

Understanding relational foci of attention may help us understand
relational phenomena

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If one takes as a starting assumption that close relationship partners – friends, romantic partners, and family members have a positive attitude toward caring about one another's welfare and wish their partners to care for their own welfare in return, then some people certainly do behave in some baffling ways at times. In the face of partner needs, some people reduce the support they provide rather than increasing it (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, Rholes, 2001; Simpson, Rholes & Nelligan, 1992) and increase rather than reduce their own anger (Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999). They may respond to their partner's negative moods not with care but with feelings of (unjustified) self-rejection (Bellavia & Murray, 2003; Murray, Bellavia, Rose & Griffin, 2003) and even hurtful behavior just when a partner presumably most needs support (Murray et al., 2003). When they faced with information that their partner sees a problem in the relationship they may not straightforwardly address the problem but, instead, derogate the and pull away from that partner (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes & Kusche, 2002). People have been shown to support friends *less* than strangers at times (Tesser & Smith, 1988) and to feel bad when a close friend performs well (Tesser, Miller & Moore, 1988; Tesser & Collins, 1988; Tesser, 1988). Sometimes when one member of a close relationship commits a faux pas or encounters difficulty (and presumably could use support and reassurance), their close partner not only fails to provide the support, but chooses to distance themselves from the partner instead (Tesser, 1988).

Relationship researchers have amply noted such strange behavior and focused on understanding such behavior and have generally explained it on the basis of people's desires to protect the self. People do such things as attack those who are seen as being in negative moods and perhaps ready to reject them because they want to *protect themselves*.

it is generally argued (Murray et al., 2003) Better to attack or reject a partner before he or she rejects you. If a partner is behaving in an embarrassing fashion, better to distance oneself from that partner lest the behavior reflect negatively on oneself than not to do so. If a close partner might outperform you on a task, better not to help his or her out as the comparison with the self can hurt. Seeing partners as *all* bad at other times can protect the self from being tempted to being depend upon that partner and perhaps be hurt as a result (Graham & Clark, 2006). People who least trust others, they noted, are most apt to engage in such behaviors, protecting the self in the moment, presumably, but often harming the partner and relationship in the process.

Such self-protective explanations do go a long way in explaining why people may fail to support partners and can actually behave in harmful ways in their relationships and we do not disagree with such explanation. *However, appealing to self-protection as an explanation for such behaviors still leaves an important question open.* It explains behavior which would seem to be self-protective but the behavior remains very baffling for most observers, partner-victims included, in large part because most of the observed destructive behaviors are just protective *in the moment*. They carry big costs in the longer run with the longer run including the moments immediately following the negative behavior in many cases. *The self-protective explanations fails to explain why people often just miss what is patently obvious to their partners and observers who surround them.* That is, why do people seem to just miss the fact that by failing to support partners when support is needed, attacking partners, distancing themselves from partners who need help or those who are anxious, , and being maddeningly unpredictable in their views of partners that will alienate partners and drive them away? Does it really make any

sense to self-protect for the moment and hurt one's partner, relationship and often, ultimately, the self in the long run? Of course it doesn't. So why don't people suppress their momentary impulses in the interest of long term goals? Why don't those who are low in trust take the partner's perspective into account particularly when the partner may be in obvious need of support (Simpson,et al., 1992). Others and partners themselves typically see this clearly at the time. People themselves, often reflect back on their destructive behaviors with great regret.

The answer to failing to "see" one's own destructiveness and to suppress it lies, we think, in understanding how goals in relationships drive focus of attention in relationships. We do not disagree with other relationship researchers that low trust leads to tendencies to be self-protective and much destructive behavior in close relationships. We, however, wish to emphasize something else that accompanies low trust and having self-protective goals in relationships. It is that the presence or absence of these goals in these close relationships drive where attention is focused in the relationship. As a consequence, we point out, there will be important trait, state and relationship based differences in the *patterning* of what we call people's *relational foci of attention* in close relationships. Understanding these differences in patterning, we claim, will help up not only to understand why people with overly strong self-protective motives behave poorly, but, why despite their sharing ideals of mutual supportiveness for close, communal, relationships with others, they simply don't take other partner needs and desires into account when they feel threatened. It's not that information about those needs is not available in the moment. It's not that people don't have long term positive attitudes about caring for their partners. Instead, we believe, the self-protective

impulses they experience carry with them an strong, and often protracted, attentional focus on the self and, importantly (patterning our term after one used in studies of visual attention) “attentional blindness” to partner needs in their relationships and to the likely destructive effects of their behavior in relationships (c.f. Most, Scholl, Clifford, & Simons, 2005, Simons & Chabris, 1999).. Such blindness to partner needs and to the negative consequences of one’s own behavior falls out of self-protective motivates and is as much of the reason, we suspect, for harmful relationship behaviors as the initial self-protective urges themselves.

