

CHAPTER 18

Interpersonal Processes in Romantic Relationships

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Interpersonal communication is central to romantic relationships. The way two people interact when they first meet can either ignite or extinguish hopes of future romance (Davis, 1973). Couples' communication is associated with what partners think about each other (Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000), how they generally behave toward each other (Fitzpatrick, 1988), and how they feel about their relationship (Noller, 1984). Patterns of interaction can even determine whether a relationship continues or ends (Gottman, 1994). In short, communication not only reflects romantic relationships, it also defines them (Duck, 1994; Knapp, 1984).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a selective review of the literature on interpersonal communication in romantic relationships. The chapter is divided into three parts. In the first section, theory and research associated with the initiation of romantic relationships are examined. In the second section, literature describing some of the interpersonal processes

that typify ongoing romantic relationships is reviewed. Both individual characteristics (e.g., cognition and affect) and interpersonal patterns (e.g., couple types, behavioral sequences) are described. Finally, in the third section, studies focusing on relational dissolution and divorce are discussed.

It is important to acknowledge that the review of research and theory offered in this chapter is by no means comprehensive. A chapter of this length could not possibly do justice to a comprehensive review—the literature simply is too vast and too diverse. The effort here was to include many of the research findings that capture the spirit of what scholars know about interpersonal interaction in romantic relationships. Given this, difficult selections were made. In some cases, interesting studies were omitted. In others, topics that are relevant to romantic relationships were excluded. It is my hope that the reader will indulge these choices and use the ideas presented in this chapter as stimuli for further study.

Initiating Romantic Relationships

The number of factors that can influence whether two people come together and form a long-term romantic relationship is daunting. Some researchers say that individuals' selection of one mate over another happens largely by chance (Lykken & Tellegen, 1993). Others argue that attraction and relationship initiation are the result of biochemical reactions in the body (Fisher, 1992). Yet others suggest that mate selection involves a series of strategies employed by individuals who are attempting to maximize their reproductive value (Buss, 1994).

Fortunately, the broad range of explanations offered for how and why people come together to form romantic relationships has not prevented researchers and theorists from systematically studying the phenomenon. Scholars have examined processes that affect the development of romantic relationships, and they have also studied the variables that encourage people to initiate relationships. For instance, research suggests that the initiation of romantic relationships is constrained by both physical and social contexts. People are more likely to start romantic relationships with individuals who are physically proximate than they are with those at a distance (Segal, 1974). Although the advent of social networking sites, Internet chat rooms, and online dating sites allows for the initiation of more long-distance relationships, people who start their relationships online usually progress to meeting face-to-face if they are interested in long-term romantic relationships (Parks & Roberts, 1998).

Because so many relationships are initiated through face-to-face interactions, the pool of potential partners available to people typically is limited by individuals' social network (Parks & Eggert, 1991). People tend to interact with others who are similar to themselves in terms of variables such as age, socioeconomic status, and education. As a consequence, the group from which individuals are likely to select a romantic partner is relatively homogeneous.

While the environmental constraints on relational initiation are stronger than many would like to admit, it is important to note that, within a relatively homogeneous pool of potential partners, individuals still make selections. The choices people make concerning relationship initiation may be influenced by any number of variables ranging from their perceptions of the other person's social competence to how lonely they feel when they first meet a potential partner.

Theoretical Approaches to Relationship Initiation

Although scholars debate over which variables exert a stronger influence on relationship initiation, most agree that the information that individuals obtain about a potential partner is an important commodity for those who are interested in initiating romantic relationships. Indeed, the notion that people seek and exchange information when they initially interact is woven through many theories of relationship initiation. For instance, one of the most well-known theories of relationship development, Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory, conceives of information as a means for developing intimacy as well as a way to evaluate the rewards and costs that may be associated with a relationship. Altman and Taylor suggested that increases in relational breadth and depth are the result of individuals sharing information about themselves with one another. When people first meet, they exchange information that is relatively impersonal and limit the number of different topics they discuss. As they come to know and trust each other, partners share a greater number of topics (breadth) and disclose more intimate information to each other about those topics (depth). In fact, research has revealed that partners who disclose more to each other report greater emotional involvement in their relationships (Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980) as well as greater relational satisfaction (Hendrick, 1981). Although, as Altman and Taylor suggested, disclosure is a

vital component of relational development, it is important to note that the rate at which partners exchange intimate information varies over the course of their relationship. For instance, as partners come to know each other, their need to disclose information typically decreases (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). They begin to establish a balance between the disclosure of intimate information and privacy (Petronio, 1991), and for various reasons, they may even declare some topics off limits for discussion (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Roloff & Ifert, 1998).

Drawing from social exchange theories (Burgess & Huston, 1979; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), Altman and Taylor argued that people move further into a relationship only as long as the perceived rewards associated with the relationship exceed the costs. If, for example, partners perceive that their interactions are more pleasing than not, they are likely to continue their association with each other. In addition to assessing how rewarding their interactions are, individuals consider what other alternative relationships might be available to them as well as how those alternatives compare with their current relationship. Rusbult's (1983) investment model suggests that partners' perception of their alternatives, their satisfaction, and the investments they make in their relationship operate together to influence how committed they are to continuing the relationship.

Rather than propose that partners' assessments of rewards and costs are the key factors in determining whether or not relationships will develop, Berger and Calabrese (1975) argued that "when strangers meet, their primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction or increasing predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction" (p. 100). Uncertainty reduction theory suggests that to reduce uncertainty during initial interactions, partners engage in information-seeking behaviors. When potential partners initially encounter each other, they discuss relatively innocuous items—the weather, where they are from, what they do for a living (Berger, Gardner, Clatterbuck, & Schulman, 1976). Normally, they do not talk about highly charged

personal matters such as their fears, anxieties, or fantasies (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). According to Berger and Calabrese (1975), as the amount of verbal communication between partners increases, their uncertainty tends to decrease. It is only after people come to know each other that they begin to exchange more intimate information because their uncertainty has faded.

Of course, people experience uncertainty about their partner's thoughts, values, and feelings after they have initiated and established their relationship as well (Parks & Adelman, 1983). In fact, researchers who have examined uncertainty in established relationships have argued that it can stem from a number of sources (Afifi & Reichert, 1996). To adapt the concept of uncertainty to the context of close relationships, Knobloch and Solomon (1999, 2002) coined the term *relational uncertainty* and defined it in terms of the confidence that people have in their perceptions of involvement within their interpersonal associations. Knobloch and Solomon suggested that relational uncertainty comes from three interrelated but distinct sources: (1) self-uncertainty (which occurs when people perceive that they are unable to predict or explain their own relationship-relevant attitudes or behaviors), (2) partner uncertainty (which reflects individuals' perceived inability to predict the other person's attitudes or behaviors), and (3) relationship uncertainty (which involves people's questions about the status of their relationship with their partner). Although the role of uncertainty in ongoing relationships is complex, researchers have found that relational uncertainty generally is inversely associated with marital quality (e.g., Knobloch, 2008).

Both social penetration theory and uncertainty reduction theory suggest that partners' willingness to exchange different sorts of information is central to relational development. Although the information that people exchange when they initially meet provides an important perspective on what happens when relationships first are initiated, it obviously represents only a part of the picture. While they seek and provide information, people also enact behaviors to make

themselves attractive and likable to others. Indeed, Bell and Daly (1984) argued that individuals intentionally engage in behaviors to generate affinity in others. Using a four-step conceptual model, these researchers identified the strategies people typically use to actively initiate relationships. The various strategies clustered into seven general categories: (1) focusing on commonalities (e.g., highlighting similarities, demonstrating equality), (2) showing self-involvement (e.g., finding ways of regularly “running into” the other), (3) involving the other (e.g., participating in activities the other person enjoys, including the other in activities), (4) demonstrating caring and concern (e.g., listening, being altruistic), (5) displaying politeness (e.g., letting the other have control over plans, acting interested), (6) encouraging mutual trust (e.g., being honest, being reliable), and (7) demonstrating control and visibility (e.g., being dynamic, looking good).

In addition to enacting behaviors to make themselves more attractive, individuals bring other, more stable qualities to initial interactions that affect how, and whether, those interactions progress. Two of the most frequently studied qualities associated with the initiation of romantic relationships are physical attraction and similarity.

Physical Attraction

Even though most people have been told not to “judge a book by its cover,” physical attractiveness is one of the primary cues that individuals employ in deciding whether to initiate a relationship with another person (see, e.g., Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966). People make decisions about approaching potential partners based, in large part, on how physically attractive they perceive those partners to be. After they have approached and talked to a potential partner, the way they evaluate the interaction also is affected by physical attractiveness. Indeed, Reis, Nezlek, and Wheeler (1980) found that physical attractiveness was associated with the degree to which interactions with others were perceived as pleasant.

