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Ways of Giving Benefits in Marriage: Norm Use, Relationship Satisfaction, and Attachment-Related Variability

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Abstract

Couples reported on bases for giving support and on relationship satisfaction just prior to and approximately 2 years into marriage. Overall, a need-based, noncontingent (communal) norm was seen as ideal and was followed, and greater use of this norm was linked to higher relationship satisfaction. An exchange norm was seen as not ideal and was followed significantly less frequently than was a communal norm; by 2 years into marriage, greater use of an exchange norm was linked with lower satisfaction. Insecure attachment predicted greater adherence to an exchange norm. Idealization of and adherence to a communal norm dropped slightly across time. As idealization of a communal norm and own use and partner use of a communal norm decreased, people high in avoidance increased their use of an exchange norm, whereas people low in avoidance decreased their use of an exchange norm. Anxious individuals evidenced tighter links between norm use and marital satisfaction relative to nonanxious individuals. Overall, a picture of people valuing a communal norm and striving toward adherence to a communal norm emerged, with secure individuals doing so with more success and equanimity across time than insecure individuals.

Keywords

attachment styles, communal norm, exchange norm, relationship satisfaction

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A defining characteristic of high-quality intimate relationships is that each person is noncontingently responsive to the welfare of the other person. Each person attends to the partner's welfare and acts in ways that promote that person's welfare. Each person seeks support from the other as needed. Attention to one's own and one's partner's needs and opportunities for mutually enjoyable activities moves flexibly according to cues of each person's needs and desires. People do not keep records of who has done what, and when responsiveness occurs, positive emotions, relationship satisfaction, and individual and couple well-being emerge (Clark, Graham, Williams, & Lemay, 2008; Clark & Lemay, 2010; Clark & Mills, in press; Clark & Monin, 2006; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Among scholars of close relationships, there is currently little dispute that consistent, noncontingent responsiveness is good for relationships. However, people frequently fail to live up to this ideal: They are sometimes unresponsive unless a partner promises to reciprocate, they sometimes keep track of benefits, and they raise issues of fairness and equity even in the best of relationships.

In the research we report in this article, we examined norm use among a group of engaged, and then married, individuals across

time. We asked four questions: What norms are seen as ideal? Which are followed? What is the trajectory of norm use across time? Finally, are there important and theoretically meaningful individual differences in norm use, links between norm use and relationship satisfaction, and trajectories of norm use across time?

Hypotheses

We set forth five hypotheses:

- Our first hypothesis was that participants (a) would endorse a communal norm as ideal for their marriages, (b) would report that they and their partner follow the norm (albeit to a lesser extent than seen as ideal), and (c) would be most satisfied when they and their partner did follow the norm. We set forth this hypothesis

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because mutual adherence to a communal norm allows for the welfare of each person to be promoted as needs and desires arise. Moreover, given the lack of “strings” attached to communally motivated support, that support can easily be attributed by recipient and donor alike to the donor being a caring person.

- Our second hypothesis was that participants (a) would not endorse an exchange norm as ideal, yet (b) to a small extent, and more than they thought ideal, would report that they and their partners followed this norm, and (c) would be less satisfied to the extent that they followed this norm. When couples operate on an exchange-norm basis, support provided is tied to a desire for repayment. As a result, partners’ needs and desires may be neglected. Moreover, when support is given, it is difficult for either recipient or donor to attribute the action to the donor’s care for the recipient.
- Our third hypothesis was that use of a communal norm would decrease from engagement to 2 years into marriage. It is effortful to follow this norm. When partners are engaged, adherence to this norm will be driven by a desire to establish the relationship and justify commitment as well as by care for one’s partner. Motivation to establish the relationship and justify commitment should decrease across time and the legal marriage commitment. Consequently, adherence to the norm should decrease as well.
- Our fourth hypothesis was that attachment-related insecurities, anxiety and avoidance, would be linked with greater use of exchange norms. Both types of insecurity involve a lack of trust in partners (e.g., Mikulincer, 1998). Adherence to a need-based norm requires high trust that partners will be available, if and when needs arise, across time. Adherence to an exchange norm requires less trust because, after giving support, one can quickly tell if comparable and prompt reciprocation of benefits occurs and can attempt to enforce the partner’s reciprocation if it does not.
- Our final hypothesis was that insecurity in the form of attachment anxiety would result in tighter concurrent links between satisfaction and norm use. Anxious people are hypervigilant about and reactive to issues surrounding responsiveness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Thus, among anxious individuals (relative to less-anxious individuals), changes in satisfaction should be especially likely to result in changes in norm use, and changes in norm use should be especially likely to result in changes in satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Both members of about-to-married couples participated. At the start of the study, the men’s average age was 27.19 years,