Going far beyond contributing to our understanding of my people with self-protective motives may just be “blind” to partner needs and to the destructive nature of their actions, attending to the consequences of both the nature of relational focus of attention highlighting certain aspects of partners and making one “blind,” at least temporarily, to other aspects can also, we claim, give rise to new programs of research on relational phenomena to which one otherwise not have attended or understood. After discussing relational foci of attention generally, we will turn to examples of two such programs of research – one on what we call the “Jekyll and Hyde”-ing of relationship partners (Graham & Clark, 2006) and another, just beginning, on how we view our own and our partners’ contributions to joint tasks (cf. Ross & Sicoly, 1979)

What types of “relational foci of attention” exist? Relational focus of attention refers to where people focus their attention when interacting with those with whom they have normatively communal relationships – that is when with their friends, family members and romantic partners -- what we will call their *relational focus of attention*. When one is interacting with or thinking about a relationship partner it might be simplest to just

assume there are three distinct relational foci of attention are possible. One's focus of attention could be on oneself,. It could be on one's partner or it could be on joint activities with thoughts about the self and partner, per se, fading to the background. However, we think understanding relational foci of attention is a bit more complex than that.

People's active goals drive where their focus of attention likely lies. Thus, if one wishes to figure out styles of relational focus, it makes sense to start with these goals. In analyzing what is an ideal in terms of focus of attention in close, mutual, communal relationships we start with what people's goals, ideally, are in these relationships.

Most people agree on what goals ideally should characterize communal relationships. First, and perhaps most obviously, each member should have a goal of supporting his or her partner's welfare. Second because communal relationships such as friendships, romantic relationships and many family relationship are mutual or symmetric in nature, each member should also have goals of seeking support when he or she needs such support. These goals will facilitate both members of mutual, communal, relationships in providing and receiving non-contingent support within the context of their relationships, a situation members of such relationships describe as ideal for their relationships (Clark, Graham, & Grote, 2002; Grote & Clark, 1998). When one member needs help, concrete help should be given (e.g. help in moving into an office), When a member needs encouragement and support as he or she strives toward goals important to him or to her (e.g. excelling in an athletic contest that he or she has set his heart on winning) support and encouragement should be given. When opportunities arise in which one's partner could be included in a mutually enjoyable activity, that partner should be included (e.g.

asking the person to join a group going out to dinner). Finally when opportunities arise for symbolic support when need is present but nothing can be done such support should be forthcoming (e.g. a sympathetic note in the face of a distressing medical diagnosis) as it should at culturally determined occasions calling for a display of support (e.g. a birthday, graduation or retirement).

When no specific, pressing needs exist, members of communal relationships may support one another by pursuing mutual, enjoyable activities or engaging in mutually beneficial tasks. Thus, a third goal may be the successful pursuit of and engagement in such activities. A communal pair might wish to go dancing, engage in an enjoyable conversation, or sing together in harmony and just have fun. This suggests that in healthy communal relationships one should see a mix of focusing on one's partner's needs, focusing on one's own needs, and focusing on activities with the self and partner fading to the background. Importantly, relational goals and relational focus of attention should flexibly and easily shift tracking internal and external cues of own needs, partner's needs and, in the absence of clear cut needs, opportunities to benefit the self or other's welfare or to engage in mutually beneficial activities.

Relational self-focus in a healthy relationship. Relational self-focus is not the same as self focus in isolation from the partner. It is a *relational* concept involving thinking about one's own needs and welfare *as they relate or might relate to the partner*. It can include thinking about one's needs and whether one actually needs a partner's support in taking care of those needs, whether the partner is capable of taking care of those needs, and whether support and/or harm is likely to be forthcoming from that partners. It might also include a consideration of whether seeking support might interfere with a partner's own

needs. . A relational self-focus of attention in relationships occurs anytime a person is explicitly thinking about the self and the self's well being as it relates to a partner. The partner need not be present but often will be. It can include positive, comforting thoughts, "He cares about me. He'll be there for me." "I'm nervous, I'll ask him for help and I know he'll come through for me." "I am so proud to be associated with him." as well as negative, distressing thoughts, "I wish I hadn't said that, he probably thinks I'm dumb." "I'd ask him for help but I know he'll turn me down." "I'm embarrassed to be seen with her."

There is, of course, an extant literature on self-consciousness and self-awareness. It has been noted that people can be more or less aware of their internal attitudes, values and emotions. This is known as private self-awareness/consciousness. It has also been noted that people can be more or less aware of how others are viewing them. This is known as public-self-consciousness. Finally, differences in social anxiety have been noted. How is our concept of self focus within relationships related to these other concepts?