Researchers and theorists suggest that part of the reason for the primacy of physical attractiveness in the initiation of romantic relationships is that people believe that physical attractiveness is associated with positive qualities (see Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991, for a meta-analysis). In one of the first of many studies to suggest that “what is beautiful is good,” Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) found that both men and women judged physically attractive people as more likely than those who were physically unattractive to have a number of positive characteristics, including kindness, sexual warmth and responsiveness, poise, sociability, and sensitivity. Participants also thought that those who were more physically attractive had better characters and would be more exciting dates than those who were unattractive. When asked about the future of physically attractive and unattractive individuals, people noted that those who were attractive would be more likely to have a happy marriage, to have social and professional success, to be competent in marriage, and to have more fulfilling lives. Many scholars have noted that the bias individuals have for beauty is the result of stereotypes associated with attractiveness: that is, in selecting a physically attractive partner, people believe that they get a partner with a number of other desirable characteristics as well. Other researchers have suggested that the bias reflects individuals’ goals: that people want to have close social ties to attractive partners and they project their desires onto potential partners (Lemay, Clark, & Greenberg, 2010).

Although physical attractiveness plays a major role in the choices people make concerning their selection of potential partners, the role that it plays is qualified by a number of variables. For instance, while people generally prefer to date those who are highly attractive, they often pair up with partners who approximate their own attractiveness (Walster et al., 1966). This *matching phenomenon* has been confirmed by work showing an inverse association between individuals’ physical attractiveness and their ratings of others’ attractiveness as well as a tendency for

those who are relatively unattractive to anticipate rejection from potential partners (Montoya, 2008). Research also has demonstrated that people's preferences for an attractive partner do not necessarily predict their choices. For example, individuals who reported that physical attractiveness was important to them prior to attending a speed dating event were not more likely, after the event, to say that they wanted to date the person they rated as most physically attractive (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). Furthermore, it is important to note that the role of physical attractiveness in relationships changes as relationships develop. People's perceptions of their partner's physical attractiveness can change over time (Albada, Knapp, & Theune, 2002), and their ratings of a partner's physical attractiveness have been associated with relational qualities such as commitment, passion, intimacy, satisfaction, and marital adjustment (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2009; McNulty, Neff, & Karney, 2008).

Perhaps the most well-studied variable associated with the role of physical attractiveness in mate selection is gender. Researchers have repeatedly found a gender difference with regard to the importance that men and women initially assign to physical attractiveness. More specifically, men report stronger preferences for physically attractive mates than do women; women, in contrast, report stronger preferences than do men for partners who have good earning potential or other valued resources (Buss, 1989; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994).

One of the most popular explanations provided for this gender difference is rooted in evolutionary psychology (Buss, 1994; Simpson & Kenrick, 1996). Scholars argue that, for example, men place greater importance on the physical attractiveness of their mates because they are seeking mates who are fertile and able to produce healthy offspring. Women, in contrast, place more importance on the earning potential of their partners because they are seeking mates who will be "good providers" for their children. This explanation is difficult to refute, in part because the gender difference in question has

been replicated across a number of cultures (Buss, 1989). Even so, there are alternative explanations. For instance, it is possible that the difference is due to the distinct ways in which men and women are socialized to talk and think about their choices in romantic partners. In support of this explanation, Sprecher (1989) found that differences in the importance that men and women assign to the physical attractiveness of potential partners were larger when self-report data were examined than when behavioral data were tested. When Sprecher asked men and women to report their preferences in potential mates, men were more likely to say that physical attractiveness affected their choice than were women, and women were more likely than were men to report that their preference was based on the other's earning potential and expressiveness. However, when she examined the participants' behavior, she found that both men's and women's choice of a partner was most influenced by the partner's physical attractiveness.

Similarity

In addition to focusing on the role of physical attractiveness in relationship initiation, scholars have studied the association between similarity and attraction. For instance, the literature on mate selection has yielded substantial evidence that people tend to choose spouses who are relatively similar to them in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, education, and age (see Surra, Gray, Boettcher, Cottle, & West, 2006). Furthermore, studies examining the dynamics of ongoing relationships indicate that partners who have similar preferences with regard to role performance and leisure activities are more compatible than those who do not (e.g., Houts, Robins, & Huston, 1996).

While researchers have explored attraction and partners' similarity with regard to a number of different variables, the association between attitudinal similarity and attraction has received the most attention. Most scholars suggest that the impetus for this line of research was a longitudinal

investigation conducted by Newcomb (1961) examining friendships that were formed between college housemates. Newcomb assessed housemates' value similarity before they were acquainted and then later looked at the association between that variable and attraction. He found that value similarity was positively linked to the attraction that developed between housemates over the course of a semester.

To further establish the association between attraction and attitude similarity, Byrne (1971) conceived what is now known as the "bogus stranger" experimental paradigm. This procedure involved researchers first measuring people's attitudes about a number of topics. Then, attitude similarity was manipulated by presenting participants with what was supposed to be another set of attitudes toward the same topics. People typically were told that this second set of attitudes belonged to a stranger, who was portrayed as another participant. Finally, the participants were asked to report the extent to which they were attracted to the bogus stranger. Byrne and his associates found that people reported greater attraction to strangers who were attitudinally similar to them than to those who were dissimilar (e.g., Byrne & Griffitt, 1966; Byrne & Nelson, 1965).

In spite of the evidence amassed by Byrne and his colleagues (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Byrne & Griffitt, 1966; Byrne & Nelson, 1965), a number of researchers have questioned the association between attitude similarity and attraction. For instance, Rosenbaum (1986) provided evidence that the link between these two variables was not due to people being attracted to similar others but that, instead, it was based on their feelings of repulsion for those who are dissimilar. Condon and Crano (1988) found that the association between attitude similarity and attraction was influenced by people's assumption that others would evaluate them positively. Perhaps the most celebrated study on this issue in the field of communication is one conducted by Sunnafrank and Miller (1981). Following a modification of the bogus stranger manipulation, these researchers asked dyads to engage in a conversation with each other. They selected conversational partners based on their similarity or dissimilarity on two controversial topics and told the participants that

they would meet and work together on a project involving those topics. Individuals who were in a no-interaction condition responded to Byrne's measure of attraction. Those in an initial-interaction condition talked to each other for five minutes and then responded to the same questionnaire. Sunnafrank and Miller found that the association between attitude similarity and attraction was eliminated when people were given the opportunity to interact (see also Sunnafrank, 1983, 1986). In line with these findings, a meta-analysis of the literature on similarity and attraction indicated that actual similarity was important in studies that involved no interaction or only a short interaction. Perceived similarity, by contrast, predicted attraction in studies that involved no interaction, a short interaction, and existing relationships (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008).

Clearly, discussion concerning the nature of the link between attitude similarity and attraction is ongoing. Two decades ago, this discussion was characterized by relatively extreme views. Some scholars argued that the attitude similarity/attraction effect was "dead" (Bochner, 1991); others said that similarity was of "fundamental importance" to human relationships (Duck & Barnes, 1992). As noted by Cappella and Palmer (1992), the intensity of researchers' comments was "testimony to the centrality of attitude similarity in the study of relationship formation" (p. 180). Today, researchers are more interested in examining different types of similarity and the outcomes associated with similarity than they are in arguing about its importance. For example, Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury (2007) found that the association between personality similarity and relationship satisfaction was mediated by partners' shared emotional experiences. Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, and Finkel (2009) examined similarity to support the *Michelangelo phenomenon*—an interpersonal model suggesting that partners in close relationships promote each other's ideal selves. They found that one partner's similarity to the other's ideal self affirmed the other's ideals and that, as a consequence, each partner moved closer to his or her own ideal self.

Interpersonal Processes in Romantic Relationships

Research and theory on similarity and physical attraction clearly illustrate the centrality of interpersonal communication to the initiation of romantic relationships. When people initiate relationships, they have to communicate—whether to gather information about potential partners, to give information about themselves to partners, or to present themselves as attractive and likable. Obviously these, and other, interpersonal behaviors do not cease once romantic relationships are established. The specific behaviors enacted by individual partners may change over time, and certainly the way in which people think about and respond to certain behaviors will change. As their relationships develop, partners also will begin to engage in patterns of interaction that they did not enact when they first met.

Studies on the interpersonal processes that take place in the context of romantic relationships have focused both on the behavior of individual partners as well as on the patterns of behavior enacted by romantic dyads. Individuals' communication patterns and the patterns of communication enacted by dyads are influenced by the cognitive and affective characteristics that individuals bring to their initial interactions. Furthermore, because romantic relationships are dynamic and reflexive, the cognitive and affective characteristics that emerge from partners' interactions influence, and are influenced by, their relationship.

Individual Characteristics of Relational Partners

Cognition

The ways people think about potential partners and relationships clearly influence whether and how they initiate relationships with others. Those who see relationships as risky and dangerous are likely to approach potential partners differently than those who view relationships as

stable and rewarding. Similarly, once individuals are involved with a romantic partner, their thoughts about their partner and about their relationship are likely to affect their relational outcomes. Research suggests that cognition in and about romantic relationships is associated with the way people feel about their relationship, the way they behave toward their partner, and even the way their partner behaves toward them (e.g., Fletcher, Overall, & Friesen, 2006).

While the literature on cognition in close relationships is quite diverse in terms of focus, three aspects of partners' cognition have received a great deal of attention from researchers and theorists. These include (1) descriptive knowledge structures (e.g., relational schemas), (2) evaluative knowledge structures (e.g., beliefs and standards), and (3) explanatory knowledge structures (e.g., attributions and accounts).

Descriptive Knowledge Structures. People have mental representations that reflect their predictions about the qualities that describe individuals and relationships. These descriptive knowledge structures influence the way people interpret information about their partner as well as the way they behave in the context of their relationship. A number of terms have been used to study the “coherent frameworks of relational knowledge” (Planalp, 1985) that individuals bring to their close relationships, including schemas, scripts, working models, and mental models.