the women’s average age was 25.98 years; the couples had dated an average of 34.39 months before engagement and had been engaged an average of 14.44 months. Most participants were Caucasian (92%) and well educated (80% had finished college). No participant had been married previously or had a child.

Procedure

Couples were recruited from bridal fairs and by using brochures, flyers, electronic bulletin boards, and word of mouth. Interested couples were scheduled for a pretesting session, which took place at their homes 3 to 4 weeks before their weddings ($N = 108$ dyads). During this session (Time 1), a researcher explained all procedures and asked each member of the couple to complete the initial questionnaire individually and confidentially. A second questionnaire (Time 2) was mailed to each member of the couple approximately 2 years following their wedding. Husbands’ and wives’ questionnaires were mailed together but were placed in separate envelopes accompanied by separate, stamped and addressed return envelopes. Each envelope included instructions to complete the questionnaires independently and to refrain from discussing them with one another. Ninety-six couples completed and returned the questionnaires.

Measures

Idealization of and adherence to norms. Each participant was presented with a “communal” and an “exchange” prototype for giving and receiving benefits. The communal prototype was as follows:

The way marital relationships should operate is that each person should pay attention to the other person’s needs. Each person should give a benefit to the other in response to the other’s needs when the other has a real need that he or she cannot meet by him- or herself. Each person should do this to the best of his or her ability so long as the personal costs are reasonable. When one person does something for the other, the other should not owe the giver anything.

The exchange prototype was as follows:

The way marital relationships ideally should operate is that each person should benefit the other with the expectation of receiving a benefit of similar value in return. After receiving a benefit, members should feel obligated to give the other a benefit of comparable value. Members of the relationship ought to keep track of benefits given and received in order to keep them in balance.

After reading each prototype, participants indicated their agreement with three statements: “I believe that this is the way marital relationships ideally should operate,” “Over the past

two months, this is the way that I have been operating in my relationship with my spouse,” and “Over the past two months, this is the way my spouse has been operating in his or her relationship with me.” Responses were made using 7-point Likert scales (from -3 , *strongly disagree*, to $+3$, *strongly agree*). Analyses supporting the validity of the adherence measures are provided in Supplemental Analyses in the Supplemental Material available online.

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed using two scales. The first was Norton’s (1983) Quality of Marriage Index, which consists of six items (e.g., “We have a good relationship”) answered on 5-point response scales (from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 5, *strongly agree*; Time 1 $\alpha = .90$, Time 2 $\alpha = .95$). The second was Hendrick, Dicke, and Hendrick’s (1998) Relationship Assessment Scale, which includes seven items (e.g., “To what extent are you satisfied with your relationship?”) answered on 5-point response scales (from 1, *not much*, to 5, *very much*; Time 1 $\alpha = .70$, Time 2 $\alpha = .85$). Scores on these two highly correlated scales (Time 1 $r = .54$, Time 2 $r = .83$) were averaged to create an index of satisfaction.

Attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. Attachment anxiety and avoidance were assessed using 17 items originally developed by Simpson, Rholes, and Phillips (1996). The Avoidance Attachment subscale consisted of 8 items assessing discomfort with closeness (e.g., “I’m not very comfortable having others depend on me”); these items were answered on 7-point response scales (from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 7, *strongly agree*; Time 1 $\alpha = .80$, Time 2 $\alpha = .80$). The Anxiety Attachment subscale consisted of 9 items assessing anxiety about one’s acceptance by other people (e.g., “I often worry that my partner(s) don’t really love me”); these items were answered using the same type of response scales (Time 1 $\alpha = .75$, Time 2 $\alpha = .80$).

Results

Analyses were conducted using multilevel models (via the SAS PROC MIXED function). For analyses to address mean differences (i.e., first vs. second assessment and ideal vs. practiced adherence to communal vs. exchange norms), we used three-level models, with multiple ratings (the score for each index) nested within individuals and individuals nested within dyads. For analyses examining the linear association of norm adherence or idealization with another variable (i.e., anxiety, avoidance, or relationship satisfaction), we used two-level models, with individuals nested within dyads. Intercepts were modeled as randomly varying across higher-level units to account for the nested data structure (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Significant interactions were probed by examining conditional effects (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). First, we present results regarding effects across the whole sample. Then, we examine links between ideal and practiced adherence to the norms and individual differences in attachment-related anxiety

and avoidance. (Zero-order correlations among the study variables are included in Table S1 in the Supplemental Material.)

Normative results

Idealization and practice. Mean scores for idealization and practice of norms are shown in Figure 1. As predicted, at both Time 1 and Time 2, participants agreed that the communal norm is ideal and did not agree that the exchange norm is ideal. Participants rated an exchange norm as significantly less ideal than a communal norm at both times—Time 1: $b = -4.26$, $t(322) = -35.04$, $p < .001$; Time 2: $b = -3.87$, $t(288) = -32.78$, $p < .001$. Figure 1 also reveals that, at both assessments, participants claimed to follow an exchange norm significantly less than a communal norm—Time 1: $b = -3.50$, $t(322) = -25.43$, $p < .001$; Time 2: $b = -3.08$, $t(289) = -22.61$, $p < .001$ —and perceived their partners as following an exchange norm significantly less than a communal norm—Time 1: $b = -3.42$, $t(322) = -24.30$, $p < .001$; Time 2: $b = -2.92$, $t(289) = -20.79$, $p < .001$.

There was also an interaction between type of norm (communal vs. exchange) and idealizing versus practicing the norm (see Fig. 1): People idealized more than they practiced the communal norm, whereas they practiced more than they idealized the exchange norm. This pattern was found both in analyses comparing self-practice ratings with idealization ratings—Time 1: $b = -0.76$, $t(642) = -4.67$, $p < .001$; Time 2: $b = -0.79$, $t(573) = -4.84$, $p < .001$ —and in analyses comparing partner-practice ratings with idealization ratings—Time 1: $b = -0.84$, $t(642) = 4.97$, $p < .001$; Time 2: $b = 0.95$, $t(574) = 5.63$, $p < .001$. Specifically, in the case of self-ratings, the communal norm received higher ratings for being ideal than for being practiced—Time 1: $b = 0.57$, $t(642) = 4.91$, $p < .001$; Time 2: $b = 0.53$, $t(573) = 4.60$, $p < .001$ —whereas the exchange norm received lower ratings for being ideal than for being practiced—Time 1: $b = -0.20$, $t(642) < -1.69$, $p = .09$; Time 2: $b = -0.26$, $t(574) = -2.25$, $p < .05$. Similarly, the communal norm was idealized more than partners were perceived to practice it—Time 1: $b = 0.64$, $t(642) = 5.39$, $p < .001$; Time 2: $b = 0.73$, $t(573) = 6.12$, $p < .001$ —whereas the exchange norm tended to be idealized less than partners were perceived to practice it—Time 1: $b = -0.20$, $t(642) = -1.64$, $p = .10$; Time 2: $b = -0.22$, $t(574) = -1.83$, $p < .07$. Our results further suggest small decreases in idealization and practice of communal behavior over time—drops that were significant for idealization, $b = -0.52$, $t(195) = -6.14$, $p < .001$; self-reported practice, $b = -0.49$, $t(204) = -5.06$, $p < .001$; and perceptions of partner practice, $b = -0.61$, $t(200) = -5.99$, $p < .001$. In contrast, across all participants, idealization, self-reported practice, and perceptions of partner practice of exchange norms did not change significantly over time, $ps > .35$.