Relational self-focus as already emphasized is *a relationship concept*. It refers to thinking about the self and the implications of the other for the self *within the relationship*. Considering it's links with private self-consciousness first, the concept of self-focus in a relationship might include being aware of one's attitudes and values *as they relate to the relationship, the relationship partner and the implications of the partner for the self* but it would not include, say, simply reflecting on one's own personal attitudes, as they exist independently of the partner or, to give another example, one's own feelings of hunger and the desire to go to the refrigerator to get something to eat. . Relationship self-focus also may relate to public self-conscious as it would include being

aware of what one's partner is thinking about the self but it would not include being generally aware of how strangers would view the self when one goes out into the world. That people who desire communal relationships track not only their needs but their partners' attention to those needs has been demonstrated (Clark, Dubash, & Mills, 1998).

Relational partner focus in a healthy communal relationship. Relational partner focus refers to thinking about one's partner including thinking about implications of the self for promoting the partner's welfare or for preventing harm to the other. As with relational self-focus relational partner focus can be positive in content. One might, for instance be thinking, "Her solo performance is wonderful. I'll take her out afterward to celebrate. She'll enjoy that." It can have negative content as well, "She's being very selfish. I think that's going to hurt her chances of being able to continue working with these people. Maybe I should tell her that." It may also involve both some positive and some negative thoughts. "She really needs my help on that. I'd like to help but she'll get mad if I offer." Ordinarily, relational partner focus should be driven by a goal of supporting the partner's welfare. In other words, an opportunity to support the partner arises and one focuses on the partner in an effort to support that partner. That such relational partner focus does occur when one desires a communal relationship with a partner and that partner has a need has been demonstrated (Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986; Clark, Mills & Corcoran, 1989; Clark, Ouellette, Powell & Milberg, 1987).

Relational activity focus in a healthy communal relationship. Importantly, when interacting with a relationship partner, one need not be focused on *either* the self or the partner. It is not only possible but often the case, we believe, that two people focus on the *activity* in which they jointly are engaged rather than squarely on the welfare or the self

or the welfare of the partner. Relational activity focus refers to thinking about mutual activities with the focus being on that mutual activity including both one's own and one's partner's contributions to that activity and often including the interactive outcome of those contributions. For example, a person might be engaged in a conversation with a partner and be firmly focused on understanding the points the other is making and on formulating and expressing clear responses to those points. Partners may be dancing with one another and the individuals may focus on the activity itself, the movement, the rhythm, the music and the coordinated steps. When people's self-awareness of their own needs and of their partner's needs fade into the background and attention is on joint activities we would say that people in relationships may enter a relational activity focus.

What's the ideal patterning of "relational foci of attention" in close, mutual, communal relationships? Ideally, as already noted one's relational focus of attention within a close, communal relationship should be *flexible* shifting easily as needs arise, are resolved, and opportunities for individual and joint activities arise. When one's partner has a need, one's relational focus of attention should be on that partner and on what one can do to support that partner (When one has a need oneself, one's relational focus of attention should be on the self, whether one's partner is close-by and can provide help, and on how one might seek support. When neither partner has a clear need but mutually enjoyable activities might take place (e.g. dancing, going to a show, going out to dinner) focus of attention might be initially be on including the other in such activities but, once engaged in the activity with another mutual focus on the activity itself or what we call relational activity focus will best support both individuals. In general, cues of needs on either person's part should shift goals and with them relational focus of attention.

Stating what is ideal in terms of the patterning of relational foci of attention in relationships implied that the foci should vary as *states* within communal relationships. People should not be characterized as having traits of being primarily relationally self-focused, of being primarily relationally other focused or of always focusing on activities. The relationship itself also not be constantly characterized as one in which each member has a particular relational focus of attention which is stable and, perhaps, distinct from that of the other member's consistent and particular relational focus of attention. [Consistent asymmetrical, relationship-base, patterns of attention may characterize other relationships such as those characterized by power differences (c.f. Depret & Fiske, 1992; Fiske, 1993) or by asymmetrical communal relationships such as that between a parent and a very young child in which the parent has a goal of taking care of the child and focuses intently on partner and partner needs whereas the child has a goal of having his or her own needs met and focuses on the self and the ways in which the parent can support his or her welfare.]

What can go wrong? Whereas flexible focus of attention is ideal in theory, and, we think in practice, can everyone "pull it off" in their relationships? The answer appears to be no.

We are born social creatures. We are innately geared, we believe, to form communal relationships. We start off life pretty helpless and dependent upon caretakers and the natural course of things is for our caretaker to be focused on our needs and to meet those needs. This allows us to start life being relationally self-focused thinking of our own needs as intimately tied to those of our caretaker who can support us and also as relationally activity focused in times of our own joint exploration of the world with our

caretaker, although, early on we may often “check back” with caretakers to assure ourselves this is O.K.. Gradually, over development as we lose helplessness and gain the ability to care for others. As we do so we take on goals of supporting others as well and come to shift our focus to them in times they need support (Clark, 1984 Clark & Jordan, 2002). The tendency to shift attention to partner’s needs as we note signs of those needs may also be built into our nature (Hoffman, 2000). This may underpin our ability to shift focus and to become relationally partner focused in face of partner needs or opportunities to support our partners.