Although scholars differ with regard to their opinions concerning the specific components and functions of descriptive relational knowledge structures, most agree that, among other things, they include understandings about the *self*, the *other*, and the *relationship between self and other*. These representations differ from those traditionally discussed by psychologists (e.g., Markus, 1977) in that they are necessarily social. While it is possible to have distinct views of the self, the other, or the relationship (e.g., “I like chocolate,” “He has grey hair,” “We’ve been married for 17 years”), relational knowledge structures define what a person is like in relationship

to others (e.g., “I’m a good listener,” “He is a caring person,” “We still like each other”) (Andersen, Reznik, & Chen, 1997). Knowledge structures about the self, the other, and the relationship, thus, are interdependent: Each influences and is influenced by the other. Furthermore, each of these cognitive structures affects the way people experience and behave within their romantic relationships.

For instance, research on the way relational partners view themselves shows that self-representations affect partners’ experiences within romantic relationships. Individuals tend to be drawn toward others who see them as they see themselves (Deutsch & Solomon, 1959). Swann, Hixon, and De La Ronde (1992) found that people with negative self-concepts were more committed to spouses who evaluated them negatively than to partners who evaluated them positively. Perhaps because they do not view themselves as strong or independent, people with low self-esteem also seem to be more swayed by their love experiences than do those with high self-esteem. Individuals with low self-esteem note that they have more intense experiences of love, report that their love experiences are less rational, and view their partners more positively than do people with high self-esteem (Dion & Dion, 1988). Individuals who doubt themselves also underestimate the strength of their partner’s love for them (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001). They respond to being hurt by behaving badly toward their partner, and their partner, in turn, rates them as overly dependent, selfish, and needy (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003). It may not be surprising, then, that when they feel inferior to their partner, those with low self-esteem engage in behaviors that function to increase their partner’s dependence on them (Murray et al., 2009).

Studies on cognitive representations of potential partners similarly illustrate that activating particular expectations about a partner can influence social interaction. In a classic study, Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (1977) found that men who were told that a woman they were about to

interact with for the first time was physically attractive rated the woman more favorably than did men who were told that their interactional partner was unattractive. Furthermore, when outside observers rated the women’s conversational behavior, the researchers found that, indeed, the women behaved in more socially skillful ways. Snyder et al. concluded that the men’s impressions of women’s physical attractiveness created a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the men expected the women to behave in more positive ways, the women did so.

In a similar vein, Andersen and Baum (1994) found that activating descriptive knowledge structures associated with a significant other can influence the way people evaluate strangers. These researchers asked people to describe a significant other whom they either liked or disliked. They also asked the participants to interact with a stranger who was portrayed as having the traits that the participants used to describe their significant other. The researchers found that individuals “transferred” the schema of their significant other to the stranger—that is, the participants evaluated the stranger based, in part, on the traits associated with their significant other.

Although studies focusing on representations of the self or the other provide interesting information about the way descriptive knowledge structures can influence people’s relationships, they constitute a relatively small sector of the literature. Research on descriptive knowledge structures in relationships has been dominated by work emphasizing the way partners represent their relationships with others. These investigations may be best exemplified by research and theory on adult attachment.

The literature on adult attachment is founded on the work of Bowlby (e.g., 1969), who argued that individuals develop “internal working models” of relationships from the interactions they had as infants with caregivers. According to Bowlby, these models comprise two distinct parts. One is a representation of the self or a self-schema that portrays the self as either worthy or unworthy of love and caring. The other is a representation of the caregiver that characterizes him or her as

responsive and sensitive to the infant or as unresponsive and insensitive. Bowlby argues that the attachment relationship infants form with their adult caregivers influences individuals' behavior well past infancy into adulthood.

Of course, in adulthood, attachments change. As people mature, they become less attached to their adult caregiver and, in many cases, become attached to a romantic partner. Hazan and Shaver (1987) argued that the attachments people develop as infants are later embodied in their romantic relationships. Based on the three categories of attachment identified by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) to characterize infants' attachments to their caregivers, Hazan and Shaver posited three types of adult attachment. The first of these is *secure*. Individuals with a secure attachment style find it easy to get close to others, are comfortable depending on others, and tend not to be concerned about being abandoned or having someone become too emotionally close to them. The second type is *avoidant*. People who are avoidant tend to get nervous when others get too close to them and are uncomfortable trusting or depending on others. The third, and final, type of adult attachment described by Hazan and Shaver is *anxious-ambivalent*. Those who are anxious-ambivalent find that others are reluctant to get as intimate with them as they would like. They worry that their romantic partners do not really care about them, and they often want to become extremely close to their partners.

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) provide a slightly different conceptualization of adult attachment. Like Bowlby, they suggest that internal working models are made up of representations of the self and the other. Because, as Bartholomew and Horowitz argue, both the self and the other can be evaluated in a positive or a negative fashion, combining these two dimensions yields four categories: (1) one in which people have a positive view of the self and of others (*secure*), (2) one in which they have a positive view of the self and a negative view of others (*dismissing*), (3) one with a negative view of the self and a positive view of others (*preoccupied*),

and (4) the final one with a negative view of the self and a negative view of others (*fearful*). Other researchers (Collins & Read, 1990) argue that two or three dimensions (e.g., comfort with closeness, anxiety about being abandoned or unloved, comfort with depending on others) can capture the essence of people's attachment styles.

Regardless of whether attachment is conceived of as a style or as dimensions along which individuals vary, a plethora of findings suggest that people who are secure tend to be involved in relationships that are more committed and satisfying than do those who are insecure (e.g., either anxious-ambivalent or avoidant). Those who are secure tend to be more trusting, have higher self-esteem, and have more positive beliefs about others. They experience more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions in the context of their relationships, and they appear to be more comfortable expressing their feelings to relational partners. In short, people who are secure tend to be better off—both as individuals and as relational partners—than are those who are insecure. (For reviews, see Cassidy & Shaver, 2008; Feeney & Noller, 1996.)

The consistent associations between attachment and positive individual and relational outcomes raise important questions about whether these knowledge structures are subject to change. Is attachment stable or unstable? If an individual is insecurely attached as a child, is he or she doomed to a life of failed relationships?

Bowlby originally conceived of attachment as relatively stable. Indeed, much of the literature on social cognition emphasizes the stability of knowledge structures. People often seek out and attend to information that is consistent with their expectations (Rosenthal, 1993; Stangor & McMillan, 1992), they resist data that contradict their beliefs (Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975), and they bias their memories of events or circumstances to fit with their current perceptions and expectations (Ross, 1989). Recent work on attachment similarly suggests that secure attachment is associated with greater accessibility of a "secure-base script," deeper processing of

script-relevant information, and faster script-relevant judgments (Mikulincer, Shaver, Sapire-Lavid, & Avihou-Kanza, 2009). In line with the notion that there is a fair amount of stability in descriptive knowledge representations, studies on adult attachment have demonstrated that approximately 70% of people evaluate their own attachment style consistently over time periods ranging from one week to four years (Baldwin & Fehr, 1995; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994).

Although researchers and theorists have emphasized the stability of individuals' knowledge structures, most also acknowledge that these structures are dynamic and responsive to changes in the social environment. For instance, Davila, Karney, and Bradbury (1999) found that, on average, individuals' attachment representations changed in a predictable way over the early years of marriage. More specifically, spouses tended to become more secure, perhaps reflecting increased comfort with their relationship. These researchers also found significant changes in spouses' attachment based on both individual differences (e.g., psychological vulnerabilities) and interpersonal variables (e.g., relational satisfaction). Little, McNulty, and Russell (2010) similarly found that although attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were negatively associated with marital satisfaction, both were influenced by couples' sexual behavior. Attachment avoidance was unrelated to daily ratings of satisfaction for partners who reported more frequent sex, and attachment anxiety was unrelated to daily satisfaction when partners reported more satisfying sex. As Davila and her colleagues (1999) noted, it appears that people's "past experiences, their current states of mind about relationships, and their experiences with partners all affect how secure they feel in relationships" (p. 798).

Evaluative Knowledge Structures. In addition to including "internal working models" that provide partners with a basis for predicting the qualities individuals and relationships *will* have, most theorists suggest that relational knowledge structures include beliefs or standards about the

qualities that individuals and relationships *should* have (Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, & Sher, 1989). Partners' evaluative knowledge structures have been studied under a number of different labels, including implicit theories of relationships, relational standards, prototype interaction pattern models, unrealistic beliefs, and ideal standards. Although each of the concepts associated with these labels carries a slightly different meaning, they all reflect criteria that provide people with a way to evaluate their relationships with others.

Evaluative knowledge structures such as relationship beliefs or standards are central to a number of well-known theories, including social exchange (Huston & Burgess, 1979) equity (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), interdependence (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelly, 1959), and investment (Rusbult, 1983) theories. Scholars who employ these, and other, theories suggest that comparisons between individuals' beliefs or standards and their perceptions of their current relationship serve as a basis for the way people feel about their romantic partner (Lederer & Jackson, 1968). When individuals' relational standards or beliefs are met or upheld, partners are relatively satisfied with their relationship; when people's standards or beliefs are not fulfilled, they are likely to become dissatisfied or distressed.

