goals. One must attend to opportunities to respond to the potential partner’s needs, desires, and goals (Clark et al., 1986). Importantly, one must respond non-contingently (Clark and Mills, 1979). Then if the potential partner accepts one’s responsiveness and shows signs of increased liking one can up one’s responsiveness and, importantly begin seeking support as well. In fact, early in potential relationships people do seem especially likely to strategically present themselves as communally oriented. They are especially like offering help to others (relative to seeking it) (Beck and Clark, 2009b), and especially likely to bend over backward to appear not to be keeping track of just who has contributed what to a relationship lest responsiveness appear to be contingent (Clark, 1984).

Responsiveness typically drops off somewhat as relationships form, people come to trust in another’s care, and they feel less need to strategically present themselves as communal in nature (Clark et al., 2010). In other words, they seem to relax a bit. After some work at promoting oneself as a caring person there comes a point at which one reveals vulnerabilities (as, for instance, by displaying emotion) and can observe how the other responds. This is known as entering a socially diagnostic situation (Beck and Clark, 2009a), and it is crucial to being able to evaluate a partner’s interest in caring for the self. Of course entering or creating one’s own socially diagnostic situations is also crucial to acquiring support and developing a communal relationship. Graham et al. (2008), for instance, have shown how revealing one’s negative emotions indicative of needs (e.g., fear, sadness, anxiety) can elicit help and, in turn, promote the development of close, communal, relationships and as well as the development of intimacy in the closest of those relationships.
relationships. Both self-promotion and evaluating of a partner will, likely, be accompanied by a good dose of self-protection. Yet if all goes well, the person succeeds in convincing a partner that he or she is a good partner, decides that the other is a good partner as well and begins to drop the self-protection.

**Making a Commitment Matters**

A few close, typically kinship-based, communal relationships start with a commitment (as when a child is born and parents feel an instant commitment to care for that child across decades). However, most close, adult close relationships begin without a commitment even though people do quickly behave in communal ways in order to establish a relationship (Berg and Clark, 1986). Commitment, if it comes, comes later when higher levels of trust have been established. Commitments, when they are made, consist in decisions to stay in the relationship over the long term. Commitment is accompanied, ideally, with a drop in efforts to strategically self-present, the absence of continuing deliberations about whether to pursue the relationship or not, and letting go of self-protection (Beck and Clark, 2009a, 2010). The relationship then ideally moves to its members simply attending to one another’s welfare and being appropriately responsive, conveying one’s own state of welfare to the partner, and seeking and accepting appropriate responsiveness as needed. In addition and importantly, when neither person has pressing needs, mutually enjoyable and beneficial activities take place.

**Ongoing Committed, Close, Communal Relationships**

Ideally, communal relationships are characterized by trust, understanding, caring, support seeking, and engagement in mutually enjoyable activities. Members track each other’s needs (Clark et al., 1986), understand and validate each other (Reis and Shaver, 1988), help each other, and feel good about doing so (Clark et al., 1987; Williamson and Clark, 1989, 1992) and bad when they fail to do so (Williamson et al., 1996). Members put up with partner anger without dropping liking and forgive partners (Finkel and Campbell, 2001; McCullough, 2000; Rusbult et al., 1991; Yoo et al., 2011). They are even biased toward seeing partner faults as virtues (Murray and Holmes, 1993) and hold positive illusions about one another which may become self-fulfilling prophecies (Murray and Holmes, 1997; Murray et al., 1996a,b; Murray et al., 2000). They also, seemingly automatically, protect their relationships by not being attentive to attractive alternatives to their relationship (Maner et al., 2009), and viewing their own relationship as being better than those of others (Johnson and Rusbult, 1989; Simpson et al., 1990; Van Lange and Rusbult, 1995). Such successful relationships are called, variously, communal relationships, responsive relationships, and secure relationships.

**Adult Close Relationships Occur within Sets of Other Close Relationships**

More frequent and appropriate responsiveness makes for better close relationships. Yet it is important to keep in mind that high-quality communal relationships can and do vary in strength (Mills et al., 2004) and that people tend to have more than one of these relationships. Very strong ones involve responsiveness that can be very costly to the responding partner in terms of time, money, and effort. These very strong communal relationships often include relationships with one’s children, spouse, parents, and the closet of friends.

