



# An examination of relational-interdependent self-construal, communal strength, and pro-relationship behaviors in friendships

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## ABSTRACT

Individual differences in relational-interdependent self-construal (RISC) are associated with positive relationship characteristics. This suggests that RISC is positively associated with the degree to which individuals view their relationships as communally-oriented (i.e., governed by norms of responsiveness), which should in turn be associated with increased use of pro-relationship behaviors. Thus, the current study explored the associations between RISC, communal strength, and pro-relationship behaviors in friendships. As predicted, RISC was positively associated with pro-relationship behavior use, but this association was mediated by greater communal strength. This suggests that increased RISC is associated with greater relationship satisfaction because the manner in which individuals view their relationships (i.e., communally) explains the association between RISC and constructive relationship behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Relationships are important means by which individuals satisfy their fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Segrin & Taylor, 2007). As nearly one-third of non-married individuals' most intimate relationships are friendships (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), maintaining friendships is likely important to individuals' well-being. Although there is growing research on the importance of maintaining friendships (Oswald & Clark, 2006; Oswald, Clark, & Kelly, 2004; Weger & Emmett, 2009), the vast majority of research examining maintenance behaviors has done so in a romantic context. Moreover, to date little research has examined why some people are more effective at maintaining friendships than others. We argue that it is important to consider how individual differences are related to engagement of pro-relationship behaviors. The current research examines how individuals' self-construal predicts the use of pro-relationship behaviors in friendships, and whether communal strength mediates this relationship.

Individuals vary in the manner in which their self-concepts are defined. Some individuals possess higher levels of independent self-construal in which their self-concept is perceived through the lens of independence and autonomy from others (e.g., social groups; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For these individuals, the self

is seen as distinct from others, and individuals' behaviors are enacted to advance individual goals and outcomes. On the other hand, some individuals possess higher levels of interdependent self-construal in which their self-concept is perceived through the lens of social connections and relationships with others. That is, the self is seen as part of a collective entity, and individuals' behaviors are enacted to advance communal goals and outcomes. These self-construals are individual differences, and the extent to which individuals possess greater interdependent (vs. independent) self identities is termed the *relational-interdependent self-construal* (RISC; Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000).

Thinking of oneself in terms of important close relationships likely motivates individuals to maintain these relationships. Supportive of this idea, increased RISC is associated with having a greater number of close relationships, having greater self-other overlap, exhibiting more self-disclosure in relationships, having greater relationship satisfaction and commitment, possessing more trusting and fulfilling relationships, paying greater attention to interpersonal similarities (vs. dissimilarities), perceiving higher levels of social support from others, considering close others when making decisions, and understanding others' beliefs (Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002; Cross et al., 2000; Morry & Kito, 2009). Thus, we propose that RISC is also likely associated with increased use of pro-relationship and maintenance behaviors.

A variety of behaviors (e.g., being positive, open, providing assurances, engaging in shared activities, humor, and being

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supportive of friends and relationships) have been identified as useful for maintaining relationships (Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993; Oswald et al., 2004; Stafford & Canary, 1991). That is, engaging in these behaviors is positively associated with friendship commitment and satisfaction (e.g., Oswald et al., 2004), and these behaviors appear especially effective if engaged in routinely (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). People who routinely engage in these types of maintenance behaviors do so habitually rather than to achieve a specific goal, and are thought to be doing so for implicit reasons such as the internalization of pro-social values (Dainton & Stafford, 1993). We argue that maintenance behaviors that are enacted *routinely* are likely to occur in relationships in which individuals see themselves as interdependent with the other person and norms of mutual responsiveness are present.

Two additional ways in which individuals can maintain their relationships are to sacrifice self-interests and accommodate the other's negative behaviors. Willingness to sacrifice is the tendency for an individual to forego self-interests in order to promote partner- and relational-interests (Van Lange, Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997). Accommodation, on the other hand, reflects individual differences in people's ability to inhibit destructive responses and instead behave constructively in response to a partner's negative behaviors (Overall & Sibley, 2010; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Thus, individuals with greater RISC should also be more likely to sacrifice and accommodate for their friends.