Empirical research generally has confirmed the association between relational quality and the degree to which people report that their standards or beliefs are fulfilled. For instance, studies examining commonly held relational standards have demonstrated that when individuals' standards were met, partners tended to be relatively satisfied with their relationship; in contrast, when those standards were unfulfilled, partners tended to be less satisfied (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). The same association emerged when the standards individuals held for their relational partners were examined: There was a positive association between the fulfillment of people's standards for their partners and their relational satisfaction (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). Research also suggests that individuals are happier when

they match their partner's ideal standards (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001).

Of course, some beliefs or standards are more difficult to meet than others. A number of researchers have examined beliefs about relationships that are "unrealistic." Because unrealistic relational beliefs involve extreme standards that are difficult, if not impossible, to meet (e.g., "happy couples never fight"), partners who hold such beliefs are more likely to be disappointed in their relationships (Baucom & Epstein, 1990). Indeed, Bradbury and Fincham (1987) found a negative link between unrealistic romantic beliefs and marital satisfaction. Kurdek (1992) further reported that unrealistic beliefs were negatively associated with satisfaction in both heterosexual and homosexual couples.

People with unrealistic or extreme beliefs about relationships not only tend to be less relationally satisfied, they also tend to be less optimistic about their partner changing than those with more realistic expectations (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). Furthermore, those who are dissatisfied tend to expect more negative behaviors and fewer positive behaviors from their partners during conflict episodes than do those who are satisfied (Vanzetti, Notarius, & NeeSmith, 1992). The negative views held by individuals who have unrealistic relationship beliefs and the disappointment they feel about their relationship may create a very undesirable relational context for partners: People who have unrealistic beliefs are more likely to be dissatisfied with their relationship; individuals who are dissatisfied, in turn, anticipate negative behaviors from their partner. Given the negative views these individuals have concerning their partner and their relationship, they are likely to become entrenched in their disappointment, regardless of whether their partner tries to change.

Another quality of beliefs and standards that affects relational satisfaction is their flexibility. Neff and Karney (2003) looked at changes in partners' standards and perceptions of each other early in marriage. They found that marital satisfaction was more stable when partners' standards

were flexible. That is, couples who were consistently satisfied tended to modify their standards so that they matched the current strengths of their relationship.

While it is apparent that unfulfilled relational beliefs and standards are linked to the quality of romantic relationships, the nature of the association appears to differ somewhat for women and men. For example, when Vangelisti and Daly (1997) asked people to rate the importance of various relational standards, they found that women and men rated the standards similarly. Women, however, believed that their standards were fulfilled less often than did men. Fitzpatrick and Sollie (1999) further examined what they called unrealistic gendered beliefs—beliefs that focused on irreconcilable differences in men's and women's relational needs. These researchers found that women's unrealistic beliefs were associated with more alternatives, lower matches to ideal comparison levels, and lower commitment. By contrast, men's unrealistic gendered beliefs were not associated with either investment or commitment. The authors argued that the links between women's unrealistic beliefs and various aspects of relational investment may reflect the notion that women are supposed to be "relational experts." That is, because women see unfulfilled beliefs as having important implications for their romantic relationships, the association between women's unmet beliefs and their relational investment may be stronger than it is for men.

Explanatory Knowledge Structures. Knowledge structures such as beliefs and standards serve as a framework for interpreting and evaluating relationships. While these structures have been the focus of a great deal of theoretical and empirical work, the processes and structures that they influence are interesting subjects of study as well. Research on attribution and accounts provides a glimpse of the explanatory processes and structures that affect, and are affected by, romantic relationships.

For instance, the attributions people provide for their partner's behavior often reveal something about the way they regard their relationship.

Studies suggest that individuals are particularly likely to seek out such explanations when something happens that is negative, unexpected, or out of the ordinary (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1981). People like their experiences to “make sense” (Heider, 1958). When romantic partners feel or behave in ways that are out of character, those who notice the discrepancy typically search for a way to explain it. Because their explanations may comment on the thoughts, feelings, or behavior of the other (e.g., “because she’s tired,” “because he’s stingy,” “because she’s a neat person”), they reflect a certain relational context—one that may be satisfying, dissatisfying, affectionate, or hostile.

A large body of research on marital and romantic partners’ attributions supports the notion that people’s explanations for their partner’s behavior are linked to their relational satisfaction (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Studies have repeatedly revealed that those who are dissatisfied with their relationship tend to opt for explanations that magnify the potential impact of their partner’s negative behavior and discount the influence of the partner’s positive behavior. Satisfied people, in contrast, select attributions that highlight their partner’s positive behavior and minimize his or her negative behavior. In short, dissatisfied individuals tend to make relatively negative, “distress-maintaining” attributions for their partner’s behavior, while those who are satisfied make more positive, “relationship-enhancing” attributions (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985).

While the association between partners’ attributions and the quality of their relationship is well established, the nature of that association has not always been clear. Researchers and theorists have long argued that the causal direction of the link between maladaptive attributions and relational distress is bidirectional—that is, not only are attributions influenced by relational satisfaction, but relational satisfaction also is affected by attributions (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1989). Evidence from longitudinal studies now has confirmed that the attributions made by partners are associated with the deterioration of marital

relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 2000). Studies also show that negative, distress-maintaining attributions are associated with elevated rates of negative behaviors during problem-solving discussions (Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996).

In line with the literature on attributions, research on accounts suggests that the explanations people provide for events associated with their romantic relationships are linked to relational quality. For example, Surra and her colleagues (Surra, Arizzi, & Asmussen, 1988; Surra, Batcheler, & Hughes, 1995) have studied people’s accounts of “turning points” in courtship—times when relational partners perceive that the chance that they will marry either increases or decreases (see also Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Lloyd & Cate, 1985). Using an interview procedure developed by Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, and Cate (1981), these researchers asked respondents to explain what happened at each perceived turning point. Their findings indicated that individuals’ explanations for relational turning points were associated with relational satisfaction four years after marriage. Partners’ satisfaction was positively linked to their comments about spending time together and disclosure and negatively associated with references to alternative dating partners and attributions concerning one or both partners’ social network.

Research on accounts (see Harvey, Orbuch, & Weber, 1992) also has focused on the story-like explanations people construct to deal with stressful life events such as incest (Harvey, Orbuch, Chwalisz, & Garwood, 1991) or relationship dissolution (Sorenson, Russell, Harkness, & Harvey, 1993). These investigations have demonstrated that those who formulate accounts to explain the trauma they experience and who then confide their accounts to close-relationship partners are better off, both physically and psychologically, than those who do not. Whether accounts are elicited by events associated with individuals’ romantic relationship or by other events, it appears that people benefit from sharing their explanations with those they are close to. The

ability to talk about stressful events with a romantic partner may not only reflect the quality of the romantic relationship, it also may affect individuals' well-being (see Pennebaker, 1990).

In spite of the potential link between people's ability to express their explanations for traumatic events to others and their personal well-being, there are a number of reasons why individuals may decide not to disclose the explanations they generate to their romantic partner. They may feel that the information is irrelevant to their partner, that it is too personal to discuss, or that it will be judged negatively. Most of the literature on accounts and attributions has focused on explanations that individuals may opt not to disclose to others. Because these internal, cognitive explanations affect people's personal relationships, they are a very important area for research. But distinguishing individuals' unspoken attributions and accounts from those they communicate also should yield interesting data about how individuals perceive their romantic relationships. What types of explanations are people unwilling to discuss, and why? How are unspoken attributions modified when they emerge in conversations between romantic partners? What can spoken attributions and accounts tell us about partners' relationships that unspoken ones cannot?

Although scholars have noted that distinctions between expressed and unexpressed explanations are important (Antaki, 1987; Hilton, 1990), few have contrasted the two. This is part of the reason why we know relatively little about how the attributions and accounts people generate for themselves to meet their own needs differ from those they generate for the public eye. Baumeister and Newman (1994) underline the importance of this distinction when they discuss possible differences in the narratives people construct to interpret their experiences and those they devise to communicate with others. These researchers suggest that stories based on *interpretive* motives meet people's needs to make sense of their lives, whereas those constructed for *interpersonal* purposes focus on achieving a particular effect on another person. Because interpretive

motives emphasize the needs of the individual rather than the impact of the individual on others, they should exert a less potent influence on the explanations people generate when they talk to relational partners than should interpersonal motives.

Affect

Even a cursory review of the literature on cognition in romantic relationships reveals that partners' affect is closely tied to what and how they think. Internal working models of relationships are organized, in part, around individuals' affective orientation toward themselves and others. The beliefs and standards that people hold for their relationships evoke certain emotions when they are unmet. The attributions and accounts that people generate are influenced by the way individuals feel toward their relational partner. Clearly, affect and the expression of affect are central components of romantic relationships.

The literature on romantic partners' expressions of affect generally suggests that individuals in distressed relationships display more negative affect, less positive affect, and more reciprocity of negative affect than do those who are not distressed (Notarius & Johnson, 1982). In addition, although partners who are happy tend to engage in more positive behaviors than those who are unhappy (Weiss & Heyman, 1990), negative behaviors often are deemed the more sensitive barometer of marital satisfaction (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). Studies demonstrate that partners' negative behaviors are more strongly linked to marital satisfaction than are their positive behaviors, particularly when couples are dissatisfied with their relationship (Jacobson, Waldron, & Moore, 1980).

