

## 6 Fairness and Equity

### Summer Gift-Giving Season or Ochūgen

In summer, there is a custom of sending a gift, called ochūgen, to those to whom we are indebted. The season for sending ochūgen varies between regions, but usually it falls in July and August. During this period, people wrap food items, seasonings, or household goods in noshi, paper tied with a red and white bow, and send them to any relatives and acquaintances who may have helped them in the past year. Children may send ochūgen to their parents, but only after they grow up and leave home. Family members who live together do not send ochūgen to each other. The origin of this custom is a Chinese Daoist festival. In Daoism, people ward off evil by making offerings at jōgen (January 15th), chūgen (July 15th) and kagen (October 15th). Among them, chūgen became popular as a gift-giving occasion because it overlaps with the bon festival, when many people travel to visit one another.

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The kinds of interactions we have with close others can vary greatly from one relationship to another. The relationships we maintain with our friends are different from those we maintain with our romantic partners, and both are different from our relationships with our parents and family. Even within a single relationship, our interactions are prone to change over time. A dating relationship in its early stages is qualitatively different from an established-long term relationship in many ways, and the kinds of things we do with our friends will change as we move from adolescence to adulthood. Despite these differences, some (e.g., Levinger & Huesman, 1980) have argued that it is possible to view them all from one single theoretical viewpoint—**social exchange theory**. This viewpoint proposes that all human interactions can be construed in terms of exchanges of mutually rewarding activities. It assumes that, although the rewardingness of various activities will be different from person to person and on different occasions, people will conduct their relationships so as to maximize rewards and minimize costs.

The idea that close relationships can be conceptualized in terms of interpersonal exchanges is at once compelling and controversial. It is *compelling* because of the simplicity of its assumptions that seem to be borne out by the relationship phenomena discussed in the previous chapters. Remember that people often desire others who match their level of attractiveness. From the perspective of exchange theory, what people are doing in this process is trading levels of attractiveness so as to gain a fair exchange. People who desire others with similar attitudes and beliefs may similarly be trading mutual agreement. The importance of a reciprocity norm during self-disclosure in its early stages further suggests the operation of exchange principles.

Exchange theory is *controversial* because it suggests that there is little difference in how we conduct our relationships with close others and strangers. In both cases, we attempt to maximize our gains and minimize our costs. Of course, to do this successfully we need to monitor closely what we put into a given relationship and compare our inputs to what we get out of it in return. Many find such a materialistic, tit-for-tat approach inappropriate to explain what happens between close and intimate others. Moreover, the story at the beginning of the chapter suggests that matters of exchange in intimate relationships can often become very complicated.

To appreciate fully both the strengths and shortcomings of exchange theory for the explanation of various processes in close relationships, it is necessary to examine the predictions it makes regarding what types of commodities people exchange, how they decide whether their relationship is fair and equitable, and how they react to inequities. As it turns out, there are several different perspectives, each looking at different aspects of the exchange.

## The Nature of Resources Exchanged

### *Rewards and Costs*

What is it that people in casual as well as close relationships exchange? On the most abstract level, people exchange rewards. By definition, a **reward** is anything a person values, and thus rewards can take on many forms, ranging from money to hugs. As a rule, people tend to place greater value on things they don't have than on things that are in ample supply. Finding a \$20 bill in the laundromat will be more rewarding for a college student, for instance, than it would for a baseball player with a multiyear, multimillion-dollar contract. Similarly, a hug will mean more to someone deprived of physical affection than to someone who receives hugs and kisses all day long.

Of course, the flipside of rewards are *costs*. Giving another person any kind of reward is usually associated with a variety of costs. Because engaging in one activity usually precludes some alternative activity, opportunity costs are almost always incurred. For example, spending an evening talking about one's relationship can be quite rewarding, but it may come at the expense of not being able to go to a movie with friends. Of course, the cost of an activity is directly related to the desirability of the alternative activity. If the alternative to talking about one's relationship is to watch the grass grow, the costs for the activity are fairly low. Apart from the unavoidable opportunity costs, most activities tend to become more costly as they are repeated over a period of time (Secord & Backman, 1964). Frequent exchanges of the same commodity may lead to fatigue in one person and satiation in the other. Remember that the value of a reward decreases once there is no shortage of it. This decrease in value, coupled with an incremental increase in the cost associated with the production of the reward, further increases the total cost of the activity. Because relationships change over time, new activities need to be substituted for older ones to avoid fatigue and satiation and to provide appropriate rewards.

### *Variety of Resources Exchanged*

To talk about exchange exclusively in terms of reward and cost does not really tell us about the specific types of resources, or commodities, that people exchange. In both casual

	Particularistic	
	More	Less
Abstract	Love	Status      Information      Money
Concrete		Goods      Services

Figure 6.1 A Classification of Interpersonal Resources by Concreteness and Particularism According to Turner et al. (1971)

and close relationships, people can exchange a wide variety of resources that fall into six distinct classes: (1) love, (2) status, (3) information, (4) money, (5) goods, and (6) services (Turner, Foa, & Foa, 1971). These resource categories can be distinguished in terms of how concrete and particularistic they are, as illustrated in Figure 6.1.

Goods and services are more concrete than money, and all three are more concrete than love, status, and information, which are relatively more abstract. Furthermore, some resources are more particularistic; that is, their reward value depends on the person who is providing them. Love is perhaps the most particularistic of all resources, simply because finding love in all the wrong places is generally not very rewarding. Money, on the other hand, may be the least particularistic of all resources because, by and large, its value is the same regardless of who gives it to us (notwithstanding drug money or blatant bribes).