Links with marital satisfaction. Communal ideals did not predict satisfaction at either assessment ($ps > .17$). However, self-reported communal practices predicted (or tended to predict)

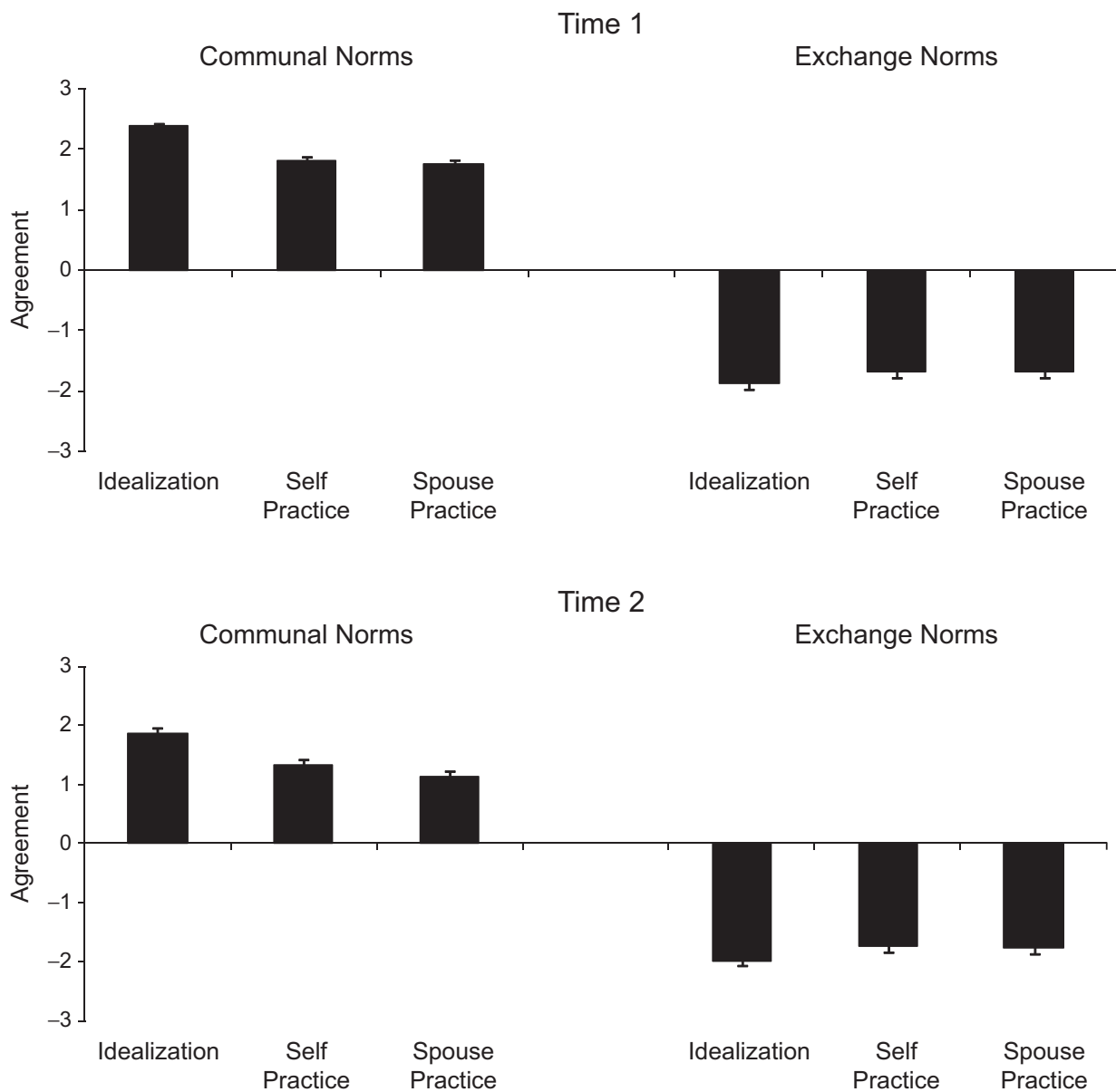


Fig. 1. Idealization and practice of communal and exchange norms. The graphs present participants' mean scores for their own evaluation of the norms, as well as their ratings of their own adherence and their partners' adherence to the norms. Results are shown separately for Time 1 (during the couples' engagement; top panel) and Time 2 (2 years into marriage; bottom panel). Error bars show standard errors.

concurrent satisfaction at both assessment waves—Time 1: $b = 0.07$, $t(199) = 3.86$, $p < .001$; Time 2: $b = 0.05$, $t(149) = 1.74$, $p < .084$. Perceptions of the partner's communal practices also predicted concurrent satisfaction at both assessment waves—Time 1: $b = 0.09$, $t(191) = 5.38$, $p < .001$; Time 2: $b = 0.06$, $t(148) = 2.60$, $p < .05$. These effects did not significantly vary between the assessment waves, $ps > .64$.

The predictive pattern was reversed for adherence to an exchange norm. Idealization of an exchange norm did not predict satisfaction at Time 1 ($p = .85$), but tended to predict reduced satisfaction at Time 2, $b = -0.05$, $t(139) = -1.82$, $p = .07$. Likewise, self-reported adherence to an exchange norm and perceptions of the partner's adherence to an exchange norm did not predict relationship satisfaction at Time 1 ($ps > .25$),