However, as both developmental and social psychologists have amply pointed out, all does not always go well. If people are insufficiently cared for early on they may become insecure with some individuals learning not to rely on others and becoming fiercely independent and avoidant and others becoming insecure and anxious about others care, constantly seeking it even, perhaps, when it is not necessary just to make sure it is there. It is such insecurities, attachment theorists have emphasized that lead to tendencies to self-protect either by learning to become fiercely independent or constantly seeking others affection.

Along with these insecurities and tendencies to self-protect, we now would emphasize, likely come losses in the flexibility of relational foci of attention. Loss of optimal attentional flexibility, we propose, becomes replaced with one of several possible more rigid and non-optimal chronic relational foci of attention.

Chronic and rigid relational self-focus. Whereas we have proposed that some relational self-focus (in the face of objectively consensual need for support) is good for for communal relationships, too much self-focus is likely to be bad. We suggest that

when people fear social rejection and/or lack of acceptance they tend toward chronic relational self-focus even in the absence of objective needs. The person, chronically, focuses on the self and the implications of the partner for his or her own well-being even in the absence of momentary needs. Along with this focus, we suggest, comes a blindness to the other's true nature and, importantly, the other's needs. The goal of self-protection drives relational self-focus and a type of attentional blindness to the other's true nature and to the cues to the other's needs occurs thereby overriding the ability to shift to attending to the other's needs when cues to the other's needs exist. The person is chronically monitoring acceptance and rejection cues in the service of maintaining own well-being and becomes blind to cues of the other's needs.

Such chronic relational self-focus appears to be common and associated with such traits as low self-esteem, low communal orientation, high rejection sensitivity and high avoidance. Those traits have long been associated with evidence of self-protection. Here we add that they are also associated with relational self-focus and, unintentional, blindness to information relevant to partners' welfare.

Notably, and very importantly, the chronic and rigid relational self-focus to which we refer here is likely to be more like a personal *trait* of an individual embedded in a relationship than the state relational self-focus discussed above. As it is embedded in relationships it comes to characterize the relationship as well. Moreover the exact nature of these foci and their consequences for the person, the partner and the relationship likely differ. Healthy relational self-focus should promote self-disclosure and support seeking in times of needs or to promote movement toward personal goals and it ought not preclude care for the other as it doesn't carry with it chronic self-focus and attentional

blindness to the other's needs. Unhealthy relational other focus may lead to seeking care or support when partners do not believe it is necessary and resentment from partners that their own needs are not being met.

Chronic and rigid relational other focus. The relationship literature suggests that insecurity and self-protective tendencies do not come in just one flavor. Some people, when faced with a lack of care, adopt an avoidant style in their relationships. These people would seem to be likely to adopt the chronic relational self-focus style suggested above. But not everyone who is insecure in their relationships completely "gives up" on the ideal of communal relationships and possibility that partners will care. Among those who do not "give up" some may still adopt a relational self-focus but the extant literature suggests that a different chronic relational focus sometimes results instead – a chronic and rigid relational other focus.

In particular some people may, in the service of self-protection, adopt a goal of trying to maintain their communal relationships by constantly trying to please or to care for partners. They become relationally partner focused and these people, we believe, may become attentionally blind to their own momentary day to day needs, ironically, despite the fact that the distal motivation is to protect the self. People who fall into the category of being chronically and rigidly relationally other focused are probably over-represented among people whom attachment theorists categorize as anxious. They also are likely the same people whom Helgeson has identified as having the trait of unmitigated communion or, in other words, the tendency to care for partner's needs to the exclusion of one's own needs (Helgeson, 1994; Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). Helgeson has noted that those characterized by unmitigated communal tend to be females rather than males. It seems to

us that it might, indeed, be the case that anxiety about acceptance might be more likely to take the form of chronic and rigid relational partner focus among women than among men given societal norms for women to be nurturant. The blindness to own needs that likely accompanies rigid relational partner focus may account for the tendency Helgeson and her colleagues have noted for those characterized by unmitigated communal to neglect their own health (Helgeson, 2003).

Notably, and very importantly, the chronic and rigid relational other focus to which we refer here is likely to be more like a personal *trait* of an individual embedded in a relationship than the state relational self-focus discussed above. As it is embedded in relationships it comes to characterize the relationship as well. Importantly since the distal motivations for flexible and healthy relational other focus versus for chronic and unhealthy relational other focus differ (i.e. promoting the other's welfare in the former case versus promoting self-acceptance and self-protection in the latter) the exact nature of these foci and their consequences for the person, the partner and the relationship likely differ. Healthy relational partner focus should promote the other's welfare and not frustrate the partner's desires to care for the person nor make the partner feel smothered or inappropriately controlled. Unhealthy relational partner focus may carry with it the costs of people not expressing their own needs (and feeling resentful that they are not cared for given all the care they give the partner) and of making partners feel smothered and controlled.

