

# Anger in Close Relationships: Relationships, Perceived Violation of Responsibility for Needs, and Feelings of Anger

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| journal or publication title | Tohoku psychologica folia                                                         |
| volume                       | 71                                                                                |
| page range                   | 33-41                                                                             |
| year                         | 2013-03-22                                                                        |
| URL                          | <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10097/57359">http://hdl.handle.net/10097/57359</a> |

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By

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Ex. "Tohoku Psychologica Folia" Volume 71

Tohoku University  
Sendai, Japan

2012

## Anger in Close Relationships: Relationships, Perceived Violation of Responsibility for Needs, and Feelings of Anger

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By assuming that an individual's perception of a relational norm violation can cause that individual to experience anger in a close relationship, we hypothesized that when a close other does not respond to a person's needs, the person would perceive the behavior as a violation of the responsibility for needs (RN) and experience anger. Japanese participants in a role-taking study were asked to read seven scenarios depicting the other person — either a romantic partner or a mere acquaintance — not responding to the participant's needs. For each scenario, they were asked to report their corresponding feelings of anger and their perceptions of whether the other person had violated a norm of RN. Consistent with our predictions, it was found that the close other's unresponsiveness to the participant's needs elicited anger more strongly and evoked the perception of the violation of RN more than did that of the not-close other. These findings imply that one cause of frequent experience of anger for a person in a close relationship is the strong belief that open expression of personal needs is acceptable in close relationships.

**Keywords:** anger, relational norm violation, relationships

### Introduction

Researchers who focus on relationships have repeatedly indicated that closeness serves as a source of comfort for people. Research has found that the construction of an intimate network with others provides one with psychological well-being (Berkman, Melchior, Chastang, Niedhammer, Leclerc, & Goldberg, 2004) and being with close others buffers distress (Schnall, Harber, Stefanucci, & Proffitt, 2008). These findings suggest that close relationships can provide an individual with comfort. However, in real social interactions, this is not necessarily the case; anger arises frequently when individuals interact with close others (Averill, 1982; Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Fitness & Fletcher, 1993; Kuppens, Van Mechelen, & Meulders, 2004). If close relationships are supposed to provide comfort, then why are individuals likely to experience anger in these relationships? Do social interactions in close relationships involve

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something in particular that causes anger? To understand this paradox, we explore what causes anger in close relationships.

### *Close Relationships and Relational Norms*

To have close relationships, it is necessary for an individual to make an investment such as of money, time, or love (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). This suggests that people are likely to regard the dissolution or leaving of valuable relationships as a major loss (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Therefore, once individuals have a close relationship, they will be motivated to maintain it, suggesting that the dissolution of a close relationship represents a serious threat to those who have that relationship. If an individual in a close relationship encounters a situation that threatens the relationship, he/she may fail to recognize the partner's negative attitudes (Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995) or resort to aggressive strategies (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006) to reduce the threat. The factors that may threaten a close relationship include an unsatisfied need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), attractive alternatives (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2006), and betrayal (Fitness, 2001). In addition, an individual may occasionally perceive threat to a close relationship through social judgments concerning the appropriateness of the partner's actions. Relational norms are important criteria of these judgments.

Relational norms are defined as implicit rules that people must follow in social interactions. These are phrased as *should* or *should not* (Argyle & Henderson, 1985), and people refer to them as a basis for determining whether actions that others have taken are appropriate. According to this perspective, individuals who attempt to follow these norms also expect their partners to behave according to the norms and may experience anger when they perceive that their partners have violated such norms. However, it has been assumed that relational norms differ across types of relationships. Therefore, while a negative behavior occurring in one relationship may be perceived as a norm violation, it may not be so in another relationship. This means that anger is elicited depending on the type of the relationship.

### *Responsibility for Needs and Anger*

What types of relational norms are associated with evocation of anger? Clark and her colleagues (Clark & Mills, 1993; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004) argued that one predominant relational norm guiding social interactions is that a person should take responsibility for the needs (RN) of a partner. It is assumed that RN is the responsibility according to which individuals respond to their partner's needs and regulate each relationship. However, the degree of RN varies across the types of relationships. In close relationships including family, couples, or close friends, people feel a sense of RN and behave according to the communal norms (they feel obligated to be considerate of a partner's well-being without expecting specific or immediate benefits in return). On the other hand, in not-close relationships such as with mere acquaintances or strangers, RN is not predominant and people instead follow the exchange norms (they regulate their behaviors according to an equity principle such as give

and take). According to Clark's theory, individuals in close relationships expect their partners to help them satisfy their diverse needs because they not only feel a sense of RN but also expect their partners to do so (Clark, Dubash, & Mills, 1998).