but predicted reduced satisfaction at Time 2—self-reported practices: $b = -0.10$, $t(146) = -4.66$, $p < .001$; perceptions of partner's adherence: $b = -0.10$, $t(158) = -3.95$, $p < .001$. The associations at Time 2 were significantly more negative than the associations at Time 1 for self-reported practices, $b = -0.10$, $t(350) = -4.01$, $p < .001$, and perceptions of the partner's practices, $b = -0.11$, $t(340) = -3.93$, $p < .001$.

Individual differences

Anxiety and avoidance as predictors of norm adherence.

We tested whether anxiety or avoidance predicted concurrent or residualized change in idealization and practice of norms (i.e., we predicted the Time 2 criterion while controlling for

the Time 1 assessment of the criterion). In these models, anxiety and avoidance were entered simultaneously as predictors of the communal- and exchange-norm variables.

At Time 1, greater anxiety predicted lower adherence to a communal norm, $b = -0.17$, $t(208) = -2.09$, $p < .05$; lower perceptions of the partner's adherence to a communal norm, $b = -0.23$, $t(211) = -2.58$, $p < .05$; and higher self-reported adherence to an exchange norm, $b = 0.27$, $t(212) = 2.36$, $p < .05$, but not higher perceptions of partner's adherence to an exchange norm, $p = .14$. At Time 1, avoidance did not have any significant effects on adherence to norms, $ps > .23$. No effects of anxiety or avoidance on ideals were significant, $ps > .46$.

At Time 2, greater avoidance predicted higher adherence to an exchange norm, $b = 0.28$, $t(180) = 2.51$, $p < .05$, and greater idealization of an exchange norm, $b = 0.25$, $t(181) = 2.66$, $p < .01$, and tended to predict higher perceptions of partner's adherence to exchange norms, $b = 0.19$, $t(173) = 1.80$, $p = .07$. At Time 2, avoidance did not predict any of the communal-norm variables, $ps > .38$. No effects of anxiety were significant at Time 2, $ps > .20$.