Chronic and rigid relational activity focus? Logically, it seems to us, for a person who has completely given up on a communal ideal for relationships including the idea that another will meet needs or they will meet another's needs but one who retains a need

for affiliation, joint task performance (e.g. raising children), and joint mutual activity (e.g. sexuality) it seems possible that a person might drop goals to self-protect (in relation to the partner) and to meet partner needs and might retain activity goals. Such a person's relational focus of attention might be chronically on activity. Yet, we know of little extant literature to support the existence of such a tendency.

What does attending to relational foci of attention buy us?

Explicitly attending to types of relational foci of attention (flexible, chronic relational self-focus and chronic relational other focus) carried with it three types of payoffs: a) It helps to explain puzzles in the extant literature, b) It can generate new hypotheses and theory relevant to understanding dysfunction in relationships, and c) It can generate new hypotheses and theory relevant to adaptive phenomenon in communal relationships. We turn now these types of payoffs and providing two examples of our own recent research generated by thinking about relational foci of attention.

Explaining puzzles in the relationship literature. This chapter began with a description of some odd behavior in relationships. In the face of partner needs, some people reduce the support they provide i (Campbell et al., 2001; Simpson et al, 1992) and increase rather than reduce their own anger (Rholes et al., 1999). At least some people respond to their partner's negative moods not with care but with feelings of (unjustified) self-rejection (Bellavia & Murray, 2003; Murray et al, 2003) and even with hurtful behaviors (Murray et al., 2003). When faced with information that their partner sees a problem in the relationship some people not only fail to address the problem but, instead, derogate the and pull away from that partner (Murray et al, 2002). People support friends *less* than strangers when they fear friends may outperform them at a task

relevant to their identity (Tesser & Smith, 1988) and they feel bad when a close friend performs well if they will look bad by comparison (Tesser et al., 1988; Tesser & Collins, 1988; Tesser, 1988) and they distance from partners under such circumstances (Tesser, 1988).

We noted that such behaviors have been explained by noting people's self-protective instincts and the fact that some people, notably those low in self-esteem, high in insecurity, or high in rejection sensitivity may engage in such behaviors to protect themselves against threats to their self-image and/or being hurt by partners (even when such threats may exist only in their own minds.) But, as we further noted, that leaves an open question. Simply appealing to self-protective instincts fails to explain why people engaging in these behaviors fail to take the partner's needs into account in the moment and thus fail to suppress their relationally destructive behaviors. Moreover, and very importantly, explanations based on self-protection fail to explain the very striking shortsightedness of these people's self-protective strategies. Don't they see that distancing themselves from a close partner who may outperform them on a laboratory task may save them from a bit of social comparison angst but ultimately cause fail to promote their relationship and perhaps cause damage to it ultimately hurting them more? Don't they see that responding to a partner's negative moods or distress by distancing themselves may protect them from partner anger in the moment but alienate partners in the long run ultimately hurting them more? Why, immediately after engaging in some self-protective but relationally destructive behaviors do people sometimes "kick themselves" for having done so and experience immediate regret?

If one assumes that a chronic, unhealthy, relational self-focus produces attentional blindness to partner needs and likely also to partner's feelings about and perspectives on one's own destructive behaviors these puzzling behaviors are actually easily explained. People with a chronic relational self-focus are not cued by partners' needs to switch to a relational other focus. They approach even situations of partner need with a self-protective, relationally self-focused mind set. We suspect they don't even "see" partner needs in the moment. That is why they don't take them into account and suppress destructive behaviors. At the same time we do not believe they are completely unaware of communal norms for relationships. People low in trust do share general knowledge of these norms with others and they, like others, describe them as ideal for relationships.

We suspect that after destructive behavior takes place and *the destructive behavior becomes relevant to their own welfare* because it may have harmed the relationship that destructive behavior immediately becomes relevant to their own self-protective, relational self-focus. At that point they "see" the error of their ways and experience regret. They may then know they should express that regret and may do so not so much out of empathy for the partner but out of continuing concern for the self. What's missing for such people is the ability to "see" partner needs and to switch to a relational partner focus as necessary when partner needs are not intimately tied to self-protective goals.

How understanding relational attention helps us to identify and to understand a harmful relationship process – the “Jekyll and Hyde-ing” of Relationship Partners.

Some time ago two of us, Steve Graham and Margaret Clark, discussed a possible phenomenon we suspected existed. That is, some people seeing their partners as “all good” at times and “all bad” at other times or what we have since called the Jekyl and Hyde-ing of relationship partners. It seemed like an odd behavior and we thought about why it might exist if, indeed, it did exist. Our thinking relied heavily both on the idea that some people are more sensitive to interpersonal rejection than others and on the assumption that such sensitivity might result not just in chronic tendencies to protect the self but also in chronic relational self-focus. Whereas most, non-rejection sensitive persons might would have what we have called a flexible focus of attention here, rejection sensitive people might be quite stuck in self-focus.

