

Communal and exchange relationship perceptions as separate constructs and their role in motivations to donate

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Abstract

Researchers have operationalized communal and exchange relationship perceptions as either mutually exclusive categories or opposite ends of a continuum. This research conceptualizes these relationships as distinct constructs that should be measured separately. We develop multi-item measures of communal and exchange relationship perceptions and find that they are actually *positively* correlated. We also examine the way communal and exchange relationship perceptions combine to influence intrinsic, extrinsic, and *social* motivations to donate, a category stipulated in economics, but not in psychology. We find that both relationship perceptions influence consumer attitudes toward donating through a mix of intrinsic, extrinsic, and social motivations.

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Understanding consumers' perceptions of their relationships with organizations has increasingly become an area of interest for consumer researchers. In the study of consumer helping behaviors, such as donating money to charity, volunteering time, spreading word of mouth, and participating in market research, a particular emphasis has been placed on consumers' perceptions of communal and exchange relationships (Aggarwal, 2004; Goodwin, 1996; Gremler, Gwinner, & Brown, 2001; Johnson, Peck, & Thomas, 2009). The difference between communal and exchange relationships is in the norms that govern helping behavior within the relationship. Individuals who perceive an exchange relationship expect to help or give benefits to their relationship partner when they have received or anticipate receiving a comparable benefit in exchange, *quid pro quo* (Clark & Mills, 1993). In contrast, individuals who perceive a communal relationship expect to help or give benefits to their relationship partner out of a caring or concern for the partner's needs or a desire to see the partner

benefit, without the expectation of receiving comparable benefits in return (Clark & Mills, 1993). Communal and exchange relationships were first identified in the interpersonal relationships literature (Clark, 1981; Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1989) and have also been found to exist and exhibit many of the same characteristics within consumer–organization relationships (Aggarwal, 2004; Goodwin, 1996).

In the interpersonal relationships literature, communal and exchange relationship perceptions are generally treated as mutually exclusive (Clark & Mills, 1993). Individuals are assumed to perceive their relationships as either communal or exchange, but not a combination of the two. This treatment appears to be based on the belief that the norms that govern helping behavior in communal and exchange relationships are mutually exclusive, thus suggesting that both norms cannot simultaneously govern a relationship.

If communal and exchange consumer–organization relationships are mutually exclusive, then organizations must be able to recognize whether their consumers perceive a communal or exchange relationship in order to treat their consumers consistently with the norms of their relationship perceptions.

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Indeed, much of the research on communal and exchange consumer–organization relationships has emphasized situations in which consumers are asked to engage in behaviors that violate the norms of their perceived relationships, such as when a consumer who perceives a communal relationship is offered a reward for helping (Aggarwal, 2004; Johnson et al., 2009). These norm violations have been found to have a negative effect on consumers' attitudes toward helping the organization and willingness to help the organization, leading researchers to conclude that it is essential to correctly identify a consumer as perceiving either an exchange or a communal relationship.

However, this conceptualization has not been empirically tested. Communal and exchange interpersonal relationships are usually manipulated experimentally, through the use of relationship scenarios or priming exercises, with individuals placed into either an exchange or communal condition (Clark, 1986). Relationship scenarios have also been used to manipulate communal and exchange relationships in the consumer–organization relationships literature (Aggarwal, 2004). Perceptions of exchange and communal relationships between consumers and organizations have also been manipulated by giving participants definitions for the two relationships and asking them to think of a real relationship that they have with an organization that fits one of the two definitions (Johnson et al., 2009). All of these approaches categorize individuals into either an exchange or a communal relationship. Therefore, researchers have been unable to test whether the conceptualization of communal and exchange relationships as separate, mutually exclusive categories is appropriate, whether communal or exchange relationships should be conceptualized as opposite ends of a single continuum, or whether they should be conceptualized as separate, distinct constructs with different effects on behavior.

This research presents the first empirical test of the dimensionality of consumer communal and exchange relationship perceptions. In order to meet our research objectives, we develop new measures of communal and exchange relationship perceptions. Using surveys of consumers from two non-profit arts organizations, we measure consumers' perceived exchange and communal relationships with the organization as separate constructs, as well as their motivations and attitudes toward donating to the organization. We find that, in contrast to the assumption of mutual exclusivity made in the literature, perceived communal and exchange relationships operate as separate constructs, with most respondents perceiving relationships that are a mix of communal and exchange and experiencing multiple motivations to help the organization. This suggests that the assumption that organizations must categorize their consumers into either communal or exchange relationships to avoid norm violations may be unfounded.

Communal and exchange relationships as separate constructs

While communal and exchange relationships have traditionally been assumed to be mutually exclusive, the interpersonal relationships literature acknowledges that a communal relation-

ship is not completely devoid of equitable exchanges. Exchanges can and do occur within communal relationships, but they are not the norm, and the social consequences if the exchange is not equitable are not as high as they are in an exchange relationship (Clark & Mills, 1993). For example, a parent/child relationship is usually assumed to be communal, but a parent may loan a child money and expect to be repaid. Similarly, it is not assumed that an exchange relationship is completely devoid of unreciprocated benefits. Clark and Mills suggest that individuals will offer unreciprocated help even to strangers when the need is great, such as calling an ambulance for someone who has collapsed, or when the cost of helping is low, such as giving directions (Clark & Mills, 1993; Mills & Clark, 1982). Again, these instances are viewed as exceptions within an exchange relationship, and not the norm.

One explanation offered for these instances of exchanges within communal relationships and unreciprocated help within exchange relationships is the conceptualization of communal relationships as varying in strength (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). Individuals are believed to have communal relationships of differing strengths with different relationship partners. For example, an individual's relationship with his or her child is likely to be stronger than the same individual's relationship with a friend, even if both are perceived to be communal relationships (Mills et al., 2004). A weaker communal relationship would have lower expectations that all help must be given without the expectation of reciprocity and would be more likely to include instances of reciprocal exchange. On the other hand, the presence of unreciprocated help in stranger interactions leads researchers to conclude that all interpersonal exchange relationships incorporate a weak communal component (Mills & Clark, 1982). Researchers also suggest that an interpersonal relationship can begin as an exchange relationship and, as the relationship increases in strength, gradually transform into a communal relationship (Clark & Mills, 1993). This theorized transformation has been used to argue that rather than two separate categories, the two constructs are best conceptualized as opposite ends of a continuum (Clark & Mills, 1993; Mills & Clark, 1982).

This idea of a "weaker communal relationship" in which reciprocal exchanges still occur and are expected seems even more likely in consumer–organization relationships. All consumer–organization relationships are fundamentally based in exchange, simply by the nature of what it means to be a consumer (Bagozzi, 1975). It is difficult to imagine that a consumer would continue to perceive a communal relationship with an organization if the exchanges that were embedded in the relationship were perceived to be unfair or inequitable. Rather, it seems likely that a consumer who perceives a communal relationship with an organization would still expect the organization to behave consistently with some of the norms of an exchange relationship.

This is apparent in the literature examining perceptions of consumer–organization relationships. For example, Fournier (1998) finds that consumers who perceive a strong brand relationship exhibit tolerance, accommodation, and forgiveness toward the brand when their expectations are not perfectly met,

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