Assuming that an RN violation causes anger, Uehara, Nakagawa, Mori, Shimizu, and Ohbuchi (2012) conducted a role-taking study in which participants were presented with scenarios depicting the other in a close relationship as responding or not responding to the participant's needs. The participants were then asked to report their feelings of anger. The results, determined through mediational analysis, indicated that a close other's unresponsiveness to an individual's needs causes him/her to perceive this as a violation of RN and consequently evokes feelings of anger in that individual. This suggests that individuals in close relationships expect one another to feel a sense of RN and that anger is evoked by an individual making a judgment of the extent to which the partner has violated the communal norm, that is, RN. However, in the authors' analysis of variance, no significant differences were found between relationship-type conditions either in the feelings of anger or in the perceived violation of RN. In the present research, we attempt again to examine the effects of the relationship type on anger and perceived RN violation.

### *The Present Research*

Assuming that anger is evoked in an individual by the perception of a violation of RN by a partner, we investigated the effects of the relationship type on the perceived violation of RN and anger. To examine these effects, we presented Japanese participants in a role-taking study with seven hypothetical scenarios depicting the other as not responding to a protagonist's needs. Each set included scenarios depicting three types of economic needs (money, goods, and information) and four types of social needs (respect, praise, sympathy, and love). The scenarios were varied across two types of relationships: For approximately half of the participants, the person who did not respond to the protagonist's needs was a romantic partner (close condition), and for the rest, the person was a mere acquaintance (not-close condition). The participants were then asked to rate, after reading each scenario, their feelings of anger and perception of the other person's violation of the norm of RN.

### *Predictions*

According to Clark's theory, whether an individual feels a sense of RN depends on the closeness of the relationship; an individual is likely to expect the other who is in a close relationship with him/her to take RN. Therefore, an individual's feelings of anger and his/her perception of a violation of RN may also depend on whether the other is close or not. On the basis of this assumption, we predicted that participants would report more anger when a close other failed to respond to his/her needs than when a not-close other failed to do so (Hypothesis 1). We also predicted that participants would perceive the other's unresponsiveness to their needs as a greater violation of RN in the close condition than in the not-close condition (Hypothesis 2).

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants in our research were 57 Japanese undergraduates (23 men and 34 women; mean age = 20.91 years;  $SD = 1.41$ ) from a private and a prefectural universities. They were individually asked to participate in the research. Those who agreed received a questionnaire titled *Psychological Survey of Interpersonal Relationships*, and they were asked to complete it immediately.

### *Procedure*

Although Clark's theory postulates that people expect the other to satisfy their needs, it does not refer to the type of needs that people have. Assuming that an individual has needs for resources/rewards in social interactions, we constructed a series of scenarios in which the other person did not respond to those needs. On the basis of the typology of resources in interpersonal exchange proposed by Foa, Converse, Tornblom, and Foa (1993) and the classification of social rewards by Buss (1986), we developed seven basic scenarios in which a protagonist has desires to obtain money, goods, information, respect, praise, sympathy, or love. The former three needs are economic, and the remaining four are social.

Following are brief descriptions of each scenario. In the money scenario, the protagonist had no cash when he/she had to pay for lunch with the other and expected the other to pay his/her share. In the goods scenario, the protagonist was somewhat hungry and expected the other to give him/her the snacks the other was eating. In the information scenario, the protagonist expected the other to tell him/her the schedule of a final semester examination. In the respect scenario, the protagonist was called by the wrong name and expected the other to correct the mistake. In the praise scenario, the protagonist received a good grade for his/her presentation in a seminar and expected the other to praise this. In the sympathy scenario, the protagonist lost his/her treasured pet and expected the other to comfort him/her. In the love scenario, the protagonist saw the other person talking to a person whom the protagonist disliked and so expected the other to not associate with that person. The description of each scenario ended with a sentence stating that the other did not respond to the protagonist's needs/expectations.

Furthermore, we prepared two versions of each scenario by manipulating the type of relationships. In the close version, the relationship between the protagonist and the non-responsive other was described as a romantic relationship. In the not-close version, on the other hand, it was described as a mere acquaintance relationship.

In our research, the factorial design was  $7$  (needs type)  $\times 2$  (relationship type). The needs type was a within-participant variable, and the relationship type was a between-participant variable. Therefore, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two types of relationships and were given the seven needs type scenarios in each relationship condition. The protagonist in the scenarios was labeled "you," and the participants were instructed to read the scenarios as though they were the protagonist. The presentation order of the

scenarios was changed randomly.