At the same time we kept in mind that they, as most people, probably likely desire relationships. They are likely caught in approach/avoidance conflicts. They wish to approach others to form relationships or to affiliate or socialize. They would also be vigilant to signs of rejection. How might this lead to seeing partners as “all good” at some times and “all bad” at others? Well, perhaps, we reasoned, in good times they might focus on potential or existing partners “good traits” in order to facilitate their own feelings of safety in approaching such partners. Due to their self-focus and goal of approach, they would likely be “blind” to partner weaknesses or flaws that might threaten approach. They would also be relatively blind to partner needs. This habit, occurring in times of low threat would result, we predicted, in (functionally) stores of all positive partner attributes and a blindness to other attributes that might also be true of those

partners. Sometimes, however, the situation would force recognition of social threats. Once perceived, we thought, such persons would maintain their self-focus but now self-defensively switch to focusing on all negative behaviors, now being blind to partner positives and, indeed, to partner needs resulting, functionally, in a store of all negative partner attributes.

People low in sensitivity to rejection, on the other hand, should not be chronically self-protective nor chronically self-focused. As a result, they would be far more likely to perceive partners' true attributes – attributes that are likely to be a mix of positive and negatives, of strengths and weakness. This should be the case, we suspected because they would have flexible relational foci. They should focus on the self primarily when their own needs dictate that but should be able to shift to a focus on the partner when helping that person (Clark, Ouellette, Powell & Milberg, 1987) or in the general course of monitoring that person's needs (Clark, Powell, & Mills, 1986; Clark, Mills & Corcoran, 1989).

Our reasoning about focus of attention and how it might influence functional stores of partner information lead to specific experimental studies to test our hypotheses. If people low in trust of others truly are chronically focused on protecting the self and, consequently, have separate stores of partner information then we ought to be able to detect this experimentally. To do so we presented people known to be high or to be low in self-esteem with adjectives appearing one at a time on a computer screen. The adjectives were positive or negative and were either blocked (five positives in order; five negatives in order) or not blocked (positive and negative adjectives were alternated in the list). Adjectives appeared one at a time on a computer screen. Participants, as quickly as

possible, indicated that each one applied to their close partner (yes) or did not (no.) Reaction times were recorded. Our prediction was simple. If people low in self-esteem had separate positive and negative stores of partner information in memory, they should be slowed by being forced to alternate between making judgments that a positive adjective and judgments that a negative adjective applied to their partner because it would require switching stores. If people high in self-esteem really did have integrated stores of partner information, they should not be slowed.

We examined the reaction times. Just as expected, whether people were judging their roommate (in one study) or their mother (in another) those low in self-esteem were slowed by having to respond to the alternating relative to the blocked list. Those high in self-esteem were not slowed.. This effect was shown to generalize to less close people (someone else's mother) but not to an inanimate object (a computer.) The results are shown in Figure 1.

Thinking about how having chronic, unhealthy, relational foci of attention (geared toward self-protection) might shape stores of memory about partners also led us to develop a measure of integrating (versus segregating) positive and negative information about the partner (the I-TAPS or integrating thoughts about partners scale). It includes questions about whether one sometimes thinks about partners as all good (e.g. as a saint), items tapping whether one sometimes thinks about partners as well bad (e.g. as rotten) and whether one's views of partners shift across time versus staying relatively stable. The measure has consistently show the tendency to integrate thoughts about partners to be linked with higher self-esteem (and, presumably less self-protective strategies) even when controlling for demographic factors, need for cognition, and duration of the

relationship. It has also been shown to predict variability in satisfaction with partners across time (Graham and Clark, submitted).

In a subsequent series of studies we reasoned that if people low in trust of others do, indeed, form two functionally separate memory stores of positive and negative information about partners whereas those higher in self-esteem have more integrated stores of such partner information that the former should be more reactive to social threat cues in the environment. For those low in trust, those social threat cues ought to shift them to accessing their negative store of information and judgments of those close to them should then be based on that store. A number of studies have now supported these ideas. In one (Graham & Clark, submitted) those who were low in self-esteem and who had high I-TAPS scores showed stronger links between recalling negative events in their lives and reported satisfaction with their relationships at that time. In other, students watched a film clip of a bully or of a moving abstract pattern and later described their sibling using five adjectives. For those high in self-esteem watching the clip of the bully had no impact on the nature of adjectives chosen to describe the sibling but for those low in self-esteem it was linked to choosing more negative traits to describe the sibling (Wortman, 2005). Finally in a very recent study, students who had filled out self-esteem scales were primed with the idea of social threat by rearranging words to form sentences with some threat content or neutral sentences. Later they described their siblings. Reports of sibling traits were unaffected by the threat prime for those high in self-esteem. Among those low in self-esteem, however, threat primes resulted in significantly more negative reports of sibling traits (Gefula, 2007). The patterning of sibling descriptions is shown in Figure 2.

