Exploring how exchange orientation affects conflict and intimacy in the daily life of
romantic couples

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Abstract

We test the hypothesis that partners' tendency to "keep score" in a relationship—as reflected in their exchange orientation—will moderate the effect of daily conflicts on their relationship evaluations. Cohabiting romantic partners ($N = 82$ couples) participated in a 28-day daily diary study. Partners higher in exchange orientation showed lower intimacy with their partner on days with conflict compared to days without conflict; the effect was attenuated for partners lower in exchange orientation. This result held even while adjusting for daily negative affect. We conclude that close monitoring of costs and benefits in a relationship, a characteristic of partners with high exchange orientation, may lead partners to overreact to simple daily conflicts, to the detriment of relationship evaluations.

Key words: "close relationships", "exchange orientation", "conflict", "intimacy", "daily diary"

Is a moment of relationship conflict just a bump in the road, or does it reflect deeper issues? In the present research, we examine whether exchange orientation, characterized by score-keeping and close monitoring of relationship equity (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010), will exacerbate the impact of daily conflict. We propose that the higher partners are in exchange orientation the more likely they are to interpret daily conflict as diagnostic of poor relationship functioning that day.

Conflicts occur in every relationship and have important consequences at the level of the individual (e.g., more negative mood; Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989), and at the level of the couple (e.g., dissatisfaction, dissolution; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). However, individual differences in how people perceive conflict and understand relationships can moderate its costs. For example, both higher growth beliefs and higher trait authenticity attenuate the impact of conflict (Knee, Patrick, Vietor, & Neighbors, 2004; Wickham, Williamson, Beard, Kobayashi, & Hirst, 2016), whereas higher interpersonal or rejection sensitivity exacerbate it (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Smith & Zautra, 2001). Each of these individual differences contributes to adaptive or maladaptive attributions for and construal of conflicts: growth beliefs cast conflicts in a positive light; trait authenticity buffers the self. By contrast, interpersonal and rejection sensitivities cast partners and conflicts in a negative light and can lead to problematic sentiment override: when people feel negatively about their relationships as a whole, they are more likely to interpret conflict situations negatively, even if their partners' intentions were relatively benign (Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996).

Exchange orientation plays an important role in how people understand their relationships. People higher in exchange orientation are characterized as providing benefits

(doing favors, giving gifts, etc.) to others with the expectation of a comparable benefit in return. Giving or receiving a benefit incurs a debt that the partner or self is obligated to repay (Clark et al., 2010; Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark & Waddell, 1985; Grote & Clark, 1998). People higher in exchange orientation closely monitor the relationship to keep track of both their and their partner's cost/benefit ratios, with an eye towards keeping everything equal. This is contrasted with communal orientation in which people higher in communal orientation provide benefits with the intention of filling an anticipated or perceived need out of the care they have for their partner (Beck & Clark, 2010; Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark & Waddell, 1985; Grote & Clark, 1998). They do not consider benefit provision to be part of a series of exchanges because that would negate the underlying assumption that the benefit provider is motivated by care for their partner's well-being rather than by potential future benefits (Clark et al., 2010; Clark & Mills, 1979; Grote & Clark, 1998).

Although previous research has connected exchange orientation and lower relationship quality (Clark & Waddell, 1985; Murstein, Cerreto, & Donald, 1977), potential mechanisms for this effect are relatively understudied. Buunk & Yperen (1991) found that higher exchange orientation exacerbated the negative impact of perceived inequities on overall relationship satisfaction. Although exchange orientation has been shown to increase aggression and avoidance during conflict (Bippus, Boren, & Worsham, 2008), the potential for exchange orientation to exacerbate the effect of conflict on daily relationship evaluations has not been examined. In the present study, we investigate a potential mechanism whereby exchange orientation negatively impacts relationships, namely by exacerbating the impact of conflict. Note that we expect this effect to occur regardless of whether the relationship is generally equitable because the monitoring would emphasize the inequity on a particular day.

We further expand upon the previous work by examining participants' relationships and conflicts using a daily diary method. This creates a level of ecological validity that cannot be achieved in lab-based studies. It also allows us to examine daily variations in our process of interest. We propose that people higher in exchange orientation are more attentive to the daily fluctuations in the cost/benefit ratios in their relationships and link these fluctuations more closely to their daily relationship evaluations. Accordingly, we predicted that conflict on a given day would decrease feelings of intimacy, but that higher exchange orientation would exacerbate this effect. We expected people higher in exchange orientation will be vulnerable specifically to overgeneralizing a conflict to the state of their relationship on a particular day. Therefore, we further hypothesized that although general negative mood would be higher on days when a conflict occurred, this effect would not be moderated by exchange orientation.