Given the differences in the nature of interpersonal resources, one can expect that different rules apply to the exchange in casual as opposed to close relationships. For one thing, it may be that different resources are exchanged. Just as nobody would expect to find love at the hardware store, few would probably expect their loved ones to provide them with roofing nails. More importantly, exchanges among strangers are more constrained. The general expectation is that the exchange will involve resources from the same class or from proximal classes. The clerk at the grocery store can rightfully expect the appropriate amount of money in exchange for a packet of cream cheese. Likewise, the mechanic can expect the appropriate amount of money in exchange for repairing the brakes on our car. People in close relationships have a little more leeway in how they conduct their exchanges. They can trade resources from proximal as well as distal classes. For example, a friend may offer us money, a dinner, or a whole lot of praise in exchange for a little help with her overdue homework. In light of the variability of exchanges possible in close relationships, some (e.g., Scanzoni, 1979b) have gone so far as to propose that intimates spend a great deal of time negotiating the values and exchangeability of certain types of behaviors. Although it is not clear whether relationships can be entirely defined by that, it is clear that a certain amount of negotiation does at least occasionally take place.

### Determining What Is Fair: Equity Theory

Assuming that people in close relationships find ways to decide on the types of resources they wish to exchange, the question becomes: How do they decide if they are getting what they deserve? Some (Homans, 1961) have phrased the answer simply in terms

of interpersonal profit: “The open secret of human exchange is to give the other man behavior that is more valuable to him than it is costly to you and to get from him behavior that is more valuable to you than it is costly to him” (p. 62). This idea, then, proposes that two people will seek maximum gains at minimal cost. Others have argued that people will focus on fairness. Specifically, **equity theory** (Adams, 1965; Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979; Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978) proposes that people scrutinize their outcomes relative to their inputs and then compare the result to their partner’s inputs and outcomes by applying the following formula (Adams, 1965):

$$\frac{O_A - I_A}{I_A} = \frac{O_B - I_B}{I_B}$$

$I_A$  and  $I_B$  represent the respective perceptions of the inputs from Person A and Person B.  $O_A$  and  $O_B$  represent the respective perceptions of the outcomes Person A and Person B are receiving. *Inputs* describe participants’ contributions to the exchange that entitle them to rewards and thus can be considered the costs of the relationships. *Outcomes* describe the positive or negative consequences participants perceive to have received as a result of the exchange. In principle, a relationship is considered to be *equitable* when the ratio of inputs to outcomes of Person A equals the ratio of inputs to outcomes of Person B. In other words, people feel like they are getting a fair shake out of their relationship when their partner puts in as much and receives as much as they do.

### *Establishing Whether There Is Equity*

Of course, one might ask just how people go about determining the magnitude and value of their inputs as well as those of their partner. According to the theory, equity is in the eye of the beholder. In order for the formula to work, two people need to agree on how they assess one another’s inputs and outcomes. This may be more easily said than done. *Inequity* can be fairly easily determined when there is a wide gap between two people’s inputs. For example, if one person spends an hour cleaning the kitchen after dinner while the other person plays basketball for an hour, it is pretty clear who incurred more costs. It may be more difficult to make the same determination when one person washes the dishes while the other person takes out the garbage. One could argue that it may be more costly to do the dishes if it requires more time than taking out the garbage, creating a temporary sense of inequity. But if disposing of the garbage should involve going out in the rain or having to talk with one’s least favorite neighbor, the equation is quickly thrown out of whack because of the increase in cost stemming from getting drenched or having to listen to deliberations about power tools.

Admittedly, the example of cleaning up after dinner is a mundane one. However, it illustrates the difficulties in assessing what is equitable. If it is hard to determine equity regarding two people’s contributions to a simple task, it may be next to impossible to determine if one’s relationship as a whole is equitable. For one thing, assessing equity requires people to scrutinize the many aspects of their relationship at any given point in time. For another, people need to keep track of their inputs and outcomes as well as those of their partner over long periods of time. Even if people were inclined to do that, and there is reason to believe they frequently don’t (Clark & Mills, 1979), there may still be

a problem in terms of the value two people put on their respective inputs and outcomes (Hatfield et al., 1979). A person who puts little stake in an impeccably clean house will likely place little value on his or her partner's painstaking clean-up efforts. Because of this, the gains provided by a clean house will be perceived as relatively low, and, as a result, the other's input tends to be devalued. Of course, the reverse is true for someone for whom a clean house is of paramount importance. Because the gains are fairly high, the other's input will increase in value.

### *Do People Really Seek Equity?*

Given the many problems in deciding what is equitable, one might well ask if people do, in fact, apply an equity rule in determining what is fair in their relationships. One way to figure this out is to look at how well research supports this idea. According to Clark and Chrisman (1994), there is little research that directly examines the extent to which people in ongoing relationships apply an equity rule. However, there is research broadly concerned with the effects of equity on relationship satisfaction and stability, which allows an indirect evaluation of the idea that people would seek equity in a relationship (e.g., Lloyd, Cate, & Henton, 1982; Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985; Sprecher, 1988).