The bottom line is that thinking about how self-protective tendencies might lead to distinct forms of relational self-focus was able to lead us to develop new theory about how people might store positive and negative information about partners in memory and, in turn, to a set of new findings about a relationship process – the “Jekyll and Hyde”ing of relationship partners – that is likely, overall, to be harmful to relationships. In particular, those who view relationship partners as all good or all bad is going to be in a bad position both to seek and to provide help to that partner. Help is unlikely to be sought at all when the partner is viewed as all bad nor is help likely to be provided in that circumstance. What about when the partner is all good? That situation might lead to support seeking that the partner is really unable or unqualified to give and, when a partner is seen as all good that partner may not be seen as needing support when he or she really does need it. A balanced view should lead to both more appropriate and feasible help seeking and more appropriate and useful support provision. Moreover, partners who are viewed in stable, realistic ways should feel their partners are more predictable and insightful than partners who are viewed in unstable, erratic and likely maddening ways.

How understanding relational attention may help identify and understand an adaptive, helpful, relationship process – Concern and perceptual benevolence may track focus of attention so as to produce adaptive biases in perceptions of self and partner.

Two of us, Erin Williams and Margaret Clark, recently considered the possibility that having flexibility in focus of relational attention – that is, shifting easily from self to partner as needs shift – might carry with it a particular type of adaptive thought and perceptual process. That is, as relational focus shifts from self or activity to partner might partner’s needs and qualities and contributions to the relationship be viewed in an

especially favorable or deserving light thereby facilitating the original goal of supporting the partner. Moreover, as relational focus shifts from partner or activity to self might own needs and qualities and contributions to the relationship be viewed in an especially favorable or deserving light thereby facilitating self-care or the seeking of care from others? It seemed possible and a preliminary study suggests that such relational focus driven biases in self and partner might exist.

We tested this idea in a fairly straightforward initial study. To start we developed a measure to tap appropriate, healthy, flexibility in focus of attention. Specifically we developed a series of twelve sentences which people would read and rate in terms of how descriptive of themselves each sentence was. The sentences, taken as a whole, were designed to measure how flexibly they could move their own relational focus of attention around to attend to the needs and overall well-being of the self, of a partner, or to concentrate on joint activity when neither self or partner's needs were pressing. Four of these sentences were designed to tap whether they easily could shift relational focus of attention to the self when need be. For instance, to tap ability to move focus to the self when need be we asked how descriptive the following sentence was, “. I can so no easily when someone asks me to do a task that I just don't have the time and/or ability to do well.” Four sentences tapped whether they could shift relational focus to the partner when need be, for instance, “When someone I know has a success it's hard for me to focus just on that person and be happy for them.” Finally, four sentences tapped ability to focus on joint activities when there were no situational presses relevant to self or partner welfare, for instance, “When I'm playing a game with a friend, I get completely wrapped up in the experience.”. In developing this scale we found that, theoretically, and

as expected, higher flexibility scores were associated with more security (lower levels of avoidant attachment, anxious attachment) and with higher self-esteem and, interestingly, lower scores on both measures of both individual private and public self-consciousness.

Next we administered the scale to a group of one hundred eighty-eight people (about two thirds female; one third male) and then asked them to complete a modified version of the classic Ross and Sicoly (1979) task in which individuals who live together report on the percentage of household tasks they perform. The classic finding is that individuals' reports of the percentage of a variety of tasks they perform, when taken together, consistently add up to more than 100% suggesting that individuals have biases in their favor.

What would happen, we wanted to know, if we provided a situational cue that could guide people to focus their attention on their own contributions per se or a different cue that could cause people to focus their attention on their partner's contributions instead. Would it make a difference in how much they reported they, in particular, had contributed to the particular domain of household chore being reported upon and what that implied regarding the partner's contribution? *For people who had flexible relational foci of attention,* but perhaps not for others, we predicted that it would. It should make a difference, we thought because those with flexible relational foci of attention should shift attention (and with it biases) according to situational cues that they ought to attend to self versus partner.

Participants were randomly assigned to complete one of two parallel tasks. In both tasks, participants were asked to report the percentage of the time 18 household duties were completed (Ross & Sicoly, 1979), but in the self reference condition they were

asked how often they completed the task (e.g., “How often do you wash the dishes?”) and in the other reference condition they were asked how frequently their partner completed the task (e.g., “How often does your significant other wash the dishes?”). Then, participants completed standardized measures of relationship satisfaction and self-esteem and provided basic demographic information.

What happened? Analyses did reveal some expected main effects. Overall people did show a bias to report having done more than 50% of the work replicating Ross & Sicoly (1979). Cueing people to focus on partners was associated with claiming less credit for the self and women, as happens in study after study of household work did report doing more than did men.