Avoidance at Time 1 marginally predicted residual change in self-reported adherence to an exchange norm, $b = 0.21$, $t(186) = 1.84$, $p = .067$, and perceptions of the partner's adherence to an exchange norm, $b = 0.17$, $t(183) = 1.65$, $p = .10$. The effect of avoidance at Time 1 on residual change in self-reported adherence to an exchange norm was significant when anxiety at Time 1 was not included in the model, $b = 0.23$, $t(189) = 2.10$, $p < .05$. All other links between anxiety and avoidance and concurrent or residualized change in norm adherence and idealization were not significant, $ps > .13$. Figure 2 illustrates change in norm use, showing the means of exchange behavior for low-avoidance (1 *SD* below the mean) and high-avoidance (1 *SD* above the mean) participants. Participants who were low in avoidance lowered their ratings of both their own and their partners' exchange behavior over time, whereas those who were high in avoidance raised their ratings of both their own and their partners' exchange behavior over time.

Anxiety and avoidance as moderators of links between norm adherence and satisfaction. We tested whether attachment-related anxiety or avoidance moderated the association between concurrent norm adherence and relationship satisfaction. Anxiety moderated the link between self-reported adherence to an exchange norm and relationship satisfaction at Time 1, $b = -0.03$, $t(184) = -2.01$, $p < .05$; the link between self-reported communal behavior and relationship satisfaction at Time 2, $b = 0.05$, $t(149) = 1.91$, $p = .06$; and the link between perceptions of the partner's exchange behavior and marital satisfaction at Time 2, $b = -0.05$, $t(125) = -2.11$, $p < .05$. All other interactions were not significant, $ps > .10$. When anxiety was high (1 *SD* above the mean), greater self-reported exchange behavior predicted reduced satisfaction at Time 1, $b = -0.04$, $t(184) = -2.12$, $p < .05$; greater self-reported communal behavior predicted increased satisfaction at Time 2, $b = 0.09$, $t(148) = 2.52$, $p < .05$; and greater perceptions of the

partner's exchange behavior predicted decreased satisfaction at Time 2, $b = -0.13$, $t(139) = -3.77$, $p < .001$. These relations were not significant when anxiety was low (1 *SD* below the mean), $ps > .38$. There were no moderating effects of avoidance on links between norm adherence and satisfaction.

Discussion

As predicted, overall, the communal norm was perceived as ideal and was reported by participants to have been followed both by themselves and their partners to a greater extent than an exchange norm. This was true both prior to and 2 years into marriage. Adherence to this norm was positively linked to marital satisfaction prior to marriage, and marginally (and not differentially) positively linked to marital satisfaction 2 years into marriage. Adherence to an exchange norm was not considered ideal, and by 2 years into marriage, adherence to an exchange norm was negatively linked to satisfaction. These findings, with the exception of the lack of a significant negative link between higher use of an exchange norm prior to marriage and lower concurrent satisfaction across all participants, support our first two hypotheses. Moreover, they are consistent with prior experimental literature showing that when close relationships are desired, behavior that conforms to a communal norm is linked to greater liking by partners compared with behavior that conforms to an exchange norm (Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark & Waddell, 1985). These findings are also consistent with prior literature linking higher scores on an individual difference measure of exchange orientation with lower satisfaction in close relationships (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; Murstein, Cerreto, & MacDonald, 1977; Murstein & MacDonald, 1983).

Behavior conforming to a communal norm presumably promotes relationship security by prompting support that best matches recipient need and support that both donor and recipient can attribute easily to donor care. Behavior conforming to an exchange norm calls communal care into question because it may result in individual needs being neglected and is likely to be perceived as driven by donor desire for repayment instead of donor care for the partner.

Use of a communal norm and satisfaction across time

Across all participants, self-reported and perceived partner's use of communal norms dropped significantly, albeit slightly, across time. This was predicted. The decrease is likely due to feeling less need to impress the partner and to justify the upcoming commitment. It does not represent a change in the norm considered best for marriages.