However, it is unclear why RISC is associated with engaging in pro-relationship behaviors. We propose that implied by this positive relationship between RISC and the pro-relationship behaviors of sacrificing, accommodation, as well as other maintenance behaviors, is the mediating role of communal strength. Because RISC is associated with defining oneself in terms of important relationships with others, we argue that greater RISC is associated with stronger communal bonds with close others. By viewing the self as intertwined with a collective entity, individuals with greater RISC are likely more concerned with behaving in a way that promotes norms of mutual responsiveness rather than expecting immediate repayment of any benefits given to others. These norms of mutual responsiveness are characteristic of communal relationships (Mills & Clark, 2001), whereas the equivalent reciprocation of positive behaviors characterizes exchange relationships (Clark & Mills, 1993). Although greater RISC is likely related to increased communal strength, no research has examined this direct association.

Increased communal strength should in turn result in individuals engaging in more routine relationship maintenance behaviors, sacrificing, and accommodation, because of the value placed on these interpersonal relationships and the norm of mutual responsiveness. These behaviors are a result of an individual's transformation of motivation that occurs when individuals begin to prioritize partner-preferences over self-preferences (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Kumashiro, Finkel, & Rusbult, 2002). This transformation of motivation is only likely to occur in communal relationships, as the prioritization of partner-preferences over self-preferences is congruent with the norms of mutual responsiveness that characterize communal relationships (Mills & Clark, 2001) and directly conflict with the expectations of immediate benefit that characterize exchange relationships (Clark & Mills, 1993).

To date, researchers have investigated how personality is associated with pro-relationship behaviors. For example, individual differences in agreeableness and self-respect have been linked to accommodating and sacrificial behaviors (e.g., Kumashiro et al., 2002; Wood & Bell, 2008). However, little theory or research has attempted to understand how individual differences in RISC are associated with use of maintenance behaviors.

The goal of the current research was to examine the relationships between RISC, communal strength, and use of pro-relationship behaviors in friendships. Specifically, we hypothesize that RISC is positively associated with routinely engaging in pro-relationship behaviors, but that this association is mediated by increased communal strength. In other words, we predict that RISC is associated with stronger communal relationships, which in turn is associated with increased use of maintenance behaviors.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

One hundred fifteen friend dyads (65 same-sex female dyads, 30 same-sex male dyads, and 20 cross-sex dyads) participated in the study for partial fulfillment of course requirements and the opportunity to win \$25 per friend. The mean age of participants was 19.0 (range: 17–22;  $SD = 0.99$ ). The majority of participants were Caucasian (77.0%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (13.0%), African American (4.3%), Latino/a (0.9%), bi-racial (0.9%), Native American (0.4%), and other (3.5%), and most dyads were of the same ethnicity (84.3%). Most dyads (75.6%) agreed on their friendship status (31.3% both reported being best friends with one another, 42.6% both reported being close friends, and 1.7% both reported being casual friends), whereas the remaining 24.4% disagreed on their status (20.9% of dyads consisted of one friend reporting the status as “best friend” whereas the other friend reported the status as “close friend”, 2.6% of dyads consisted of a casual-close mismatch, and 0.9% of dyads consisted of a casual-best mismatch). Averaging dyads' estimates of their friendship duration revealed that friendships ranged from about 1 month in duration to over 20 years ( $M = 25.6$  months,  $Mdn = 13.0$ ,  $SD = 42.3$ ).