What’s important for the present chapter, though, is that the expected interaction emerged ($p=.054$). That is.. Individuals who were in the high focus flexibility condition were both more self-serving in the self reference condition and less self-serving in the other reference condition (self $M = 60.39$ vs. other $M = 51.01$) than low focus flexibility individuals (self $M = 57.98$ vs. other $M = 53.35$). In other words, high flexibility of relational focused was associated with more benevolence in views of the self when situational cues dictated focus on the self and with greater benevolence in views of the partner when situational cues dictated focus on the partner. Their benevolence of views *moved* with those cues.

Might this sort of moving relational focus of attention in the face of situational cues to focus on the self or on the partner and the bias in perceptions that follows be quite adaptive for relationships? If we are right and the most potent cues to shift relational focus of attention in healthy, well functioning, secure communal relationships are cues

relevant to own and partner needs or opportunities to benefit self or partner might and if attentional focus leads to especially benevolent views of the individual on whom one is focused (including the self when focus lies there), might that facilitate optimal communal behavior? Might not the person focused on the self be especially sensitive to his or her own needs, feel especially deserving of support and be most likely to seek or accept such support? Might not the person focused on the partner be especially sensitive to his or her own needs, feel that he or she especially deserves support and be most likely to offer and enact such support? We think the answer to each of these questions may well be yes.

It is attending to questions of relational focus of attention that led us to examine this possible consequent of flexibility in relational focus and, we suspect, attending to relational focus of attention will lead to other advances in understanding adaptive, helpful interpersonal processes in close relationships as well.

Of course, more investigation is in order. The effects of flexibly shifting attention between self and other may be quite complex and not always adaptive. In this regard we would simply take note of a study published long ago by Millar, Millar & Tesser, 1988). They found that the act of actually helping self or partner shifted focus of attention to the object of that help. As attention shifted both positive and negative thoughts about the self (or other) were activated suggesting that, perhaps, the results might not always be to increase benevolence.

Concluding Comments

We have presented a discussion of types and patterns of relational foci of attention Starting with the premise that goals drive one's focus of attention and that most people's

goals for their communal relationships are to provide non-contingent support to their partners, receive non-contingent support from their partners, and to engage in mutually beneficial joint activities, we have suggested that optional relational focus of attention is flexible. Ideally when one is with one's partner (and sometimes when one is not) attention is focused on the self and on how the partner can support the self in times calling for responsiveness to the self, partner and how the self can support the partner when situations call for responsiveness to the partner, and on joint activities when needs are low and opportunities for such activities are present. For healthy relationships, then, relational focus of attention will vary by situation and be experienced as one of three states. In the best relationships both

Of course, following communal norm of mutual responsiveness to relationship members' needs is ideal as is having a flexible relational foci of attention. Whereas we do believe most all people hold a communal norm as an ideal we do not believe all people are adept at following it nor are adept at switching focus within communal relationships in ways most useful for maintaining the success of relationships. For people who do not trust others to consistently care for their needs, perhaps due to having been neglected and hurt in the past, a goal of self-protection can override communal goals. Along with that goal can come inflexibility in relational focus of attention. A common pattern is likely to be constant, unhealthy, relational self-focus. When the self has a need or desire the person may not seek help for fear requests may be turned down or, worse, that the self may be exploited. When the other has a need, help may not be given for fear it may not be desired or that the self may fail at providing it. When opportunities for joint activities occur the self may engage in those activities but in a very self or partner

focused way that interferes with the success of the activity. Another possible pattern is a constant, unhealthy, relational other focus which may take the form of attending to a partner's needs to the neglect of the self or of constantly trying to please the partner. For such people, relational self or other focus may seem more like a trait than a state.

Moving beyond a consideration of the self-protective goals of people who have low trust in others to consider how self-protective goals may eliminate the sort of flexible focus of attention that is optimal for communal relationships and replace it with unhealthy and more rigid, trait-like forms of focus of attention, we think, suggests new avenues of for relationship research. For us, this sort of thinking led to a program of research on whether people develop stores of information about partners in which positive and negative information is integrated into a coherent and realistic image of partners or whether people are likely to "Jekyll and Hyde" their partner seeing that partner as all good or all bad at a single point in time and varying in their judgments of partners across time. This sort of thinking has also led us to conduct work that illustrates how a lack of flexibility in focus may make people relatively insensitive to situational cues suggesting that one should focus on self or on other which in turn may eliminate the benevolent biases that may ordinarily attend such situationally determined shifts in attention. These are but two examples of phenomena to which differential patterns of attention in relationships may give rise. We are confident there are others.

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Acknowledgements

Preparation of this chapter was supported by National Science Foundation grant (), Margaret S. Clark, P.I. and by a NRSA pre-doctoral grant to Edward Lemay. Much of the research described within the chapter was supported by an NRSA pre-doctoral grant to Steven M. Graham and the above referenced NSF grant. The opinions expressed in this chapter are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation or of the National Institutes of Health.

We acknowledge the work of Berit Nowicki who developed some aspects of the existence of relational activity focus as a part of her senior honors thesis completed at Carnegie Mellon University under the direction of Margaret S. Clark..