There is a limit to the number of close responsive relationships a person can have. People cannot be responsive to all other people’s needs; they also do not need everyone to be responsive to their needs. People generally have very few, very strong communal relationships, more moderately strong ones, more casual communal relationships, and many very weak communal relationships (Clark and Mills, 2012).

The moderate and even weak communal ones characterized by expectations of more limited and less costly responsiveness but they are, nonetheless, of value and can be very successful. Members of such relationships simply must implicitly agree on the strength of the communal relationship they have or desire and their actions should fall in the appropriate bounds. For instance, casual friend ought not to give the partner an extravagant present. That would make the partner uncomfortable and threaten the relationship. Those who have weak or moderately strong or weak communal relationships also can and do understand when partners must attend to the needs of someone with whom that partner has a stronger communal relationship as, for instance, might happen when a friend says he or she cannot attend one’s birthday party because his or her child is ill.

Importantly, people are responsible for their own needs and they implicitly place themselves in their own hierarchy of communal relationships. Well-adjusted people place themselves high in their hierarchies but often have one or a small number of others, for instance, a spouse or child, who they rank equally with themselves or even above themselves. It is these people for whom they are most likely to make large sacrifices or to forgive large transgressions (Clark and Mills, 2012b).

**Abilities and Fortitudes Necessary to Pull off Closeness**

We have emphasized success in adult relationships. Yet many people fail to achieve success in these relationships and a great deal of the scientific literature on close relationships has focused and continues to focus on impediments to forming and maintaining close relationships. There now is wide consensus that viewing the self and others positively and trusting that others can and will care for one noncontingently is a key to becoming involved in close relationships and to succeeding in them (Murray et al., 2006; Murray and Holmes, 2011). Absent confidence that others will be responsive to one and that they will accept one’s responsive overtures, little support will be sought or given. Individuals who lack such confidence have been called, variously, rejection sensitive (Downey and Feldman, 1996), insecure in anxious and/or avoidant ways, or low in self-esteem (Murray et al., 2000), low in communal orientation (Clark et al., 1987). Such people appear to be chronically relationally (and defensively) self-focused meaning that they think about themselves and implications of partner for themselves constantly and have trouble allowing self-protection and focus to fade to the
background when situations call for focusing attention on partners or joint activities such as conversations, dancing work projects that are best accomplished if people focus neither on self nor partner but on the joint activity itself (Clark et al., 2008). As a result they often neglect partners and activities and overreact to real or imagined slights, fail to enter or create situations in which they will find out that others care about them (Beck and Clark, 2009a), view others in negatively biased and often incorrect ways (Clark and Beck, 2011), and react to others’ anxiety by withdrawing from them rather than providing support (Simpson et al., 1992). They may even strike out at the partners in defensive and relationship defeating ways (Murray et al., 2003). As this happens some partners may compensate striving to assure the insecure person’s security (Lemay, in press).

Yet this is likely at a cost to the self and the relationship and partners, at times, will withdraw.

A full discussion of how close relationships fail to be formed, fail to be adequately maintained and disintegrate is beyond the scope of this article (see Partnership Formation and Dissolution in Western Societies). The important point is that successful close relationships require not only knowing implicitly or explicitly what the norms of close relationships are and what is required (something most people likely know but may not see as unattainable), but also having trust in others’ positive regard for the self that provides the fortitude one needs to venture forth into relationships, risk dependence, and follow those norms without fear (Murray and Holmes, 2011).

Summary

Close, communal, relationships consist in mutual intimacy (including understanding and validation of one another) and both giving and seeking responsiveness. They promote the mental and physical well-being of their members. Although poor relationships are often characterized by a lack of stability and conflict and low satisfaction, stability, lack of conflict and satisfaction are not necessarily indicative of high-quality close relationships. Rather researchers the interpersonal processes involved in the provision and seeking of constructive responsiveness in these relationships (and the lack of destructive interpersonal processes) to assess whether a high quality close, communal, relationship exists.

See also: Face Recognition, Psychological and Neural Aspects; Family as Institution; Fertility Theory: Theory of Life History; Evolution; Friendhip During Adolescence and Cultural Variations; Friendship During Childhood and Cultural Variations; Infancy and Childhood: Emotional Development; Partnership Formation and Dissolution in Western Societies; Prenatal and Infant Development: Overview, Current Trends, Future Directions; Welfare.

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