### 2.2. Materials

#### 2.2.1. Self-construal

Participants' self-construal was assessed using the 11-item Relational-Interdependent Self-Construal (RISC) scale (Cross et al., 2000). Sample items are: “My close relationships are an important reflection of who I am” and “When I think of myself, I often think of my close friends or family also.” Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = very much agree). The scale demonstrated adequate reliability in the current study:  $\alpha = .87$  (Friend A) and  $\alpha = .83$  (Friend B).<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.2.2. Communal strength

Participants' communal strength for the friendship was assessed using the 10-item Communal Strength Measure (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). Sample items are: “How far would you be willing to go to visit \_\_\_\_\_?” and “How happy do you feel when doing something that helps \_\_\_\_\_?” Items were rated on a 10-point scale (1 = not at all, 10 = extremely). The scale demonstrated adequate reliability in the current study:  $\alpha = .86$  (Friend A) and  $\alpha = .85$  (Friend B).

#### 2.2.3. Routine friendship maintenance

Routine friendship maintenance behaviors were assessed using a revised version of the Friendship Maintenance Scale (FMS; Oswald et al., 2004). The FMS is a 20-item scale, with each item preceded by the root “How often do you...”. Sample items are: “express thanks when your friend does something nice for you”

<sup>1</sup> Due to the non-independence of the dyad's data, we randomly designated one friend as Friend A whereas the other friend was designated as Friend B and we report reliability estimates for both Friend A and Friend B for all measures.

and “provide your friend with emotional support”. Items are rated on 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = frequently). For the current study, participants were provided with a short definition of routine behaviors (i.e., “In friendships people engage in a variety of behaviors. Some of these behaviors people do routinely – these are behaviors they do frequently and without specific intentions”; Dainton & Aylor, 2002) and were instructed to report the extent of their actual behavior over the previous two weeks. The FMS demonstrated adequate reliability in the current study:  $\alpha = .88$  (Friend A) and  $\alpha = .88$  (Friend B).

#### 2.2.4. Willingness to sacrifice

Participants’ willingness to sacrifice was assessed using a revised version of the 3-item measure developed by Arriaga and Jones (2004). A sample item is “I am willing to give up things that I like doing if they bother or hurt my friend, even if he or she does not always thank me.” Items are rated on a 9-point scale (1 = do not agree, 9 = agree completely). The scale demonstrated adequate reliability in the current study:  $\alpha = .77$  (Friend A) and  $\alpha = .83$  (Friend B).

#### 2.2.5. Accommodation

Participants’ accommodation was assessed using a 12-item measure adapted from items used by Rusbult et al. (1991). Sample items are: “When my friend is very angry with me and ignores me for awhile, I talk to him/her about what’s going on” and “When my friend is angry with me and ignores me for awhile, I give my friend the benefit of the doubt and forget about it.” Items are rated on a 9-point scale (0 = I never do this, 8 = I constantly do this). Accommodation was calculated by taking the sum of the destructive responses and subtracting from the sum of the constructive responses. Thus, the scale was scored so that higher values represent more constructive responses (i.e., accommodation). The scale demonstrated adequate reliability in the current study:  $\alpha = .69$  (Friend A) and  $\alpha = .78$  (Friend B).

### 3. Results

Table 1 shows the correlations of all study variables for Friend A and B (e.g., A’s RISC with A’s communal strength), as well as the intraclass correlation between Friend A and B’s variables (e.g., A’s communal strength with B’s communal strength),

To test the study hypotheses, three path models were examined using AMOS 16.0. Given that the majority of the friendship dyads were same sex and thus the individuals are interchangeable, we used an analysis strategy similar to that recommended by Olsen and Kenny (2006). Specifically, the paths for Friend A and B were constrained to be equal. Similarly the means and intercepts for Friend A and B’s variables were constrained to be equal. This provides one overall model of the hypothesized relationship (rather than testing the models separately for Friend A and B).