To date, the evidence for the importance of equity is somewhat mixed. In one study (Sprecher, 1986), research participants who were involved in a dating relationship were asked to indicate their level of commitment to the relationship, their experience of positive and negative affect over the past month, whether they or their partner contributed more to the relationship, and who seemed to be getting a better deal out of their relationship. Consistent with predictions from equity theory, research participants who felt that they and their partner were getting an equally good deal out of the relationship and contributed to it equally reported a higher level of commitment and a preponderance of positive emotional experiences. Similarly, Sabatelli and Cecil-Pigo (1985) found that married couples who reported their relationship as equitable were more committed to their relationship than couples who felt their relationship was inequitable. Additionally, Lloyd et al. (1982) found that perceived equity was associated with higher relationship satisfaction among serious as well as casual daters.

More recently, in 5-year longitudinal study of 101 romantic couples, Sprecher (2001) found that most participants felt their relationships were equitable. They also found a strong correlation between global measures of equity and specific equity dimensions, perhaps because similarly anchored scales were used for both. Equity was found across specific dimensions of love, status, money, services, goods, information, and sexuality. Partners did not feel overbenefitted or underbenefitted in these areas of their lives. However, couples perceived equity to be relatively low when it came to money, perhaps reflecting the practice of most men paying for the expenses related to their dates. Sex differences were found in terms of feelings of inequity. To the extent that there was inequity in the relationship, women were more likely to feel overbenefitted, while men were more likely to perceive themselves as being underbenefitted (Sprecher, 2001). Finally, this study did not find that equity increased over time, as the theory suggests.

Thus, there appears to be some evidence that perceived equity is related to happiness as well as relationship satisfaction and stability. However, to conclude from these studies that people may, in fact, apply an equity rule to evaluating the quality of their relationship would be premature. Virtually all the studies in support of this idea used a global measure

of equity (e.g., “Are you getting a better, worse, or equally good deal from your relationship as your partner?”). When dating couples are asked to rate the extent to which there is equity on *specific* dimensions of relationship inputs and outcomes, levels of equity no longer predict relationship satisfaction. Others (Clark & Mills, 1979) have even found that subscribing to a principle of equitable exchange can be downright harmful for the further development of a relationship. Specifically, people in close relationships who feel like they are being repaid for every benefit they award to the other end up being less attracted to that person. More importantly, and contrary to what equity theory predicts, people in a close relationship often avoid keeping track of their respective inputs (Clark, 1984; Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1989).

### *Reactions to Inequity*

The preceding discussion of the difficulties inherent in deciding what is equitable suggests that people in close relationships may be less motivated to achieve and maintain equity at all times. At the same time, it is reasonable to expect that glaring inequities may not go unnoticed. Theoretically, a relationship can be marked by inequity in either one of two ways. A person may find herself underbenefitted. Her outcomes, relative to her inputs, may be lower than that of her partner. Another person may find himself overbenefitted. His outcome, relative to his inputs, exceed those of his partner. According to the theory, both situations should have negative emotional consequences. This is fairly obvious in the case of the person who finds herself underbenefitted. She is likely to feel exploited, unhappy, and angry, and her satisfaction with the relationship may be low. Contrary to what intuition might suggest, the person who finds himself overbenefitted is not much better off. If nothing else, the person should feel guilty about getting more than his fair share. Both types of inequity, along with their respective emotional consequences, should lead to attempts to make the relationship more equitable. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways. People might simply try to convince themselves and their partner that they are getting more or less out of the relationship than they actually do. Or they might try to convince themselves that their partner is getting more or less than he or she does.

Alternatively, people who find themselves in an inequitable relationship may attempt to restore equity behaviorally. An underbenefitted member of a couple may decide to decrease her inputs, whereas an overbenefitted member may increase his inputs. Or the couple may choose the somewhat more difficult option of asking each other to increase or decrease their inputs. Of course, symbolic attempts at restoring equity through changes in the perceptions of inputs may be more successful than actual behavioral attempts, as it is generally easier to change one's perceptions than one's actual behavior.

There is some evidence for some of the predictions equity theory makes about the emotional and behavioral consequences of inequity. Overall, underbenefitting inequity leads to greater distress than overbenefitting inequity (Sprecher, 2001). Further, several studies have shown that being underbenefitted results in feelings of unhappiness and anger, whereas being overbenefitted results in feelings of guilt. Still others (Sprecher, 2001) find gender differences in which underbenefitted men experience anger *and* depression while their female counterparts experience primarily frustration. Moreover, it is women's feelings of being underbenefitted that are most likely to lead to relationship disruption (DeMaris, 2007). Although this finding suggests that perceived inequity contributes to marital dissatisfaction (DeMaris, 2007), there is also evidence that the opposite may occur. Marital



distress can compel partners to begin scrutinizing their relationship outcomes, which may result in perceptions of inequity or unfairness (Grote & Clark, 2001). Of course, realizing unfairness may lead to a further deterioration of the relationship.

These issues aside, *equity* is generally associated with happiness and contentment (Hatfield et al., 1979; Walster, Walster, & Traupman, 1978). However, these particular findings were obtained by asking research participants first about how equitable or inequitable their relationship was and then asking them to indicate how content, happy, angry, and guilty they felt. It is never clear just how much people's self-reports can be trusted (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), and, in the case of these studies, some extra caution should be warranted, especially since no attempt was made to disguise their purpose. It may be that responding to the questions made salient norms about how one *ought* to feel in cases of inequity (e.g., "I get more out of this than my partner, so I had better feel guilty"); thus, the results may be partially due to the demands inherent in each study.