Longitudinal research further suggests that the association between the expression of negative affect and relational satisfaction holds up over time. Indeed, premarital assessments of negative affect and the intensity of couples' conflict predict satisfaction in the marriage later

(Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985). Even when initial levels of satisfaction are controlled, the expression of negative affect predicts declines in relational satisfaction over time (Levenson & Gottman, 1985).

Although studies have consistently established an association between negative affective behaviors and relational satisfaction, it is important to note that the link between these two variables may not be as straightforward as it first appears. Researchers and theorists who have focused their attention on romantic partners' expression of affect argue that the decline in relational satisfaction associated with negative behaviors is qualified by several issues.

First, while there is evidence that negative behavior often outweighs positive behavior in terms of its impact on relational quality, researchers who have studied the effect of positive behavior on relationships argue that positive behavior can be just as influential. These scholars suggest that the impact of positive behavior on relationships is more difficult to detect than that of negative behavior because it is relatively subtle and complex. Some argue that the influence of positive behaviors may emerge at certain times in relationships. For example, Cutrona (1996) noted that positive supportive behaviors may contribute to relational quality when partners are under a great deal of stress. She suggested that under stressful circumstances, the expression of positive affect can prevent emotional withdrawal and isolation, and as a consequence, it can help alleviate damage to the relationship.

Other theorists have focused on the unique functions of positive affect for individuals and their relationships. For instance, Fredrickson's (2001) *broaden-and-build* model suggests that the experience and expression of positive emotions function to broaden thought–action repertoires and build resources that people can use to enhance or maintain their well-being. Taking a slightly different tack from Fredrickson, Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher (2004) argue that *capitalization*—the process of sharing positive events—helps people enjoy the positive events

they experience and build personal and social resources. In line with this argument, Reis et al. (2010) found that sharing positive events with an enthusiastic listener increased the perceived value of the events. They also found that enthusiastic responses to shared positive events were associated with trust and a prosocial concern for others.

A second issue that affects the link between partners' negative behaviors and their satisfaction is gender. A number of studies suggest that there are important gender differences in the expression of affect and the influence of affective expressions on relational satisfaction. Research has shown that, on average, wives express more negativity as well as more positivity in their relationships than do husbands (Noller, 1984; Notarius & Johnson, 1982). Women tend to be more critical when they interact with their partners than do men (Hahlweg, Revenstorf, & Schindler, 1984). Furthermore, wives who are distressed are more likely than distressed husbands to behave negatively toward their spouse (Notarius, Benson, Sloane, Vanzetti, & Hornyak, 1989). Distressed wives also have a greater tendency than those who are not distressed to reciprocate negative behavior from their partner (Notarius & Pellegrini, 1987).

In addition to expressing more negativity toward their husbands, it appears that distressed wives have difficulty countering their husbands' negative behavior with positive behavior. Notarius and his colleagues (1989) found that distressed wives were less likely than distressed husbands to respond positively to negative messages. These wives, as a consequence, are less likely than others (distressed husbands, nondistressed husbands, and nondistressed wives) to break the cycle of negativity that characterizes the interactions of many dissatisfied couples.

Studies that have examined the behaviors of both partners suggest that there may be good reason for the greater negativity of distressed wives: Distressed wives are particularly likely to have unresponsive husbands. Because men experience greater physiological arousal during conflict than do women, Gottman and Levenson (1988)

argued that men have a greater tendency than women to withdraw during conflict episodes. Inasmuch as this is the case, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) suggested that the increased negativity of wives may be due, in part, to a tendency among distressed husbands to suppress their negative behaviors during conflict. In other words, the ways in which distressed husbands and wives respond to the negative feelings they experience during a conflict may actually “feed” on each other. Wives who are distressed may be particularly likely to express their negative feelings because their husbands are unresponsive. Distressed husbands may withdraw and act unresponsive as a consequence of their wives’ increased negativity.

It is important to note that although wives (particularly those who are distressed) express more negativity in their relationships than do husbands, the negativity of wives does not necessarily affect couples’ satisfaction as might be expected. Social learning theorists would predict that the greater negativity of wives would be experienced by husbands as punishing or costly and, as a consequence, would create declines in husbands’ satisfaction. However, this does not appear to be the case. In fact, husbands’ negativity seems to have more of an impact on spouses’ satisfaction than does wives’ negativity. Gottman and Krokoff (1989), for example, found that husbands’ negativity, rather than wives’ negativity, predicted declines in partners’ relational satisfaction. Furthermore, wives appear to be more sensitive to their partner’s negativity than do husbands. Huston and Vangelisti (1991) found that husbands’ negativity predicted declines in wives’ satisfaction, but wives’ negativity did not similarly affect husbands’ satisfaction.

A third issue that complicates the association between negative behaviors and satisfaction involves the way negative behaviors are coded and defined. When negative behaviors are coded in concert with other behaviors or examined based on their form or function, the inverse association between negative behaviors and satisfaction becomes more nuanced. Some researchers

have found that the impact of positive behaviors is only evident when positive behaviors are examined in context with negative behaviors. Huston and Chorost (1994) studied whether partners’ expressions of affection moderated the longitudinal association between negative behavior and relational quality. They found that the link between negativity and the quality of couples’ relationships was buffered by partners’ expressions of affection for each other. Gottman and Levenson (1992) argued that the ratio of positive to negative behaviors has a stronger influence on couples’ satisfaction than does the absolute frequency of either positive or negative behaviors. These researchers tested their argument by classifying couples into two groups: regulated and unregulated. Regulated couples were those in which both partners displayed more positivity than negativity when they spoke to each other. Unregulated couples, by contrast, were those in which both partners showed more negativity than positivity during interaction. Over a period of four years, Gottman and Levenson found that regulated couples were more satisfied, less likely to have considered divorce, less likely to have separated, and less likely to have divorced.

Rather than examine the ratio of positive to negative behaviors, Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, and Sibley (2009) looked at communication strategies varying in valence and directness. They found that direct negative strategies initially were perceived by partners as unsuccessful but that these strategies predicted increases in desired change over time. McNulty and Russell (2010) also looked at direct versus indirect negative behaviors. They found that direct negative behaviors interacted with the severity of couples’ problems to affect relational satisfaction. More specifically, couples’ tendency to engage in these behaviors predicted declines in their satisfaction when they faced relatively minor problems but more stable satisfaction when they faced severe problems. Indirect negative behaviors, by comparison, were linked to consistently lower levels of satisfaction, regardless of problem severity. The researchers suggested that direct negative

behaviors can help partners resolve problems over time because they provide a relatively clear understanding of the issues at hand. In a similar vein, Graham, Huang, Clark, and Helgeson (2008) argued that expressing negative emotions can promote relational development and intimacy by providing information about partners' needs. The results of their study indicated that willingness to express negative emotions was associated with positive outcomes such as the provision of social support, building new close relationships, and greater intimacy in people's closest relationships.

Interaction Patterns of Couples

Although research has demonstrated fairly consistent links between the positive and negative affect expressed by partners and their relational satisfaction, couples may differ in terms of the way they enact and interpret affective behaviors. Some couples may maintain very satisfying relationships while engaging in a relatively high number of negative behaviors because they enact an even greater number of positive behaviors. Other couples who enact relatively few negative behaviors may be somewhat dissatisfied because the number of positive behaviors they engage in is so low. The patterns of interaction that couples engage in are important predictors of relational satisfaction and stability (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995).

Scholars have studied the interaction patterns of couples in several different ways. Some researchers have employed the amount of time couples spend together as a general indicator of their behavior and have examined the links between that time and relational quality. Others have used partners' behaviors and attitudes as a basis for grouping couples into categories or "types." Scholars also have analyzed specific behavioral sequences and have tested the associations between those sequences and partners' relational happiness.

Time Together

Most researchers would agree that evaluating the amount of time partners spend together is a rather crude way to measure couples' interaction patterns. It does not provide any information about partners' beliefs, values, or specific behaviors. Assessing couples' time together, however, does offer a potentially interesting (albeit indirect) indication of partners' attitudes and their behavioral intentions. Couples who have maintained their relationship over a period of 50 years likely regard their partner and their relationship differently than do those who have been together for 2 or 3 years. Similarly, those who spend a great deal of time with each other on a daily basis probably have different attitudes toward each other than do those who spend very little time together.

Researchers have studied the amount of time couples spend together in both global and specific ways. Globally, they have examined the duration of a couple's relationship in terms of its association with marital satisfaction. Specifically, they have focused on the amount of time couples spend engaged in various activities together on a day-to-day basis.

Global Assessments. The duration of couples' relationship is regarded by many as a measure of relational stability. Partners who have been together for long periods of time are said to have more stable relationships than those who have been together for short periods or those who have ended their relationship. Although stability—conceived of as the duration of a couple's relationship—is an important variable, examining stability apart from variations in partners' satisfaction yields limited information about the quality of the relationship. Relationships can be stable and happy or they can be stable and unhappy. They can be stable with regard to duration but quite volatile in terms of partners' feelings toward each other (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Perhaps for these reasons, researchers often have examined the length of couples'

relationship in terms of its association with partners' satisfaction.