### *Material*

Immediately after reading each scenario, the participants completed the following scales.

*Feelings of anger.* To assess the level of the feelings of anger, we used a list containing nine adjectives related to anger that have been used similarly in previous research (see Batson, Kennedy, Nord, Stocks, Fleming, Marzette, Lishner, Hayes, Kolchinsky, & Zerger, 2007; Uehara et al., 2012). Participants were asked to indicate “the degree to which you feel *irritated, angry, upset, annoyed, offended, outraged, mad, perturbed, or frustrated* as a result of reading each episode” by rating each emotion on a six-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very strongly*).

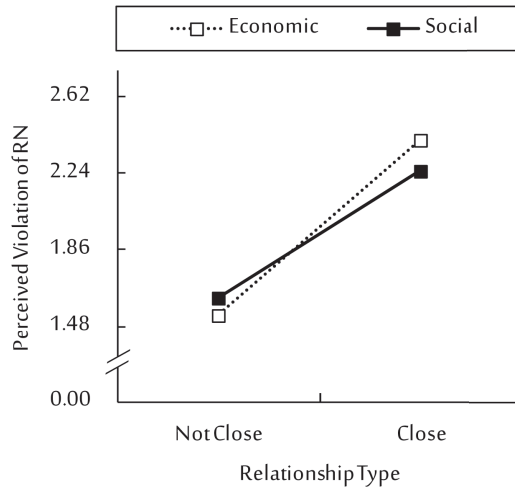
*Perceived violation of RN.* Next, to assess whether participants perceived the other’s unresponsiveness as a violation of RN, we used four items developed by Uehara et al. (2012) and six original items. The first four items are “the partner should not be unconcerned with what you want him/her to do,” “if the partner cannot respond to what you want, he/she should feel terrible,” “the partner should be concerned that he/she has not paid attention to what you want him/her to do,” and “if the partner cannot respond to what you want, he/she should feel sorry.” The original items are “the partner ought to respond to something you want,” “given your relationship, the partner should respond to what you want even if you ask for the impossible,” “the partner should willingly respond to your needs, but he/she did not do so,” “it is improper that the partner did not to respond to what you want,” “even if you want something that benefits only you, the partner should be in a position to meet your needs,” and “even if you ask for the impossible, the partner must meet your needs.” The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceived that the partner had violated RN by giving a rating for each item on a six-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*definitely*).

## **Results**

A preliminary analysis revealed no reliable effects of gender, either main effects or interactions, on any of the reported measures. Therefore, we have omitted gender from the following analyses.

### *Scale Analyses*

To check the reliability of the nine-item anger scale and ten-item perceived violation of RN scale, we calculated Cronbach’s alpha separately for each scenario. Alphas of the anger scale were .97 for the money scenario, .97 for the goods scenario, .96 for the information scenario, .97 for the respect scenario, .97 for the praise scenario, .97 for the sympathy scenario, and .96 for the love scenario. Alphas of the perceived violation of RN scale were .95 for



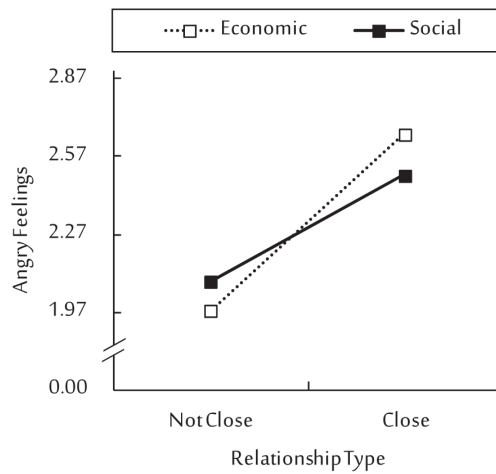
*Figure 1.* Perceived violation of the responsibility for needs (RN) as a function of relationship and needs types. Economic needs included money, goods, and information; and social needs included respect, praise, sympathy, and love. Relationship type was a between-participant variable, and needs type was a within-participant variable. Perceived violation of RN was measured by averaging responses (0–5 scale) to ten items (e.g., *the partner should not be unconcerned with what you want him/her to do*).

the money scenario, .97 for the goods scenario, .95 for the information scenario, .95 for the respect scenario, .97 for the praise scenario, .97 for the sympathy scenario, and .94 for the love scenario. These results indicate that the reliability of these scales reached a satisfactory level. We then computed scale scores separately for each scenario by averaging items.