Longitudinal studies have attempted to push our understanding of equity beyond that obtained via paper-and-pencil measures. van Yperen and Buunk (1990) followed the relationships of 736 married Dutch couples for a year and found that equitable relationships were more comfortable and satisfying. And contrary to Sprecher's (2001) findings, relationships that did not dissolve over the course of the study became more equitable over time.

Empirical tests of the predictions made by equity theory about behavioral avenues toward the restoration of equity provide a mixed bag of evidence. Reasoning that underbenefitted members of couples may call in the chips in order to restore equity, one study (Hatfield et al., 1979) hypothesized that dating couples in which the male partner is underbenefitted would have sex more frequently than couples in which the male partner is overbenefitted or couples who have an equitable relationship. The general idea is that there is a double standard suggesting that men are supposed to have sex and women are supposed to dispense it cautiously. Therefore, if a man finds himself shortchanged, equity can be restored by an increase in the frequency with which the couple has sex because it requires an increase in the woman's input to the relationship, which should lead to an increase in the man's outcomes. At the same time, couples in which the man is overbenefitted should have sex less often because women may now withhold sex to restore equity.

Those who find this line of reasoning less than compelling may be reaffirmed by the results of the study, which showed that couples who felt that their relationships were equitable had sex more frequently than any other set of couples. Although this finding is inconsistent with the specific predictions of the study, it does make a great deal of sense, perhaps even from an equity point of view. Remember, couples who feel that their relationship is equitable are generally happier than couples who feel there is inequity. And while happiness is not a prerequisite for sex, common sense suggests that it promotes its enjoyment.

To sum up, at some point, equity theory appeared to be a promising approach to finding out how two people may evaluate their relationship outcomes, including a seemingly easy-to-use formula. In its heyday, some (e.g., Hatfield et al., 1979) felt that equity theory might someday become the foundation for a general theory of human behavior. However, support for its major predictions has been hard to come by. This, combined with a more general distaste for a theory that proposes people would keep track of relationship inputs and outcomes in an almost bean-counting fashion, has put equity theory's seeming promise in perspective.



### Thinking Critically About Relationship Issues, Theories, and Research

- How would you explain the fact that a global measure of equity predicts relationship satisfaction, but equity on specific dimensions does not?
- DeMaris (2007) found a gender difference in the influence of perceived equity on relationship stability, namely that it is women's feelings of being underbenefitted that is most likely to lead to a relationship disruption. How does that fit with the stereotype that women are more idealistic, more romantic, and interested in "the relationship itself" rather than its benefits?
- Inequity contributes to relationship dissatisfaction, but there is evidence that the opposite may also occur: Relationship distress may lead to perceptions of inequity. Can you think of situations in which relationship distress not caused by inequity could lead to feelings of unfairness.

### Evaluating Relationship Outcomes: Comparison Levels

The difficulties with equity theory aside, it is probably fair to say that people will evaluate their relationship at least occasionally. Most people have a pretty good idea of how satisfied or dissatisfied they are in their relationship. Of course, if such evaluations are not based on rules of equity, one must ask just how people go about making these types of assessments.

### The Thibaut and Kelley Model

One approach (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) proposes that people evaluate their relationship against two standards. The first standard is a **comparison level (CL)** that summarizes what people expect to get or deserve from a relationship. This comparison level may be an idealized standard, such as perpetual romance, or it may be a more realistic standard comprised of past relationship experiences, cultural ideas, or social comparison to one's siblings or friends. From this latter perspective, comparison levels can change over time. A series of highly satisfying relationships is likely to increase one's CL, whereas a series of bad relationships is likely to decrease it. The extent to which people are satisfied with their relationship is then a function of their current outcomes compared to their expectations (CL). When the outcomes exceed the CL, people will be satisfied with their relationship; when the outcomes fall below, people will be dissatisfied. The degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction is determined by the magnitude of the discrepancy between outcomes and CL.

In Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) original proposal, the CL was considered a universal quantitative standard against which outcomes are compared. Thus, if Ashley expects five units of companionship and Derek provides eight units, she should be quite satisfied with her relationship. However, the issue becomes complicated when one takes into account people's mental models of relationships—that is, the kinds of things they idiosyncratically expect from their relationship. As it turns out, people vary widely in terms of the characteristics their ideal relationship should have (Rusbult, Onizuka, & Lipkus, 1993). On the surface, Ashley may be quite satisfied with the level of companionship Derek provides, but if she really values passion and intimacy and her outcomes on these dimensions fall



Table 6.1 Different Levels of Satisfaction and Dependence Stemming From Comparisons Between Relationship to a CL and  $CL_{Alt}$

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
0	$CL_{Alt}$	CL	$CL_{Alt}$
CL	0	0	CL
$CL_{Alt}$	CL	$CL_{Alt}$	0

below her CL, she will likely be somewhat unhappy. After all, even though companionship may be a good thing, it does not really compensate for a perceived lack of intimacy and passion. Thus, in order to determine whether someone is satisfied with a relationship, one needs to take into account both the quantity as well as the quality of what is received.