The positive associations between concurrent communal norm adherence and satisfaction were significant at Time 1, but only marginally significant at Time 2. Perhaps for many people, communal behavior not only drops across time but also becomes more taken for granted across time. This

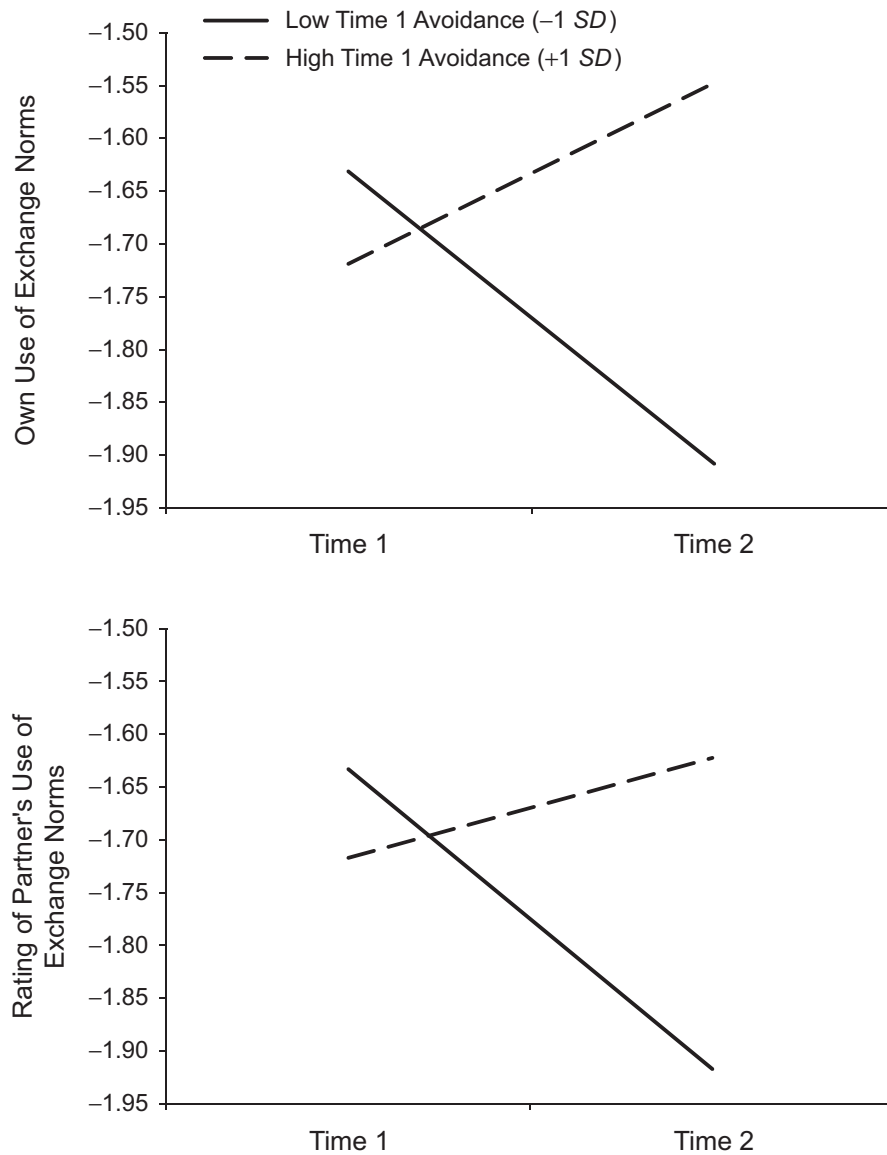


Fig. 2. Change in practice of exchange norms over time. The graphs show the mean ratings of self-practice of exchange behavior (top panel) and partner's practice of exchange behavior (bottom panel) for low-avoidance (1 SD below the mean) and high-avoidance (1 SD above the mean) participants at Time 1 and Time 2.

interpretation, however, must be considered speculative because the difference between these associations was not significant.

Use of an exchange norm and satisfaction across time

Averaging across all participants, adherence to an exchange norm was negatively associated with satisfaction only at Time 2. Yet this level of evaluation masks the most interesting finding of the study: the interaction between attachment-related avoidance and norm adherence across time.