Figure 1 shows the results for the hypothesized mediational model with routine maintenance behaviors. Self-construal was associated with communal strength ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ ) and communal strength was in turn associated with routine maintenance ( $\beta = .40, p < .001$ ). The originally significant association between self-construal and routine maintenance ( $\beta = .35, p < .001$ ) was weaker in magnitude in the mediated path model although still significant ( $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ). This mediating effect from self-construal to routine maintenance through communal orientation was statistically significant based on a bootstrap of 2000 resamples ( $\beta = .13, p < .001, 90\%$  confidence interval of .09–.18) as well as the Sobel test ( $Z = 4.24, p < .001$ ). The model accounted for 26% of the variance in routine maintenance. Overall the fit indices suggested a good model fit:  $\chi^2(15) = 20.78, p = .144, \chi^2/df = 1.39, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .06$ .

Figure 2 shows the results for the hypothesized mediational model with sacrifice. As hypothesized, self-construal was associated with communal strength ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ ) and communal strength was in turn associated with sacrifice ( $\beta = .50, p < .001$ ). The originally significant association between self-construal and sacrifice ( $\beta = .18, p = .006$ ) was no longer significant in the mediated path model ( $\beta = -.01, p = .886$ ). This mediating effect from

**Table 1**  
Correlations between study variables.

	RISC	Communal strength	Routine maintenance	Sacrifice	Accommodation
RISC	-.07	.27**	.44***	.17 <sup>†</sup>	.13
Communal Strength	.46***	.38***	.53***	.44***	.32***
Routine Maintenance	.30**	.45***	.25***	.36***	.40***
Sacrifice	.19*	.57***	.21 <sup>†</sup>	-.03	.34***
Accommodation	.28**	.46***	.27**	.42***	.17**

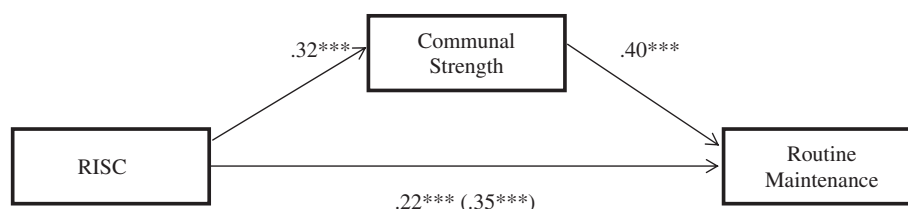
Note. Friend A’s correlations are above the diagonal, Friend B’s correlations are below the diagonal. Intraclass correlations between Friend A and B are presented on the diagonal.

\*  $p < .05$ .

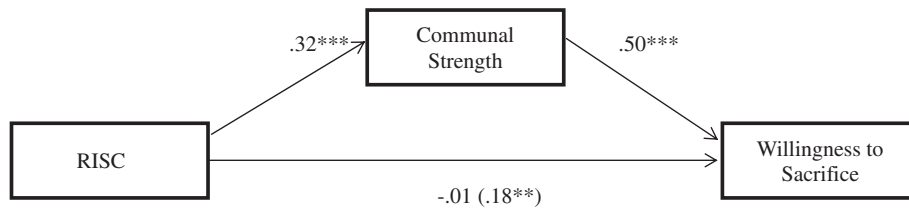
\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .



**Fig. 1.** Communal strength as a mediator between relational-interdependent self-construal and routine friendship maintenance. Note. RISC = Relational-interdependent self-construal. Value in parentheses represents the unmediated effect of RISC on routine maintenance. \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**Fig. 2.** Communal strength as a mediator between relational-interdependent self-construal and willingness to sacrifice. Note. RISC = Relational-interdependent self-construal. Value in parentheses represents the unmediated effect of RISC on willingness to sacrifice. \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

self-construal to sacrifice through communal orientation was statistically significant based on a bootstrap of 2000 resamples ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p = .001$ , 90% confidence interval of .11–.23) as well as the Sobel test ( $Z = 4.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The model accounted for 25% of the variance in sacrifice. Overall the fit indices suggested a good model fit:  $\chi^2(15) = 22.05$ ,  $p = .107$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.47$ , CFI = .94, RMSEA = .06.