#### *Perception of RN Violation of Unresponsiveness to Needs*

To examine the differences between needs types for perceived violation of RN, we computed the perceived RN violation scores for economic needs by averaging the scores for three economic scenarios (money, goods, and information) and for social needs by averaging the scores for four social scenarios (respect, praise, sympathy, and love). To assess the perceived violation of RN in response to the other's unresponsiveness, we conducted a 2 (relationship type)  $\times$  2 (needs type) mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the perceived violation of RN. Relationship type was a between-participant variable, and needs type, including economic vs. social needs conditions, was a within-participant variable. As can be seen in Figure 1, only a main effect of type of relationship was significant,  $F(1, 53) = 9.90, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$ , indicating that participants in the close condition gave higher ratings for the perceived violation of RN ( $M_s = 2.41$  and  $2.23$  for the close/economic and close/social conditions, respectively, on a 0–5 scale) than those in the not-close condition ( $M_s = 1.54$  and  $1.63$ , respectively).





*Figure 2.* Feelings of anger as a function of the relationship and needs types. The feelings were measured by averaging responses (0–5 scale) to nine adjectives related to anger (e.g., *irritated*, *angry*, and *outraged*).

*Reported Anger after Reading the Scenario*

To examine the differences between needs types for anger, we computed anger scores for economic needs by averaging the scores for three economic scenarios (money, goods, and information) and for social needs by averaging the scores for four social scenarios (respect, praise, sympathy, and love). A 2 (relationship type) × 2 (needs type) mixed-model ANOVA on anger revealed that a main effect of relationship type was significant,  $F(1, 54) = 3.27, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ . As can be seen in Figure 2, participants reported more anger at the unresponsiveness of the close other (economic need:  $M = 2.66$ ; social need:  $M = 2.50$ ) than of the not-close other (economic need:  $M = 1.98$ ; social need:  $M = 2.09$ ). No other significant effects were observed.

**Discussion**

Assuming that anger is evoked by the perceived violation of RN, the present research examined the effects of the relationship type on anger and the perceived violation of RN.

The results of the ANOVA on any of the measures indicated that responses to the other’s unresponsiveness to one’s needs depended on the closeness of the relationship. The participants’ reported anger after reading the scenarios is shown in Figure 2. Participants in the close condition reported more anger than those in the not-close condition, regardless of whether the need type that the other failed to respond to was economic or social (Hypothesis 1 supported). This finding suggests that a close partner’s unresponsiveness to one’s needs evokes more anger than that of a not-close other, irrespective of the type of needs. A similar pattern of the results is seen in Figure 1 on the effect of the relationship type on the perceived

violation of RN. Regardless of the type of needs, participants in the close condition were more likely to perceive the other's unresponsiveness as a violation of RN than those in the not-close condition (Hypothesis 2 supported). Clark and her colleagues (Clark & Mills, 1993; Reis et al., 2004) regarded RN as a predominant relational norm that regulates close relationships. The present results are consistent with this perspective and the findings of Uehara et al. (2012) regarding the perceived violation of RN as a cause of anger in close relationships.

Considering the above discussion, one cause of the frequent experience of anger in close relationships seems to be the following: individuals in close relationships believe that they do not need to avoid open expression of their personal needs because their partners have RN. As mentioned above, individuals believe that the other will consider their needs when they engage in social interaction with their close partners. Therefore, if they have needs, they are likely to expect their partners to sensitively respond to their needs. However, no matter how strongly the partners feel a sense of RN, it is difficult for their partner to actually respond to every type of need that they have, and thus it is also true that the partner's unresponsiveness to their needs frequently occur. Nevertheless, because those who expect their partners to have RN believe strongly that their partners will accept or respond to their needs, they may not be able to condone the partner's unresponsiveness to their needs, and thus they will strongly evoke their anger. It implies that an individual's belief that open expression of personal needs is acceptable in close relationships, that is, the release/discarding/mitigation of a psychological burden such as self-discipline are provided from close relationships may lead him/her to frequently experience anger with close partners.

Although the results suggest that individuals expect close partners to satisfy their needs, it was not directly demonstrated that these expectations are a cause of the frequent experience of anger in close relationships. This indicates that the above discussion is just an interpretation at present. In future research, we should manipulate the degree of RN by varying the type of relationship (see Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987, Study 2) and observe the frequency with which anger is provoked after two people interact.

In sum, the present research, which focused on the feelings of anger evoked in close relationships, revealed that a close other's unresponsiveness to an individual's needs caused the individual to perceive a violation of RN, evoking the feelings of anger in him/her. On the basis of these findings, we interpreted that an individual's beliefs that open expression of personal needs is acceptable in close relationships contribute to his/her frequent experience of anger in close relationships.

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(Received August 17, 2012)

(Accepted November 12, 2012)