Ties between avoidance and norm use across time

An examination of Figure 2 reveals that avoidance was not associated with norm use just prior to marriage, yet avoidance predicted distinct patterns of change in adherence to norms across time. For participants low in avoidance, both adherence to a communal norm and adherence to an exchange norm decreased across time. In contrast, for participants high in avoidance, as adherence to a communal norm decreased across time, adherence to an exchange norm increased.

These findings raise interesting theoretical and practical possibilities. Consider theory first. Prior to marriage, avoidance was not linked to norm adherence, but avoidance did predict increasing adherence to an exchange norm across time. Perhaps just prior to making a major commitment avoidant people are especially likely to experience “sentiment override” (i.e., focusing almost exclusively on the positives of marriage and their particular partner; cf. Clark & Grote, 1998; Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002; Markman, 1979, 1981). Avoidant people may do so in an effort to reduce their likely especially high feelings of dissonance regarding making a formal commitment to the partner (Festinger, 1957). As a result, among avoidant individuals, the dynamic of low satisfaction driving adherence to an exchange norm may temporarily disappear prior to marriage. This could account for adherence to an exchange norm not being greater among high- versus low-avoidant people right before marriage. Yet after the need to justify the marriage passes and mutual adherence to a communal norm drops somewhat, avoidant individuals’ underlying lack of trust in close others may emerge and drive their increased adherence to an exchange norm across time.

In contrast, people low in avoidance may be realistically a bit cautious and self-protective prior to marriage, accounting for their occasional adherence to an exchange norm at that time. However, across time and formal commitment, people low in avoidance may more comfortably “settle into” their communal relationships. Given the marital commitment and the passage of time, they may gain confidence in the mutual communal nature of their relationship. Consequently, they may less self-consciously and less effortfully strive to adhere to a communal norm. Their growing confidence also may allow them to simultaneously “let go” of their need to adhere to an exchange norm. Such a “settling in” process is consistent with their drops in adherence to both a communal and an exchange norm.

There is also potential practical value to our results: We have identified a reliable premarital predictor (avoidant attachment) of a worrisome trajectory of support processes—an increase in adherence to an exchange norm which itself comes to be negatively associated with satisfaction. This knowledge may be useful to premarital counselors in identifying couples at risk for marital deterioration and in devising interventions to prevent relationship deterioration.

Ties between anxiety and norm use

Attachment anxiety did not predict trajectories of norm use but did predict level of norm use at Time 1 as well as the tightness of some links between norm use and satisfaction. At Time 1, anxiety predicted lower adherence to and perception of partner adherence to a communal norm and higher own use of an exchange norm. It appears that, prior to marriage, anxious people doubt their partner’s care, withhold their own communal care, and self-protect by following an exchange norm more than do nonanxious people.

Moreover, among individuals high in anxiety (but not among those low in anxiety), greater self-reported own adherence to an exchange norm at Time 1 and greater perceptions of the partner’s adherence to an exchange norm at Time 2 were linked with lower satisfaction. Also, among those high in anxiety (but not among those low in anxiety) greater self-reported adherence to a communal norm at Time 2 was linked with higher satisfaction. Our explanation for such tighter links between norm use and satisfaction is that anxious people are hypervigilant to information relevant to the nature of care in their close relationships. Thus, they should be more likely than nonanxious people to react to their own felt satisfaction with changes in own norm use and perceived norm use by their partner and to their own and to perceived changes in partners’ norm use with changes in satisfaction. However, it is important to note that not all concurrent links between norm use and satisfaction were tighter for anxious than for nonanxious people. Understanding why must await further research.

An overall picture

In sum, our data paint a clear picture of couples believing in and, imperfectly, striving to follow communal norms in marriage. Success in doing so and greater satisfaction are positively linked. Adherence to an exchange norm sometimes happens and, in time, comes to be related to lower marital satisfaction. Secure individuals appear able to follow a communal norm with more success and with more equanimity than do insecure people.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>

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