While exchange orientation and communal orientation are often conceptualized in tandem, and in some cases have been operationalized as a single dimension (Clark & Finkel, 2005), previous studies using both of these measures have found them to be uncorrelated or weakly negatively correlated (Bresnahan, Chiu, & Levine, 2004; Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Mills & Clark, 1994) and statistically independent using factor analysis (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993). Given that we are most interested in the processes involved with exchange orientation, we decided that treating the two constructs as separate was the most appropriate method for our analyses. Although we did not have specific hypotheses for how communal orientation might interact with conflict, we explore its effects below.

Methods

Participants

Flyers describing the study and inclusion criteria were placed in campus mailboxes of graduate students from several urban universities; snowball sampling was also encouraged. To participate, couples had to be cohabitating for a minimum of six months when the study began. The final sample consisted of 82 couples (age $M = 29$ years, $SD = 6$ years, range = 20-66 years; 68% White, 7% Hispanic, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% Black, 13% other, and 1% missing). Two gay couples were recruited and included in the final sample because results remained consistent including and excluding them from analyses (see supplement on the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/fbz3y/>). Participants received \$50 and were entered into a raffle for \$1,000.

Procedure

In the four weeks before the diary period, participants were sent an initial \$10, two consent forms, two background questionnaires, and two return envelopes. Each week during the 4-week diary period, participants received a week of daily diaries and two return envelopes. Participants were told not to discuss their answers with their partner. We focus on the measures used in the current investigation (see [supplement](#) for full text of these measures and see Cranford et al., 2006; Gleason, Iida, Bolger, & Shrout, 2003; Iida et al., 2008; Kennedy, Bolger, & Shrout, 2002 for additional investigations with these data).

Measures

Exchange and communal orientation. Trait-level exchange orientation and communal orientation were measured in the background questionnaire; the measures were adapted to target preferences for exchange and communal norms in their relationship rather than general views about exchanges with others (Clark, Oullette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987; Clark, Taraban, Wesner, & Ho, 1989; Mills & Clark, 1994). The exchange orientation scale consisted of 9 items and the

communal orientation scale consisted of 14 items (exchange: $\alpha = .69$; communal: $\alpha = .82$) rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = definitely does not sound like me; 5 = definitely sounds like me).

Sample items for exchange orientation include, “When I give something to my partner, I generally expect something in return,” and “It’s best to make sure things are kept ‘even’ between me and my partner.” Sample items for communal orientation include, “When making a decision, I take my partner’s needs and feelings into account,” and “I often go out of my way to help my partner.”

Conflict. In the daily diaries, participants indicated if they had a conflict with their partner that day. We used conflicts reported by both partners on a given day as these conflicts would likely be the most consequential conflicts (Kennedy et al., 2002). Conflict was dummy-coded (0 = conflict not reported by both partners; 1 = conflict reported by both partners).

Intimacy. Each evening, participants rated three intimacy items (*emotionally close*, *physically intimate*, and *connected*) on a 7-point scale. Following Thompson & Bolger (1999), we removed the between-person variance from the three intimacy items and we evaluated the adequacy of a one-factor model of the within-person change variance of the items. We found in an exploratory factor analysis all items loaded on one (factor loadings $> .77$) and that the α reliability estimate for the three-item scale was .83.

Negative evening mood. Each evening, participants completed an abbreviated Profile of Mood States (McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1971), measuring the four highest-loading items from the anxious, angry, and depressed subscales. Items were rated on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 9 = extremely). We evaluated the adequacy of a one-factor model of the within-person change variance of the items. We found in an exploratory factor analysis all items loaded on one (factor loadings $> .52$) and that the α reliability estimate for the three-item scale was .89.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We first examined the frequency of conflicts within the sample, as well as the relationship between conflicts and exchange and communal orientation. On average, couples reported 2 conflicts ($SD = 2$ conflicts) during the daily diary period, and the number of conflicts ranged from 0-10 across the 28-day period. Next, we examined whether exchange or communal orientation affected couples' levels of conflict in two linear regressions predicting number of conflicts from trait levels of exchange and communal orientation. Exchange orientation did not affect number of conflicts reported, $b = 0.04$, $t(162) = 0.12$, $p = .902$, 95% CI [-0.60, 0.68]. Higher communal orientation was weakly associated with having more conflicts, $b = 0.68$, $t(162) = 1.75$, $p = .083$, 95% CI [-0.09, 1.45]. To be conservative, in our main analyses we adjust for each couple's average level of conflict when examining the impact of daily conflict.