Over time, marital satisfaction declines for many couples. The greatest decrease in satisfaction appears to take place during the first few years of marriage (Glenn, 1998). Theorists have long argued that this initial decline in satisfaction occurs as newlyweds' infatuation with each other wanes (Waller, 1938). Partners who might have been particularly careful to engage in positive, affectionate behaviors prior to marriage may begin to settle into more stable behavioral patterns after marriage (MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990). Indeed, Huston, Robins, Atkinson, and McHale (1987) found that the frequency with which spouses engaged in affectionate behaviors decreased significantly shortly after marriage. The frequency of partners' negative behaviors, by contrast, remained relatively stable. These findings suggest that the decline in marital satisfaction that occurs during the first few years of marriage may be due more to a decrease in positive behaviors than an increase in negative ones.

Although research suggests that satisfaction declines continuously over the first few years of marriage, many textbooks that discuss this issue note that spouses' satisfaction tends to increase in the later years of marriage (typically after the children leave home). This curvilinear pattern is regarded by many scholars with some skepticism. Researchers' questions about the U-shaped satisfaction curve stem from two issues: The first involves the explanation typically given for the drop and subsequent rise in the level of partners' happiness, and the second involves the nature of the data used to identify the pattern.

First, the explanation often provided for the initial decline in satisfaction is the arrival of children. Although there is evidence suggesting that couples who do not have children tend to be happier than those who do (Glenn & McLanahan, 1982), the presence of children, per se, does not seem to cause marital dissatisfaction. Studies that compare couples who have children during the initial years of marriage with those who do not

show that both groups experience declines in marital satisfaction (McHale & Huston, 1985). Some research also has demonstrated that the presence of children delays the divorces of many couples who are unhappy with their marriage (White, Booth, & Edwards, 1986). The results of studies such as these suggest that changes often attributed to the transition to parenthood instead may be associated with the duration of couples' relationship as well as systematic differences between couples who opt to have children and those who do not (Huston & Kramer-Holmes, 2004; Huston & Vangelisti, 1995).

The second reason why many scholars regard the U-shaped satisfaction curve with caution is that much of the research supporting the curvilinear pattern is based on either cross-sectional or retrospective data. The findings associated with cross-sectional data are subject to scrutiny because, as noted by Glenn (1990), they may reflect the effects of a number of factors, including "(a) duration of marriage, (b) the removal of many marriages from each marriage cohort through divorce as the cohort grows older, and (c) differences among different marriage cohorts" (p. 823). Furthermore, Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) argue that the trajectory of partners' satisfaction differs depending on whether it is evaluated using retrospective reports or measurements of satisfaction at several points in time. In a longitudinal study, these researchers found that the curvilinear pattern appeared in partners' retrospective reports but not in periodic measurements of their satisfaction. When looking back on their relationship, spouses may perceive that they experienced a decline and a subsequent increase in their satisfaction. Those perceptions, however, do not necessarily match up with the feelings they reported at various points in time over the course of their relationship. It may be that partners who stay together for long periods recognize that they have experienced ups and downs in their relationship, and they may take pride in having overcome the difficulties. Indeed, Buehlman, Gottman, and Katz (1992) found that the most satisfied couples in their study told stories of having overcome difficulties together.

Specific Assessments. In addition to examining the duration of couples' relationship, some scholars have looked at the amount of time partners spend together on a day-to-day basis. In general, the literature suggests that satisfied couples report spending more time together than do couples who are dissatisfied with their relationship (Kirchler, 1989). During courtship, partners who are more involved in their relationship tend to engage in more activities together (Surra, 1985). Studies further have revealed a positive association between marital happiness and the frequency of partners' interaction (Johnson, Amoloza, & Booth, 1992) as well as the amount of time partners spend talking to each other (Dickson-Markman & Markman, 1988).

It also is interesting to note that marital satisfaction has been positively linked to the number of pleasurable activities partners engage in together (Marini, 1976). Although this pattern undoubtedly varies from culture to culture (Wong & Goodwin, 2009), it appears that people who are happy in their relationship not only spend more time together, but they also engage in activities that make their time together particularly rewarding.

Couple Types

Although the amount of time couples are willing to spend together provides some indication of the degree to which they are involved in their relationship, it offers only a very general picture of the interaction patterns that typify different couples. Fitzpatrick (1977) developed a typology for characterizing married couples that reflects variations in the patterns of behaviors and beliefs reported by partners. Her model is based on the work of Kantor and Lehr (1975) and focuses on the associations between partners' ongoing patterns of interaction and marital satisfaction. Using the Relational Dimension Instrument (RDI), Fitzpatrick identified four different types of couples.

Couples who are *traditional* have relatively conventional ideological values about marriage.

They tend to be very interdependent, reporting that they share time, space, and leisure activities together. These partners are not extremely assertive, but they do not avoid conflict. In *independent* couples, both partners have relatively nonconventional values about relational and family life. Because independents do not make assumptions about the roles men and women should assume in relationships, they have difficulty negotiating a daily time schedule. These partners maintain separate physical spaces but demonstrate a great deal of interdependence in their marriage and tend to engage in, rather than avoid, conflict. *Separate* couples are ambivalent about their values concerning marriage and family life. They report having a conventional orientation toward marriage but a nonconventional orientation toward individual freedom. These partners usually have less companionship and sharing than do the other couple types. They report being assertive, but they tend to avoid conflict. Finally, *mixed* couples are those in which each partner has a different definition of the relationship (e.g., the wife is an independent, and the husband is a traditional).

Gottman (1993) later put forth a typology of couples that, as he noted, is similar in many ways to that of Fitzpatrick's (1977). Gottman suggested that stable partnerships can include *validator* couples (those who display moderate negative affect, moderate positive affect, and a great deal of neutral interaction), *volatile* couples (those who express a great deal of negative affect, even more positive affect, and relatively little neutral interaction), and *avoider* couples (those who demonstrate little negative affect, little positive affect, and a great deal of neutral interaction).

While typologies such as these cannot capture the full range of variation in couples' behaviors and attitudes, they do offer at least three advantages over models that categorize couples as either satisfied or dissatisfied (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, in press). First, instead of placing partners at one of two extremes on a continuum of marital satisfaction, they include couples who are moderately satisfied or who disagree about the degree to

which they are satisfied. Second, these typological approaches typically allow for increased variability because partners' scores on measures of marital quality often are skewed in a positive direction (Terman, 1938). Third, because the typologies include an assessment of characteristics other than partners' satisfaction, they can provide researchers with an indication of the criteria couples use to evaluate their relationship as satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

Behavioral Sequences

Rather than use assessments of partners' behavior as one of several means for grouping couples into categories, a number of researchers have examined couples' behaviors in their own right. Similar to research that has focused on the individual behaviors of each partner, studies that have emphasized the behavioral patterns of couples generally suggest that couples who are dissatisfied engage in more negative behaviors and fewer positive behaviors than do those who are satisfied. For instance, distressed couples display more negative and fewer positive nonverbal cues than do nondistressed couples (Noller, 1982). Those who are unhappy with their relationship tend to engage in fewer supportive behaviors than do those who are happy (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Couples who are distressed also report more frequent conflict, more time spent in conflict, and more conflict avoidance (Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988). Furthermore, during conflict episodes, distressed couples engage in more criticizing, complaining, disagreeing, and sarcasm than do couples who are not distressed (Ting-Toomey, 1983). The conflict of distressed couples' also tends to be marked by expressions of contempt, criticism, defensiveness, and avoidance or "stonewalling" (Gottman, 1994). (For a review of the literature on couples' conflict, see Sillars & Canary, in press.)

In addition to a general tendency to communicate increased negativity and decreased positivity, dissatisfied couples tend to exhibit two patterns of behavior that distinguish them from

satisfied couples. These two behavioral sequences not only set dissatisfied couples apart from couples who are satisfied, but they also predict declines in partners' satisfaction over time.

Negative Affect Reciprocity. The first of these patterns involves the reciprocity of negative affect. Research has demonstrated that while both satisfied and dissatisfied partners reciprocate each other's positive behaviors, dissatisfied partners also reciprocate negative behaviors (Weiss & Heyman, 1990). Partners who are dissatisfied, in other words, respond to their spouses' negative behavior with more negative behavior. Research by Gaelick, Bodenhausen, and Wyer (1985) offers one interesting explanation for why some couples may engage in more negative affect reciprocity than positive affect reciprocity. These researchers found that individuals tended to reciprocate the emotion that they thought their partner was conveying. The participants in this study also perceived that their partners reciprocated their own affect. At first glance, these findings might suggest that partners would be equally likely to reciprocate negative and positive affect. However, Gaelick et al. found that the spouses had some difficulty decoding their partners' expressions of love. Because the partners were able to decode expressions of hostility more accurately, hostility was reciprocated more frequently than love. Inasmuch as dissatisfied couples are more likely to express negative than positive affect, this effect probably is intensified for couples who are unhappy with their marriage.

In some couples, the reciprocity of negative affect takes a form that appears to make it a particularly potent predictor of relational distress. Levenson and Gottman (1985) found that a decline in marital satisfaction over time was associated with more reciprocity of the husband's negative affect by the wife and less reciprocity of the wife's negative affect by the husband. This mismatch, or lack of symmetry, in the reciprocity of spouses' affect creates a situation where the affect of one partner (in this case, that of the husband) appears to exert more control over

the course of the interaction than does the affect of the other (in this case, that of the wife). Of course, one partner's affect only has this sort of influence if it is reciprocated. Given this, a number of researchers argue that partners' ability to avoid reciprocating negative affect, and thus to extricate themselves from negative sequences of communication, is an important skill (Escudero, Rogers, & Gutierrez, 1997).