Figure 3 shows the results for the hypothesized mediational model with accommodation. As hypothesized, self-construal was associated with communal strength ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and communal strength was in turn associated with accommodation ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The originally significant association between self-construal and accommodation ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $p = .003$ ) was no longer significant in the mediated path model ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $p = .240$ ). This mediating effect from self-construal to accommodation through communal orientation was statistically significant based on a bootstrap of 2000 resamples ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .001$ , 90% confidence interval of .08–.17) as well as the Sobel test ( $Z = 3.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The model accounted for 16% of the variance in accommodation. Overall the fit indices suggested an acceptable model fit:  $\chi^2(15) = 29.41$ ,  $p = .014$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.96$ , CFI = .85, RMSEA = .09.

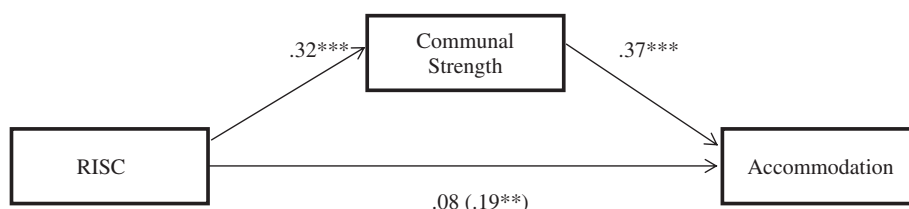
We also tested alternative models to contrast with the hypothesized model in which we: (1) reversed the order of mediator (i.e., communal strength) and the outcome variable (i.e., routine maintenance, willingness to sacrifice, accommodation), and (2) reversed the order of predictor (i.e., self-construal) and mediator variable (i.e., communal strength). For the first set of alternative models, the path between self-construal and the outcome (i.e., communal strength) retained significance after including pro-relationship behaviors as mediators. Specifically, when testing routine maintenance as a mediator variable, self-construal was associated with routine maintenance ( $\beta = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and in turn routine was associated with communal strength ( $\beta = .39$ ,  $p < .001$ ); however, self-construal was also significantly associated with communal strength ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When testing sacrifice as a mediator, self-construal was associated with sacrifice ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p = .006$ ) and in turn sacrifice was associated with communal strength ( $\beta = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ); however, self-construal was also significantly associated with communal strength ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When testing accommodation as a mediating variable, self-construal was associated with accommodation ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $p = .003$ ) and in turn accommodation was associated with communal strength ( $\beta = .31$ ,

$p < .001$ ); however, self-construal was also significantly associated with communal strength ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For the second set of alternative models, the path between communal strength and pro-relationship behaviors retained significance after including self-construal as the mediator. Specifically, when testing routine maintenance as the outcome, communal strength was associated with self-construal ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and in turn self-construal was associated with routine maintenance ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ); however, communal strength was also significantly associated with routine maintenance ( $\beta = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When testing sacrifice as the outcome, communal strength was associated with self-construal ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but self-construal was unassociated with sacrifice ( $\beta = -.01$ ,  $p = .888$ ), yet communal strength was significantly associated with sacrifice ( $\beta = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When testing accommodation as the outcome, communal strength was associated with self-construal ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but self-construal was unassociated with accommodation ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $p = .248$ ), yet communal strength was significantly associated with accommodation ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, the data do not support either set of alternative models as well as the hypothesized models.

#### 4. Discussion

Individual differences are associated with tendencies to engage in pro-relationship behaviors (e.g., Kumashiro et al., 2002; Wood & Bell, 2008). However, no research had yet examined the association of relational individual differences (i.e., RISC) with pro-relationship behaviors or the mechanisms by which RISC may be related to increases in such behavior. Thus, in the current study we examined the relationship between RISC and friendship maintenance behaviors, and we explored whether this relationship would be mediated by individuals' communal orientations.