Preliminary analyses also verified the relative independence of exchange and communal orientation to confirm that the scales should be treated separately. The correlation between exchange and communal orientation was expectedly negative, but was small and not significant, $r(162) = -.12$, $p = .116$. Following the examples of previous research for instances when exchange and communal orientations are unrelated, we include them as separate predictors in the models (Bresnahan et al., 2004; Buunk et al., 1993; Chen et al., 2001).

Overview of Analyses

We hypothesized that the negative impact of daily conflict on intimacy would be stronger for people higher in relationship-specific exchange orientation, and that this effect would not generalize to negative mood. To test this hypothesis, we ran three models:

1. We modeled daily intimacy as a function of conflict, exchange orientation and communal orientation of both the person and their partner, and the two-way interactions between conflict and exchange orientation and between conflict and communal orientation. Conflict was decomposed into its between-person (grand-mean centered) and within-person (person-mean centered) components. Exchange orientation and communal orientation were measured at the individual level and were standardized. Elapsed time in days was included in the model as a control. To aid interpretation, time was rescaled into weeks by centering the variable in the middle of the diary period and dividing by 7.
2. We re-ran model 1 with negative evening mood as a covariate to test if the effects of conflict and exchange orientation on intimacy held above-and-beyond negative affectivity.
3. We modeled negative evening mood using the same predictors as in model 1 to demonstrate the difference between intimacy and negative evening mood.

We used multilevel statistical models to test the hypotheses using the MIXED procedure in SPSS (see [supplement](#) for syntax). Hypotheses were tested with an indistinguishable actor-partner model (conclusions remained consistent with a distinguishable actor-partner model, see [supplement](#); Kashy, Donnellan, Burt, & McGue, 2008). Diary responses were nested within individuals within couple. Random effects specified random intercepts and slopes for each couple and an autoregressive model (AR1) for elapsed time which assumes estimates for days are more similar to the days adjacent to each other compared to more distal days.

Exchange Orientation

Table 1 presents the multilevel analysis results for intimacy. Our hypothesis was confirmed: although there was a negative within-person main effect of daily conflict ($b = -0.67$, $t(45) = -5.52$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-0.91, -0.43]$), it was moderated by the expected interaction between exchange orientation and within-person level conflict ($b = -0.23$, $t(94) = -2.31$, $p = .023$, 95% CI $[-0.42, -0.03]$).

Table 1. Fixed and random effects for model 1 predicting intimacy from daily conflict, trait exchange and communal orientation, and the two-way interactions between conflict and exchange orientation and conflict and communal orientation. Degrees of freedom were estimated using the Satterthwaite method.

Fixed Effects (intercept, slopes)	Estimate	SE	t (df)	p	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Intercept	4.83	0.09	51.14 (77)	<.001	4.64	5.02
Time	0.07	0.02	2.97 (824)	.003	0.03	0.12
Exchange Orientation	-0.08	0.07	-1.21 (119)	.228	-0.22	0.05
Partner Exchange Orientation	-0.03	0.07	-0.41 (119)	.681	-0.16	0.11
Communal Orientation	0.19	0.07	2.61 (105)	.010	0.05	0.33
Partner Communal Orientation	0.18	0.07	2.45 (105)	.016	0.03	0.32
Within-Couple Level Conflict	-0.67	0.12	-5.52 (45)	<.001	-0.91	-0.43
Between-Couple Level Conflict	2.24	0.80	2.79 (118)	.006	0.65	3.83
Within Conflict * Exchange Orientation	-0.23	0.10	-2.31 (94)	.023	-0.42	-0.03
Within Conflict * Partner Exchange Orientation	-0.09	0.10	-0.95 (93)	.346	-0.29	0.10
Within Conflict * Communal Orientation	0.10	0.10	1.03 (73)	.306	-0.10	0.31
Within Conflict * Partner Communal Orientation	0.16	0.10	1.56 (73)	.122	-0.04	0.36
Between Conflict * Exchange Orientation	0.47	0.68	0.69 (161)	.491	-0.88	1.82
Between Conflict * Partner Exchange Orientation	-0.09	0.68	-0.13 (161)	.894	-1.44	1.26
Between Conflict * Communal Orientation	-1.21	0.89	-1.36 (106)	.176	-2.97	0.55
Between Conflict * Partner Communal Orientation	-2.01	0.89	-2.26 (106)	.026	-3.76	-0.25
Random Effects ([co-]variances)	Estimate	SE	Wald Z	p	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Level 2 (between-person)						
Couple-level Intercept	0.13	0.04	3.01	.003	0.07	0.25
Couple-level Covariance	0.53	0.11	4.78	<.001	0.31	0.75
Conflict and Couple-level Intercept	0.08	0.11	0.75	.455	0.01	1.08