In addition to comparing relationship outcomes to a general comparison level, people use a **comparison level for alternatives** ( $CL_{Alt}$ ). In this comparison, people contrast their current relationship outcomes with the outcomes they could obtain from a possible alternative relationship. If the current outcomes exceed the  $CL_{Alt}$ , people are somewhat dependent on their partners and their relationship will be relatively stable. On the other hand, if the outcomes are lower than the  $CL_{Alt}$ , a person may decide to leave a current relationship in favor of the alternative. Of course, a person's  $CL_{Alt}$  may fluctuate, as its level depends on the availability of possible alternatives, which may vary over time and across situations.

The two comparison levels produce at least four different kinds of relationships, depending on how one's current outcomes stack up against the CL and the  $CL_{Alt}$ , as depicted in Table 6.1. Level 1 shows a person in a relationship marked by *attractive stability*. The person's outcomes from his current relationship exceed both his CL and his  $CL_{Alt}$ . He should be highly satisfied with his relationship, but also fairly dependent on it, because his outcomes from an alternative relationship would be much lower than his current outcomes. Level 2 shows a person in a relationship marked by *attractive instability*. The person's outcomes exceed her expectations, but she could do better by leaving the relationship in favor of the alternative possibility. Level 3 shows a person in a relationship marked by *unattractive stability*. The person is unhappy because he is getting less from his current relationship than what he expects, but by leaving it, he would be even worse off. Level 4 shows a person in a relationship marked by *unattractive instability*. What this individual gets from her current relationship falls below her expectations and what she could get from an alternative relationship. According to comparison level theory, it is a pretty safe bet that the relationship will end soon. In fact, there is ample research suggesting that, compared to individuals whose relationships persist, those whose relationships end often report lower satisfaction along with more attractive alternatives (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985; Simpson, 1987).

Interestingly, our evaluations of possible alternatives appear to decrease as our commitment to a relationship increases. You may recall from Chapter 3 that people in exclusive dating relationships tend to perceive opposite-sex persons as less attractive than people who are dating more casually or not dating at all (Simpson et al., 1990). It turns out that this effect is not limited to perceptions of physical attractiveness, but instead extends to other characteristics, as well (Rusbult, 1983). This tendency to devalue possible alternatives is strongest among those who are committed to a relationship and are presented with an extremely appealing alternative. Furthermore, this devaluation is more closely related to commitment rather than satisfaction per se (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989).

*The Investment Model*

What creates commitment in the first place? This question has been addressed by a model that extends interdependence models in two ways. Specifically, the **investment model** (e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Rusbult, 1983) suggests that attraction and dependence are to some extent influenced by the level of *investment* one has in a relationship. Alina becomes increasingly dependent on Michael to the extent that the relationship is rewarding, that there are few alternatives, and that she feels bound by the relationship (i.e., is highly invested in it). The confluence of these forces leads to relationships marked by increasing cognitive interdependence. As Alina and Michael become increasingly committed to continuing their relationship, foreseeing an extended future, they are likely to engage in more frequent relationship-relevant cognitive activity (e.g., Wegner et al., 1991), and the nature of their identity and self-presentation is likely to shift, as well (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1997). In other words, Alina will come to view herself as part of a unit. Interestingly, this link between commitment and interdependence is strongest in romantic relationships (Agnew et al., 1998), suggesting that it is a unique mechanism that sustains exclusivity—a relationship feature that is more important in romantic relationships than in friendships.

It is all too easy to construe commitment and investment in terms of extemporaneous markers such as marriage. However, they are present to varying degrees in all close relationships—straight and gay alike (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Rusbult, 1983). It appears from these observations that investment is a state of mind one brings to a relationship. Recent work has extended our understanding of the *types* of investments on the level of commitment to a relationship. Goodfriend and Agnew (2008) distinguished investments in terms of their timing (past vs. planned) as well as their materiality (tangible vs. intangible).

Money spent on a relationship would be an example of a past *tangible* investment whereas time spent in a relationship would be an example of a past *intangible* investment. Planned investments represent the goals and investments to come, such as getting married, buying a home, having children, or retiring to Hawaii. Data from five studies using diverse samples of dating and married couples, college students, and an older non-college population supported the idea that both the materiality and the timing of investments mattered. Intangible past investments and planned investments contributed significantly to strengthening commitment. Higher levels of planned investments also serve as a buffer to relationship dissolution and are also more likely to impede, after dissolution, the establishment of new relationships (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008).

Understanding what leads to increases in commitment is of obvious importance as it has been implicated in many important relationship functions—most notably decisions on whether to leave or stay (e.g., Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Le & Agnew, 2003; Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006). A meta-analysis testing the investment model assessed the degree to which relationship satisfaction, the presence of relationship alternatives, and investment size predict commitment and subsequent relationship duration (Le & Agnew, 2003). Relationship satisfaction was a better predictor of relationship duration than the presence of alternatives and investment size, although all three predicted commitment. Finally, the causal arrow points in both directions as commitment predicts relationship satisfaction in married couples (Givertz, Segrin, & Woszidlo, 2016) along with decisions to stay or leave (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010). We revisit the role of commitment on how partners make decisions of this kind in Chapter 13.

In conclusion, the research based on Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) theory does a good job of describing how people evaluate their relationships and in predicting the consequences of certain types of comparison outcomes. People are undoubtedly happy with their relationships if they exceed their expectations, and people become dissatisfied when their relationships fall below their expectations. The theory suggests reasons why many people remain in relationships with which they are unhappy and further suggests reasons why some people may walk out of what seem to be perfectly good relationships. Still, some scholars seem troubled by the suggestion that people apply some sort of calculus involving a comparison of their relationship outcomes. After all, such a notion seems to imply that there is little difference in how we conduct ourselves in close relationships and casual relationships. The following section considers a somewhat radical approach that emphasizes the differences in the norms guiding our relationships with close others and strangers.