Demand-Withdraw. The gender difference in negative affect reciprocity identified by Levenson and Gottman (1985) is closely related to the second communication pattern that distinguishes dissatisfied couples from satisfied ones. Typically labeled the demand-withdraw pattern, this sequence of behaviors occurs during conflict when one partner communicates in "demanding" ways (e.g., attempts to discuss a problem or concern) while the other withdraws (e.g., attempts to avoid the conversation). Research consistently has demonstrated a link between the demand-withdraw pattern and both marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Heavey et al., 1995; Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994).

A number of studies examining the demand-withdraw pattern have found that wives more frequently engage in demanding behavior than their husbands, whereas husbands tend to withdraw more often than their wives (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; but see Papp, Kouros, & Cummings, 2009). Several theorists have offered a social-structural explanation for this particular finding (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Klinetob & Smith, 1996). These scholars argue that because wives typically have less power in their marriage than do husbands, wives tend more often to be less satisfied with the state of affairs in the relationship. As a consequence, wives may be more likely than their husbands to desire changes in the marriage. Their desire for change may encourage wives to complain or demand. By contrast, because husbands have more relational power, they tend to desire relatively few changes in the relationship.

Husbands may have little reason to engage in demanding behaviors and quite a few reasons to withdraw. For husbands, withdrawing may be a way to maintain the status quo and avoid their wives' demands for change.

Researchers who have tested the social-structural explanation for the demand-withdraw pattern have found that when partners discussed an issue about which husbands desired more change than wives, the tendency for wives to demand more frequently than husbands disappeared (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993). Furthermore, one study suggested that husband demand/wife withdraw occurred more often than wife demand/husband withdraw when partners discussed an issue about which husbands desired more change than wives (Klinetob & Smith, 1996).

Although the social-structural explanation has received some support, there also is evidence that the causal forces behind the demand-withdraw pattern may be more complex than originally thought. For instance, Caughlin and Vangelisti (1999) found that individuals' desire for change in their partner was positively associated with both husband demand/wife withdraw and wife demand/husband withdraw. Partners' desire for change, in other words, may be related to their engaging in both demanding and withdrawing behaviors. In addition, Caughlin (2002) found that the demand-withdraw pattern predicts increases in wives' satisfaction over time. Caughlin suggests that the influence of the demand-withdraw pattern on marital satisfaction may depend on how long couples have been married as well as the way partners enact demand-withdraw sequences.

Relational Dissolution and Divorce

Although the popular media and political pundits argue that people often enter romantic relationships with the idea that they can end them

with little difficulty, research suggests that relational dissolution is a very stressful, unpleasant process for most couples (Kitson & Morgan, 1990). Those who are divorced or separated tend to experience lower happiness and more symptoms of psychological distress than do those who are married (Mastekaasa, 1997). After a romantic breakup, people report less clarity about the way they view themselves (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). They have a greater tendency to be depressed and report lower levels of satisfaction with their life (Glenn & Weaver, 1988). People who are divorced are more likely to have health problems (Murphy, Glaser, & Grundy, 1997) and tend to be at a greater risk of mortality than those who are married (Hemstrom, 1996).

The picture put forth in the literature of individuals who have experienced relational dissolution is fairly bleak. Yet it is important to remember that this picture is one derived from between-group differences—typically differences between those who have experienced the termination of a long-term relationship and those who are involved in an ongoing relationship. Variations also exist within the group of individuals who have dissolved their marital or romantic relationships.

Indeed, a number of scholars have identified certain traits that are associated with divorce. Partners bring individual characteristics with them into marriage (e.g., depression, neuroticism) that decrease the stability of their relationship and increase the chance that they will divorce (Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997). Using data from monozygotic and dizygotic twins, some scholars even argue that people have genetic predispositions toward certain behaviors or qualities that increase their risk of divorce (Lykken, 2002). The overarching assumption behind much of this research is that individuals who are poorly adjusted are “selected out” of marriage. People who divorce are perceived as relatively unfit to select partners, maintain long-term romantic relationships, or deal with the disruptions that occur in their relationships.

An alternative perspective is one that regards divorce and relational dissolution as a stressor or a crisis that individuals adjust to with varying levels of success. Although some adopting this latter perspective have characterized the termination of relationships as a singular event, most now recognize that it is an event embedded in a system of other events and circumstances. Relational dissolution, in other words, can be seen as a chronic strain (Amato, 2000). It sets the stage for changes in partners’ relationship, their social network, their economic well-being, and sometimes their parental status. These changes, in turn, create stressful conditions that individuals must adjust to over time.

Clearly, some individuals are better able to adjust to relational dissolution and divorce than others. Research suggests that people’s ability to cope with the termination of their relationships is affected by structural, social, and psychological resources. For instance, concrete, structural resources such as income and employment can influence people’s well-being. If partners’ socioeconomic status is significantly diminished following a divorce, they are likely to have more difficulty adjusting to the separation than if their socioeconomic status remained relatively stable (McLanahan & Booth, 1989). Similarly, social resources such as network support can affect individuals’ ability to adjust. Partners who have supportive social networks tend to experience less difficulty than those who do not (Gerstel, 1988).

Individuals’ personal or psychological resources are particularly important contributors to postdivorce well-being. Part of the reason for this is that relational dissolution often depletes both structural and social resources. People (particularly women) can lose substantial income, and social networks often are disrupted. As a consequence, individuals’ ability to identify and recover their losses following the termination of their relationship can be critical. Those who are unable to do so may experience distress not only because of their limited psychological resources but also

because those limited psychological resources put them at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing structural and social resources. Given this, it is not surprising that studies show that partners who experience reduced clarity about the way they view themselves after a breakup are more distressed (Slotter et al., 2010) or that those who feel guilty or preoccupied about their divorce generally have more problems adjusting to their postdivorce state (Masheter, 1991).

Harvey and Fine (2006) underline the importance of partners' psychological resources when they suggest that a critical factor in people's recovery from traumatic events such as relational dissolution is their ability to formulate accounts. Accounts provide individuals with a way of making sense of what happened in their relationship and give them a basis for talking about the termination of their relationship to others (Sorenson et al., 1993). The explanations people generate for why their relationship ended can offer them a way to save face with regard to an event that some might see as a major failure: Rather than portray themselves as unable to maintain a satisfactory relationship, individuals may depict themselves as making a decision that will improve the quality of their life. Indeed, research suggests that people's descriptions of relational termination often are biased in a self-serving manner. For example, Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) found that people who had experienced the breakup of a dating relationship tended to report that they wanted to end the relationship more than their partner did. In studying divorced couples, Gray and Silver (1990) found that former spouses had relatively positive perceptions of themselves and negative perceptions of their partner. Similarly, when Hopper and Drummond (1991) compared a conversation between two partners who were ending their relationship with later conversations between the partners and others in their social network, they found that the individuals reconstructed their breakup conversation to portray themselves in a positive light.

In addition to helping people save face, accounts can reflect the way partners feel about

their relationship ending. For instance, women who attempt to end physically abusive relationships may explain the dissolution as caused by unstable, external factors (e.g., the stress their partner has experienced on the job) or by stable, internal characteristics of their partner (e.g., his immaturity, his inability to control his temper). The accounts these women formulate to frame the termination of their relationship may not only reflect how they feel about their partner, they also may provide them with a reason to avoid going back to an abusive relationship (Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991).

Although existing research offers a fair amount of information about the factors that may influence partners' adjustment following relational dissolution or divorce, it does not provide a great deal of information about the dissolution process itself. Certainly, gathering data on the interpersonal processes that occur as relationships dissolve is no easy task. Partners who are in the midst of ending their relationships are unlikely to volunteer to bare their souls to researchers. In some cases, these individuals may not even be aware that their relationship is in the process of coming apart. Nevertheless, scholars have formulated models that may be used to begin to explore the communication processes that are involved in relational dissolution.

Stage Models

Researchers and theorists have posited a number of different models to illustrate the various stages that partners go through as they dissolve their romantic relationships. Two models frequently cited by communication scholars include one proposed by Duck (1982) and one put forth by Knapp (1978). Duck's model suggests that partners move through four phases when their relationships come apart. The first is labeled the *intrapsychic* phase. During this period, individuals evaluate their partner's behavior and consider the extent to which that behavior provides a justification for ending the relationship. They also

assess the positive aspects of alternative relationships and the costs of relationship dissolution. The *dyadic* phase is next. In this phase, partners begin to discuss the problems they perceive. They talk about the costs associated with terminating the relationship as well as whether the relationship should be repaired. In the *social* phase, partners begin to think about how they will present the dissolution of their relationship to their network of friends and family members. In doing so, individuals construct stories or accounts that help them (and others) make sense of the relationship. Finally, the *grave-dressing* phase is a period when partners focus on ending the relationship. They reformulate the account of their breakup and start to disseminate that account to their social network. They also engage in behaviors that help them “get over” the relationship and their relational partner.