Conflict and Couple-level Covariance	0.48	0.18	2.60	.009	0.12	0.84
Level 1 (within-person)						
Residual	1.60	0.05	35.51	<.001	1.52	1.69
Autocorrelation	0.34	0.02	19.00	<.001	0.30	0.37

As illustrated in Figure 1, participants had similar scores for intimacy when there was no conflict, regardless of their level of exchange orientation. For partners high in exchange orientation, a daily conflict predicted lower feelings of intimacy that day. By contrast, for participants lower in exchange orientation, conflicts did not predict feelings of intimacy. This effect held while controlling for negative evening mood, ($b = -0.22$, $t(94) = -2.27$, $p = .025$, 95% CI [-0.41, -0.03]), suggesting this is not simply a negative reaction after a conflict. There was an effect of within-person level conflict on negative evening mood ($b = 2.88$, $t(50) = 7.39$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [2.10, 3.67]), but no interaction between exchange orientation and within-person level conflict ($b = -0.04$, $t(95) = -0.10$, $p = .917$, 95% CI [-0.75, 0.67]). Thus, exchange orientation does not appear to moderate the effect of conflict on negative mood (additional details of analyses provided in [supplement](#)).

Figure 1. Interaction of exchange orientation and conflict on intimacy. The lines represent predicted slopes for all observed levels of exchange orientation. Darker lines represent predicted slopes for participants higher in exchange orientation and lighter lines represent predicted slopes for participants lower in exchange orientation.

Communal Orientation

According to our analyses, there was a main effect of communal orientation on intimacy, $b = 0.19$, $t(105) = 2.61$, $p = .010$. That is, the higher a participant was in communal orientation, the more intimate they felt toward their partner on a given day. This effect did not moderate the negative impacts of conflict on intimacy, $b = 0.10$, $t(73) = 1.03$, $p = .306$. While participants higher in communal orientation generally felt more intimate with their partners, it did not serve as a protective buffer on days of conflict. This effect of conflict on intimacy was also not moderated by communal orientation when controlling for negative evening mood, $b = 0.05$, $t(73)$

= 0.49, $p = .625$. Unexpectedly, communal orientation did moderate the negative impact of conflict on negative evening mood, $b = -0.85$, $t(89) = -2.39$, $p = .019$. Participants had similar scores for negative evening mood when there was no conflict, regardless of their level of communal orientation. For partners higher in communal orientation, conflicts did not predict negative evening mood. By contrast, for participants lower in communal orientation a daily conflict predicted higher feelings of negative evening mood that day.

Discussion

In a month-long daily diary, we studied the relationship between conflict, daily intimacy, and daily negative evening mood, and tested exchange orientation as a potential moderator for this relationship. Our data support our main hypothesis: the effects of daily conflict on intimacy depend on a person's level of exchange orientation. We find the occurrence of daily conflict decreases intimacy that day, but relationship-specific exchange orientation strengthens this effect. This process occurred above-and-beyond effects of general negative affectivity. Further, the effect of daily conflict on intimacy was not moderated by communal orientation.

Monitoring and scorekeeping between romantic partners can be deleterious to relationships (Clark & Waddell, 1985). Our data suggest one mechanism driving this may be the interpretation of everyday conflict. For participants higher in exchange orientation, the occurrence of conflict seemed to be representative of the general state of their relationship; participants lower in exchange orientation seemed less inclined to make this generalization. Higher exchange orientation, like other individual differences that cause relationship problems, may contribute to sentiment override (Fincham, Garnier, Gano-Phillips, & Osborne, 1995), generalizing a moment of conflict negativity to the entire relationship.

The occurrence of conflict did not differ by level of exchange orientation, indicating that high exchange orientation did not cause people to have or notice more conflict. Further, this was not simply a result of negative affect. The observed interaction occurred above and beyond negative evening mood. Moreover, this reactivity was contextualized in the relationship; exchange orientation did not moderate the impact of conflict on negative mood. Finally, exchange orientation did not moderate lagged effects of conflict (see [supplement](#)); as might be expected, close monitoring has rapid consequences.