### Thinking Critically About Relationship Issues, Theories, and Research

- Can you find commonalities between variants of social exchange theory discussed at the beginning of this chapter and the Thibaut and Kelley model?
- Some research shows a tendency among those in committed relationships to devalue alternatives, especially extremely appealing ones. To make things more interesting, this tendency is not directly related to relationship satisfaction, but with commitment. How would you explain these findings?
- Some research found that intangible and planned investments have a greater influence on relationship stability than tangible and past investments. This conclusion seems a little counterintuitive, especially since one would expect investments that have already been made to weigh more heavily. How would you explain these findings?

### Close Relationships as Communal Relationships

Some (Clark & Mills, 1979) have argued that our relationships with close others are fundamentally different from those we have with casual acquaintances or strangers. According to this view, for example, relationships with our employers and those who provide us with goods and services are based on exchange principles. We expect our employers to compensate us adequately for the amount of effort we put into our jobs. When we realize that we are getting less than we can reasonably expect, we become unhappy and, depending on the availability of alternatives, might decide to take our skills elsewhere. When we pay \$50 for a concert ticket, we expect the band to show up, start on time, and play for more than 45 minutes. When we lend our chainsaw to a neighbor across the street, we often do it with the expectation that someday he will let us borrow his jumper cables. In all these examples, people exchange things with the expectation of getting something in return, either immediately or in the near future.

Other types of relationships are not as easily captured in terms of exchange. For example, precisely what do teachers and their students exchange? If it is a tradeoff between effort and grades, what are the teacher's contributions to the exchange? What is the nature

of the exchange that takes place between parents and their children? Historically and culturally, children were often expected to provide for their parents once they reach old age. However, this type of exchange has in many cases given way to employer-sponsored retirement funds, social security, and nursing homes. Of course, one could argue that raising children has its own rewards. Then again, how many smiles and coos do we expect in return for changing one messy diaper?

Faced with such difficulties in conceptualizing a variety of relationships in terms of exchange principles, Clark and Mills (1979) proposed that close relationships may best be considered communal in nature. In **communal relationships**, giving and receiving benefits are guided by different norms and principles, which render them qualitatively different from **exchange relationships**.

### *Giving and Receiving Benefits*

In *exchange relationships*, benefits are given either in exchange for past benefits or with the expectation of receiving benefits in the future. This is why we often feel compelled to return favors when we are dealing with relative strangers or casual acquaintances. Such considerations do not matter in close relationships. Instead, the giving of benefits is, or should be, guided by the other's needs or our desire to please the other (Clark & Mills, 1979). For example, in deciding on a wedding gift for a couple of friends, we carefully examine what they would like and need by consulting their registry and making a choice accordingly. It matters little what they have given us for our own wedding. Moreover, if we find that a close other responds to us by returning favors and assistance in a tit-for-tat fashion, we are likely to experience a measure of discomfort, and we may even like him or her less.

These assertions about a need-based norm regarding the giving and receiving of benefits in close relationships have received a fair amount of empirical support. One of the first investigations was designed to test the idea that in exchange relationships, benefits are given in exchange for receiving past benefits or with the expectation of future benefits. In *communal relationships*, on the other hand, benefits are given according to the other's needs, without consideration of past or future benefits (Clark & Mills, 1979). In this study, male research participants were led to believe that they could expect either an exchange or a communal relationship with a female confederate who posed as either married or new in town and thus anxious to meet people. Participants then worked on a task that required them to create as many words from a set of letters as they could for points from the experimenter. While doing the task, they were under the impression that the female confederate was in another room doing the same task but using fewer letters. Because that essentially made the confederate's task harder, the experimenter gave research participants the opportunity to send any extra letters to the confederate if she so requested through an elaborate message system. This manipulation allowed research participants to give benefits to another with whom they expected either an exchange or communal relationship. In addition, the confederate responded to research participants' benefits in one of two ways. She sent research participants a note, thanking them for the letter, and included a letter from her set in return. This essentially communicated that she was desiring an exchange relationship. Alternatively, she sent research participants a note containing a simple "Thank you" without returning the favor. At the end of the experiment, research participants were asked to indicate their liking for the confederate.

Table 6.2 Liking Based on Relationship Expectations and Compliance With Relationship Norms

	<i>Believes confederate is single</i>	<i>Believes confederate is married</i>
<b>Confederate follows exchange norms</b>	Lower levels of liking	Liking is high for this confederate
<b>Confederate follows communal norms</b>	Liking high for this confederate	Lower levels of liking

The results of the experiment were in line with what Clark and Mills (1979) had predicted. Research participants who expected an exchange relationship with the allegedly married confederate liked her most when she followed exchange-based norms—that is, when she returned research participants' favors. On the other hand, research participants who expected the possibility of a communal relationship with the single woman liked her most when she followed communal norms—that is, when she offered no repayment. Moreover, when the confederate violated the norms of the type of the expected relationship by either following communal norms in the exchange situation or exchange norms in the communal situation, research participants' liking of her decreased substantially (see Table 6.2).