As predicted, RISC was positively associated with individuals' use of relationship maintenance behaviors, and this association was mediated by increased communal strength. That is, the manner in which individuals view their relationships (i.e., communally) explains the association between RISC and friendship maintenance behaviors. Viewing one's self-concept in terms of important close relationships is associated with the development of relationships that are more communally oriented (such as close friendships), such that an individual is more concerned with norms of



**Fig. 3.** Communal strength as a mediator between relational-interdependent self-construal and accommodation. Note. RISC = Relational-interdependent self-construal. Value in parentheses represents the unmediated effect of RISC on accommodation. \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



responsiveness than equitable reciprocation of positive behaviors (Clark & Mills, 1993; Mills & Clark, 2001). Because communally-oriented individuals prioritize partner-preferences over self-preferences, behaviors such as sacrificing self-interests and accommodating (i.e., behaving constructively in light of a partner's negative behavior) occur with greater frequency. Furthermore, maintenance behaviors that are enacted routinely likely occur in communal relationships. This is because routine maintenance behaviors are not intentionally enacted with an explicit goal in mind, such as relational improvement (Dainton & Stafford, 1993), but are instead enacted for more implicit reasons (e.g., due to the internalization of pro-social values). Intentionally maintaining a relationship so that one can achieve and obtain an explicit outcome is more indicative of exchange relationships in that the individual is more concerned with their own welfare than for the welfare of the partner. Although specific individual outcomes may occur as a result of routine maintenance, the intent of routine maintenance is genuinely communal.

The value of engaging in these pro-relationship behaviors cannot be understated, as there is ample evidence that relationship maintenance, sacrificial behavior, and accommodation are associated with greater relationship quality and stability (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002; Dainton, 2000; Mattingly & Clark, 2010; Oswald & Clark, 2003; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). Ultimately, RISC may be associated with more positive, rewarding, and long-lasting relationships because individuals whose self-construals are largely relationally-oriented tend to view their close relationships in terms of communal endeavors, which is associated with selfless and pro-social behavioral patterns. Moreover, partners likely respond positively to individuals' pro-relationship behaviors, and these positive outcomes may feedback and strengthen individuals' relational self-construals.

Although the current study provides a clearer understanding of the relationship between RISC, communal strength, and pro-relationship behaviors, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences. Although RISC is likely neither a mediator nor an outcome as it relates to communal strength and pro-relationship behaviors (primarily due to it being an individual difference, whereas communal strength and pro-relationship behaviors are contextually dependent in that they are contingent upon the relationship in question), it is plausible that: (1) RISC is associated with communal strength due to individuals' increased tendency to engage in pro-relationship behaviors; or (2) communal strength is associated with individuals' increased tendency to engage in pro-relationship behaviors due to increased RISC. However, our data do not support these possibilities, as the alternative models were not supported. Nevertheless, longitudinally examining the association of RISC, communal strength, and pro-relationship behaviors would be beneficial in understanding the temporal sequence of mechanisms. Additionally, experimentally manipulating RISC (e.g., through priming) would provide additional evidence for the causal and temporal sequence.

## 5. Conclusion

Close relationships, such as friendships, are vitally important for individuals' well-being (Segrin & Taylor, 2007). Some individuals are quite effective in maintaining these friendships whereas others are less successful in doing so. The current study provides the first evidence that individual differences in how individuals' self-concepts are defined are associated with stronger communal relationships, which in turn is associated with increased use of pro-relationship behaviors in friendships. Specifically, increases in the tendency to view the self in terms of one's close

relationships is associated with feeling a stronger communal connection in close friendships, which ultimately is associated with positive, relationship enhancing behaviors. Thus, integrating individual differences such as RISC and communal orientation can help further our understanding of relationship processes. Understanding why some people are more effective at maintaining relationships can ultimately assist people who are struggling with interpersonal issues maintain important, satisfying relationships.

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