In a related manner, individual differences in destiny beliefs might have similar effects as individual differences in exchange orientation. Participants higher in destiny beliefs have more negative reactions to instances of conflict and may be more likely to overgeneralize them to the state of their relationship (Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003). However, the underlying mechanisms would be different. Higher endorsements of destiny beliefs would lead people to overgeneralize an instance of conflict as being diagnostic of their relationship because they have relatively black-and-white conceptualizations of relationships – either ideal and conflict-free or destined to fail. Alternatively, higher levels of exchange orientation would lead to reactivity and overgeneralization due to an increased vigilance for and monitoring of perturbations in the costs and benefits contributing to relationship equity. Future research should examine the relationship between growth and destiny beliefs and exchange and communal orientation.

Communal orientation has been associated with higher relationship satisfaction and life satisfaction in previous literature (Clark et al., 2010). This could be due to the protective benefits that stronger communal norms engender. Across the 28 days, participants higher in communal orientation reported higher levels of intimacy overall. Additionally, at the daily level, higher communal orientation protected against increases in negative mood following conflicts. Note that

this cannot be explained as simply being the “opposite” effect to exchange orientation because exchange orientation did not moderate the effects of daily conflict on negative mood. Instead, communal and exchange orientations appear to have important but different impacts on the construal of conflicts. While higher exchange orientation facilitates a construal that generalizes the negativity of the conflict to the more global assessment of the relationship on the daily level, higher communal orientation facilitates a construal that protects against overgeneralizing the negativity of the conflict to a more global assessment of daily mood. Although preliminary, this daily level mood-buffering demonstrates how people higher in communal norms could benefit from more benign interpretations of conflicts within their relationships.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

The dataset used in the present study comes from daily diaries of couples; this strengthens our findings in several ways: Firstly, because data came from couples, we could operationalize conflict dyadically and we could capture interdependence between partners in our analyses. As the saying goes, “it takes two to tango”—conflict is intrinsically dyadic and so it is beneficial to have appropriately dyadic data.

Secondly, by observing daily behavior over a month, we were able take intensive repeated measures of our variables of interest. This allowed us to test our hypotheses within-persons. Given that we were interested in how trait differences in exchange orientation would affect reactivity to conflict, i.e., how a between-person factor would moderate a within-persons process, it was helpful to have multiple observations of the within-person process in the data.

Thirdly, diary methods are high in ecological validity. Conflict—even routine daily conflict of the type we capture here—can be a sensitive issue. Although conflict between couples can be elicited in lab settings, we think that it is important to complement lab work with studies

such as this one, where conflict is contextualized in people's lives and relationships as they are lived.

Although there were advantages to capitalizing on this existing data set, this work is not without weaknesses. Because these data were not collected with our hypothesis in mind, we could not set the sample size. Further, the data are correlational and cross-sectional within a given day, so true causality cannot be established. While it is plausible that a breach in intimacy could lead to conflict on a given day, we do not think that such breaches were likely to have occurred in our sample during the four relatively uneventful weeks during which they provided data. It is of course possible that in a particular couple an event such as a marital infidelity could have caused a breach in intimacy, but such rare events could not account for the general result. Finally, this project was developed before use of and procedures for preregistration became widely-known, and so our analyses were not pre-registered; future replication is needed.

Therefore, we present the present work as a preliminary exploration, not a conclusive one. Although preliminary, we think that it is worth sharing our findings in the hope of inspiring both replication and extension. Other researchers may have similar archival couples diary datasets; these are likely to include a measure of daily conflict. If they also have exchange orientation, this would allow for independent replication of our findings. If they have other potential moderators of conflict reactivity, these would also be interesting to examine further! In the spirit of shared investigation, we have provided an extensive supplement, including syntax, that could be adapted to many investigations of how between-persons differences affect reactivity to daily conflict.

Moreover, future work could target the question of causality. Researchers could manipulate exchange orientation and/or conflict experimentally and examine how this affects the

generalization of different types of conflict to relationship outcomes. If reducing exchange orientation attenuates the impact of the everyday conflicts that are inevitable in relationships, this could have important implications for couples therapy.

Summary

On days with conflict, people higher in exchange orientation suffered more negative impacts to their feelings of intimacy with their partner than did people lower in exchange orientation, whose intimacy was relatively protected from daily conflict. The increased attention to who benefits in the relationship, as is characteristic of exchange orientation, may create maladaptive generalizations of simple daily conflict to more global relationship evaluations. Future research should continue to examine conflict as it occurs, its implications for close relationships, and how individual differences may drive variation in conflict's impact.

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