There are several reasons that may lead to decreased liking for someone who violates our expectations about the rules in which people in exchange and communal relationships are to conduct themselves. In exchange relationships, *giving* a benefit comes with the expectation of repayment, ideally in the form of a comparable benefit. At the same time, *receiving* a benefit creates an obligation to respond with a comparable benefit. When this expectation is violated, people will feel shortchanged and exploited, just as equity theory would predict. However, this same expectation is not only absent in communal relationships, but it may be downright absurd (e.g., Mills & Clark, 1994). In its strongest form, it would suggest that if Jennifer gives Jason a three-pack of Under Armour briefs for his birthday, Jason is to reply in kind (three thongs from Victoria's Secret?). At the very least, this type of gift exchange is likely to leave Jennifer with a sense of bewilderment at Jason's lack of originality. Things do not become much better if Jason decides on a gift that simply costs as much as the underwear and is thus comparable in value. After all, it is considered tacky to leave the price tag on gifts (partly because it creates the impression that we expect future, comparable repayment).

Our expectations of what should happen in a communal relationship can influence how we perceive others, how we behave toward them, and how much we like them. That is, holding a communal orientation also has the power to break down barriers and facilitate the development of interdependence (Lemay & Clark, 2008). In other words, it is relationship promoting. For example, research participants who perceived themselves to have a high degree of communal responsiveness projected this orientation onto their partners. Believing their partners to be equally communal, participants reacted with relationship-promoting behaviors such as greater self-disclosure, caring, and positive views of their partner (Lemay & Clark, 2008).

Of course, the differences in the norms guiding the giving and receiving of benefits in exchange relationships, as opposed to communal relationships, should be reflected in terms of how much we like someone who either follows or violates the respective rules. Moreover, one would also expect to find differences in terms of how closely people keep track of their inputs in casual and close relationships. Specifically, one would expect people

in casual relationships to monitor their inputs more closely than people in communal relationships. This speculation was borne out in two studies (Clark, 1984) that looked at the communal-exchange distinction in two ways.

The first study was similar to the procedure used by Clark and Mills (1979). Pairs of strangers were led to believe that their partner desired either an exchange or communal relationship. All research participants then worked on a joint task for which they expected a reward. The task consisted of circling numbers that were arranged as a matrix; the reward would be given according to how well the pair (rather than the individuals) performed. To complete the task, research participants could choose pens that were the same color as or a different color from the one their partner used. As expected, research participants who considered the relationship with their partner as an exchange relationship chose the different color pens significantly more often (87.5 percent of the time) than what one would expect by chance. Apparently, their choice was motivated by a desire to keep track of each other's inputs in the service of dividing the joint reward proportionately. At the same time, research participants who desired a communal relationship chose the different color pens significantly less often than what one would expect by chance (12.5 percent of the time), presumably because they felt compelled to obscure any differences in the respective inputs. Similar results were obtained in the second study, when the behavior of friends, who should think of their relationship as communal in nature, was compared to the behavior of strangers, who should think of their relationship as an exchange relationship.

For the same reason that keeping track of inputs becomes unimportant for communal relationships, keeping track of the other's *needs* increases in importance. This should be true regardless of whether the other person has an opportunity to reciprocate for a benefit in kind. Instead, the giving of benefits in communal relationships should be exclusively guided by an orientation toward the other's needs. This should not be the case in exchange relationships, where reciprocation, expected or actual, should determine the willingness to give a benefit. These hypotheses were confirmed in a study (Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986) that employed a paradigm similar to the one used by Clark and Mills (1979). The main difference was that instead of actually returning benefits, research participants had a chance to check on whether their partner needed help under conditions of reciprocation or no reciprocation. As it turned out, research participants who expected an exchange relationship checked more often when they knew the other might reciprocate, whereas for research participants who expected a communal relationship, the possibility for reciprocation did not influence the frequency with which they checked for calls for help. Another way to look at relationship orientation is in terms of stable individual differences. In other words, people chronically differ in the extent to which they approach relationships in an exchange or communal fashion. Toward that end, Mills and Clark (1994) developed a scale to measure these individual differences. It is depicted in Table 6.3.

### *Controversies Surrounding the Communal-Exchange Distinction*

Despite the impressive amount of research in its favor, the distinction between exchange and communal relationships is not without its critics. One frequent argument claims that the distinction is based on research conducted in somewhat artificial laboratory settings in which the type of relationship is experimentally manipulated. However, this argument is not particularly compelling in light of the fact that studies that looked at the



Table 6.3 Items from the Communal and Exchange Orientation Scale

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The nature of a relationship influences which orientation (communal versus exchange) people adopt. In addition, communal-exchange orientation may also be viewed as an individual difference variable. Some people approach relationships with a communal orientation, whereas others approach them with an exchange orientation. Margaret Clark and her colleagues (e.g., Mills & Clark, 1994) have developed two scales to measure such individual differences. Following are some sample items from both scales. On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely), respondents rate the extent to which these statements characterize themselves.

*Items from the Communal Orientation Scale*

It bothers me when other people neglect my needs.  
 When making a decision, I take other people's feelings into account.  
 I believe people should go out their way to be helpful.  
 I expect people I know to be responsive to my needs and feelings.  
 When I have a need that others ignore, I'm hurt.

*Items from the Exchange Orientation Scale*

When I give something to another person, I generally expect something in return.  
 When someone buys me a gift, I try to buy that person a gift as comparable as possible.  
 When people receive benefits from others, they ought to repay those others right away.  
 It's best to make sure things are always kept "even" between two people in a relationship.