Knapp’s (1978) model is similar to the one posited by Duck (1982), but it places slightly more emphasis on what takes place between partners and slightly less emphasis on the interface between partners and their social network. Knapp argues that the process of dissolution begins with what he calls the *differentiating* stage. When partners start to disengage from each other, they begin to talk more about their differences. Joint possessions and joint activities become individualized. In some cases, communication during this stage is characterized by conflict, but partners also may express the distinctions between them in ways that do not include overt disagreement. The next phase described by Knapp is the *circumscribing* stage. During this period, communication between partners becomes more restricted and controlled. Partners opt to talk about “safe” topics and begin to avoid issues that they perceive as sensitive. They usually communicate less frequently; less information is exchanged, and the information that is exchanged is less intimate. In the *stagnating* stage, partners’ communication nearly comes to a halt. Even relatively superficial topics sometimes are avoided. Partners often believe that communication is useless. They

usually share the same physical environment, but emotionally, they are quite distant. Next, in the *avoiding* stage, partners do their best to avoid social contact. When they do communicate, they make it clear that they are not interested in each other or in the relationship. Interaction often is very direct (e.g., “I don’t have time for you”) because partners have little, if any, concern about the impact of what they say on each other. When individuals reach the *terminating* stage, their relationship finally ends. Partners may engage in a conversation in which they agree that they will no longer see each other, or they may avoid such an interaction and allow the relationship to fade away. If they do talk about the end of the relationship, their interaction is likely to be characterized by messages that emphasize the distance between them—whether psychological, physical, or both. (See Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008, for a study of postdissolution relationships.)

Both Knapp and Duck note that the models they describe should be interpreted with caution. By describing the stages or phases that may be experienced by partners, these theorists are not implying that people will move toward dissolution in a direct, linear fashion. In fact, both of these scholars argue that partners may move forward through the various stages of dissolution or backward from what appears to be a more advanced stage to one that is less advanced. They also note that some individuals may skip some stages altogether. The models, in short, offer a template that can be used by researchers and laypeople alike to explore and explain some of the experiences individuals have when their relationships come apart.

Directions for Future Study

The studies reviewed in this chapter offer only a glimpse of what has become a substantial scholarly literature (Perlman & Duck, 2006). In spite of the size and diversity of this literature, it is possible to identify a number of trends that have

begun to influence what researchers study as well as how they study it.

Identifying Patterns of Behavior

Research on behavioral sequences such as the demand–withdraw pattern (Christensen & Heavey, 1990) and the reciprocity of negative affect (Levenson & Gottman, 1985) has yielded important information about the influence of behavior on partners' relationships. Rather than isolating and identifying communication behaviors out of context, these and other similar studies have pinpointed the behavioral patterns that affect the quality of partners' relationship over time (e.g., Heavey et al., 1995). Given the relatively sophisticated analytic strategies that have emerged in recent years (e.g., Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) as well as the increasing tendency of researchers to focus on couples as opposed to individual partners, it is likely that scholars will continue to identify the behavioral sequences enacted by couples and explore the ways in which various patterns of behavior affect relational qualities.

Changing the Outcome Variable

Researchers and laypeople alike want to know what makes for a happy marriage. Perhaps for this reason, relational satisfaction has been the outcome variable of choice for most scholars studying interpersonal communication in romantic relationships. The underlying assumption made by many has been that if partners are happy, their relationship is likely to remain intact, whereas if they are unhappy, their relationship may come apart. In spite of the premium placed on relational happiness, scholars have begun to acknowledge that satisfaction—typically operationalized as partners' feelings about their relationship at a given point in time—is not the only way to conceptualize relational success. For instance, Glenn (1990) argued that a “marriage that is intact and

satisfactory to both spouses is successful, while one that has ended in divorce or separation or is unsatisfactory to one or both spouses is a failure” (p. 821). Successful relationships, in short, may be conceived as those that are both intact and satisfying. Because satisfaction is integral to successful relationships, it certainly will continue to be a focus of interest for researchers. But variables other than satisfaction that are associated with intact relationships also have begun to move to the forefront. Researchers, for example, are examining outcome variables such as commitment (Rusbult, Coolsen, Kirchner, & Clarke, 2006), sacrifice (Van Lange et al., 1997), trust (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985), and forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). They also have begun to reassess the structure of relational satisfaction, noting that positive and negative evaluations of relationships can be measured as separate, albeit related, variables (Fincham & Beach, 2006).

Reexamining the Structure of Variables

Relational satisfaction is not the only variable that has come under scrutiny in recent years. The structure of other variables has been reassessed as well. For instance, most researchers now conceive of positive and negative affect as two separate dimensions rather than as a single, bipolar dimension (e.g., Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994). Similarly, instead of looking at partners' behavior on a unidimensional continuum ranging from positive to negative, scholars have begun to examine positive and negative behavior separately (e.g., Caughlin & Huston, 2006). Distinguishing positive and negative affect as well as positive and negative behavior is not simply a matter of developing more sophisticated measures. It also represents an important theoretical issue. When the positivity and negativity that characterizes couples are assessed using unidimensional measures, couples who are rated

as highly positive cannot also be evaluated as highly negative. Likewise, those who are assessed as low in positivity cannot also be rated as low in negativity. Similar concerns have been raised about other variables such as commitment (Adams & Jones, 1997; Johnson, 1991) and love (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Marston, Hecht, & Robers, 1987; Sternberg, 1986). Researchers examining these variables have argued, for example, that there are different forms of commitment and different types of love. Inasmuch as this is the case, using unidimensional measures to assess variables such as commitment or love may oversimplify constructs that are actually relatively complex and may even offer a distorted view of couples' relationships.

Including Physiological Measures

Researchers have long known that close relationships can influence people's physical well-being (Berkman, 1995). Supportive relationships have been linked to individuals' health (Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003) as well as their longevity (Rohrbaugh, Mehl, Shoham, Reilly, & Ewy, 2008). To identify the mechanisms by which relationships affect people's physical health, a number of researchers have begun to include physiological measures in their studies. These studies have yielded a range of interesting findings. For instance, close attachment relationships have been associated with decreased threat-related brain activity (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006). In a similar vein, people who reported receiving affectionate communication from their spouses tended to have lower levels of cortisol (a stress hormone) (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008). By contrast, when individuals were hurt by something their partner said, their cortisol levels tended to be higher (Priem, McLaren, & Solomon, 2010), and partners' negativity during problem-solving interactions has been associated with decreased immune function (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1997) and delayed healing of wounds (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005).

Although there are clear associations between partners' communication behavior and a number of physiological measures, the precise mechanisms by which these associations occur still are unclear. For instance, Saxbe and Repetti (2010) found that individuals' cortisol level was positively associated with their partner's cortisol level over several days but that marital satisfaction weakened this effect for wives. While these findings suggest that partners' cortisol levels are linked, they also raise any number of questions about whether there are relatively direct causal associations between communication and physiological variables, whether the associations are moderated or mediated by other variables such as relational quality, or both.

Exploring the Role of Technology

In addition to assessing physiological variables, researchers are beginning to examine the influence of technology on partners' relationships. The explosion of technological advances has made this a difficult issue to ignore: Computers, cell phones, and the Internet are integral to many people's lives and, as a consequence, touch their relationships. Much of the research that has been conducted in this area has focused on people's use of computer-mediated communication and the Internet. For example, researchers have examined the influence of the restricted communication channels associated with computer-mediated communication on intimacy as well as the personality characteristics of those who spend a great deal of time on the Internet (see Chapter 14, by Walther, this volume). Given that a growing number of romantic relationships are initiated in online settings, the nature of those relationships and the various ways by which partners negotiate those relationships is intriguing. Examining romantic relationships that are developed or maintained online may provide researchers with an interesting point of comparison for variables that have heretofore been studied in face-to-face settings. For instance, while

studies have established the importance of social networks for the development of romantic relationships (Parks, 2006), the Internet provides people with a context in which they can initiate relationships with little influence from network members. As Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, and Willets (2002) note, couples may experience greater difficulty maintaining such relationships over time without network support. In addition to its obvious influence on relationships that are initiated online, the Internet may shape face-to-face romantic relationships indirectly by affecting partners' communication with their social network. People who, in the past, have had little contact with family members may develop closer family relationships via the Internet. Those closer family ties, in turn, may influence their relationship with their partner. Individuals also may develop friendships or sexual relationships online that affect their existing romantic relationship. When this occurs, couples may have to negotiate rules about what they can and cannot do online and develop strategies to deal with violations of those rules (Whitty, 2009).

Concluding Comments

The research reviewed in this chapter underlines the notion that interpersonal communication is a defining feature of romantic relationships. People have to communicate when they initiate relationships. The way they approach potential partners, the type of questions they ask, and the information they disclose all influence whether and how their relationships develop. Communication also is central to partners' ongoing associations with each other. The cognitive and affective processes that partners bring to their relationships are reflected in their communication behavior. Furthermore, the interactions that individuals and couples engage in provide important information about the quality of their relationships. Even when relationships come apart, the way partners communicate shapes the dissolution process.

Researchers and theorists who study romantic relationships are moving forward along several paths that are likely to highlight the centrality of communication to relational partners and relationships. They are examining patterns rather than isolated instances of behavior. They are expanding the scope of what they study, refining relevant variables, and exploring the impact of physiology and technological advances on romantic partners and romantic relationships. Surely, these are steps in the right direction.

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