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Source: J. Mills and M.S. Clark, "Communal and Exchange Relationships: Controversies and Research," in R. Erber and R. Gilmour (Eds.), *Theoretical Frameworks for Personal Relationships* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1994). Reprinted by permission.

behavior of friends (e.g., Clark, 1984; Clark et al., 1989) have, by and large, obtained results that are consistent with those studies that manipulate the type of relationship experimentally.

A second issue relates to whether communal relationships are really exchange relationships with an extended time perspective. In other words, people in communal relationships may not expect immediate repayment or reciprocation, but instead expect the giving and receiving of benefits to be equitable in the long run (Batson, 1993). However, this idea is not easily reconciled with the findings showing that people in communal relationships do not keep track of their inputs. Without such knowledge, it is unclear how they would determine what to expect in the future (Clark & Mills, 1993).

A final and related criticism holds that the etiquette of the exchange is what sets communal relationships apart from exchange relationships (Batson, 1993). You expect the mechanic who worked on your car to present you with a bill for his services, but you probably don't expect your date to directly "pay" for dinner with affection. However, the main reason for not holding this expectation is that a communal orientation prevents you from seeking this kind of quid pro quo while at the same time allowing you to *anticipate* exchanges of affection at a future point in time (Clark & Mills, 1993).

*Communal Orientation and Relationship Satisfaction*

It appears, then, that the distinction between exchange and communal relationships is a meaningful one both in terms of its theoretical and empirical foundations. By adopting a communal orientation, partners in a close relationship respond to each other's needs, as we

have seen. Their responsiveness is in large part a matter of projection. Essentially, people project their own care and supportiveness for their partner onto the perceptions of their partner's care and supportiveness for them. And the projected perceptions of responsiveness promote satisfaction with the relationship (Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007). Further contributing to relationship satisfaction may be that partners in a communal relationship are more willing to express positive *and* negative emotions, which is associated with more liking for the other (Clark & Taraban, 1991).

Of course, it is entirely possible that responsiveness may have at least some limits. For example, whether or not one responds to another's need may to some extent be determined by its perceived legitimacy. Most people are probably somewhat reluctant to accommodate their partner's need for "more space." It is also possible that people for whom equity is highly salient, perhaps because they are deprived of it at work and elsewhere, might seek it in their close relationships in a compensatory fashion. None of these issues is likely to shatter the usefulness of the distinction between communal and exchange relationships. In fact, research (Bartz & Lydon, 2006) has found predicted patterns of preferences for either communal or exchange norms that cleave along the lines of an individual's attachment style. Securely attached individuals were more comfortable in communal situations while avoidantly attached individuals actually disliked others who attempted to respond according to communal norms.



### Thinking Critically About Relationship Issues, Theories, and Research

- Some relationships are difficult to capture in terms of the exchanges they entail. Relationships between teachers and student are a case in point. Do you think they fit better with the exchange or the communal type? How would you describe them?
- In communal relationships benefits are given according to the other's needs, without consideration of one's own benefits. How can you reconcile that with what you know about the need to belong, the need for intimacy, and the need for affiliation?
- Do you think the orientation could change from communal to exchange in a romantic relationship? What could cause such a shift? What might be the consequences?

### Summary

<b>Issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships as the exchange of interpersonal resources</li> <li>• Inequity in relationships</li> <li>• The relationship of commitment and investments to relationship stability</li> <li>• Commitment</li> <li>• Communal vs. exchange orientation in intimate relationships</li> </ul>
<b>Theories</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equity theory</li> <li>• Comparison level theory</li> <li>• Investment model</li> <li>• Communal-exchange theory</li> </ul>

- Research**
- A great deal of research supports equity theory, although results are frequently based on self-reports
  - At least one study failed to support predictions regarding attempts to restore equity
  - Comparison level theory has been supported by several studies that showed that satisfaction combined with dependence are important to stay/leave decisions
  - Commitment is an important mediator of perceptions of the attractiveness of alternatives
  - A meta-analysis of studies on the investment model supports the roles of relationship satisfaction, availability of alternatives, and investments into the relationship in predicting commitment and stay/leave decisions (Le & Agnew, 2003)
  - Studies in which participants' expectations for communal vs. exchange relationship were manipulated demonstrated that both types of relationships are guided by different principles regarding the giving and receiving of benefits (Clark & Mills, 1979)
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## Key Terms

*Social exchange theories*: a set of theories proposing that all human interactions can be construed in terms of exchanges of mutually rewarding activities.

*Reward*: in social exchange theory, anything a person values.

*Equity Theory*: a theory that proposes that individuals in relationships seek a ratio of inputs to outcomes that is equal to their partner's.

*Thibaut and Kelley Model*: this model predicts that satisfaction and stability of a relationship are determined by the way people compare their relationship to two standards—a comparison level, and a comparison level for the alternatives.

*Comparison level*: standard of comparison that summarizes what people expect to get from a relationship.

*Comparison level for alternatives*: standard of comparison between current relationship outcomes and outcomes from a possible alternative relationship.

*Investment model*: suggests that attraction and dependence are influenced by the level of investment one has in a relationship.

*Communal relationship*: type of relationship in which benefits are given according to needs, without consideration of past or future benefits.

*Exchange relationship*: type of relationship in which benefits are given either in exchange for past benefits or with the expectation of future benefits.