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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a meta-theoretical perspective for looking at change and stability in close personal relationships. The theoretical conception of interpesonal relationships is summarized in an intial section, emphasizing interpersonal influence in specific interactive sequences. Next, a five-phase conception of relationship development is outlined and described including (1) acquaintance with another person; (2) buildup of mutual relationship; (3) continuation or consolidation of the relationship; (4) deterioration or decline; and (5) ending, either voluntary or involuntary. This perspective on relationship development is applied to two of the phases, pair buildup and couple maintenance, including a discussion of several "filtering" models of courtship or mate selection. The role of children in changing relationships and role perceptions is considered and the model is summarized as a circular loop conception of close relationships influenced by personality and environment. A graphic presentation of the circular loop model is appended. (JAC)

A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

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This paper presents a meta-theoretical perspective for looking at change and stability in close interpersonal relationships. Its constructs are intended to be sufficiently general so as to apply to other more specific theoretical orientations. The perspective draws on a recently completed book on Close relationships by Harold Kelley, Ellen Berscheid, and seven others including myself (Kelley et al., in press).

Let me start by summarizing our theoretical conception of interpersonal relationships, outline my own five-phase conception of relationships development (Levinger, in press), and then apply this perspective to two of those phases--pair buildup and couple maintenance.

What is a Relationship?

To say that two persons have a "relationship" with each other means that each one can and does influence the other. Thus if two former strangers are said to have developed a close relationship, it means that they have moved from total independence (no interconnections at all) to a large amount of interdependence (strong and diverse interconnections) in their actions, thoughts, and feelings. A relationship between any two persons, P and O, may be defined as the degree to which there exists "causal interconnections" between P's and O's "chains of events"--i.e., either person's strings of actions, thoughts, and feelings (Kelley et al., in press).

In any interactive sequence, each partner's actions, thoughts, and feelings are at least partly determined by--and, in turn, determine--the other's actions, thoughts, and feelings. Over the longer span, P's and O's

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degree of closeness reflects the frequency, diversity, and strength as well as the duration of such causal interconnections.

To illustrate this definition, consider two friends who are conversing animatedly. Each will strongly affect the other's ongoing sequence of overt and covert events; each responds both publicly and privately to the other. Such an interactive event sequence is shown in Figure 1a, where P's and O's events are influenced by prior events in their own and/or the other's chain of responses.

Figure 1 about here

Such immediate interpersonal sequences are, of course, embedded in a broader, more enduring context or set of "causal conditions" (Kelley et al., in press), which help to explain regularities in patterns of interaction (see Figure 1b). Although a vast variety of causal conditions may be used for explaining particular regularities, we have proposed three basic types: (1) Personal causes (P, O) refer to either partner's relatively stable characteristics, such as their physique, personality traits, or values, or their recurring states, such as appetites or moods. (2) Environmental causes (E_{phys}, E_{soc}) pertain to the physical environment around the P-O interaction (e.g., climate or crowdedness) and to the social networks and social norms that affect either or both persons. Environmental causes may further be subdivided into "distal" conditions which operate at a distance (e.g., culture or technology or unemployment rate) and "proximal" conditions that may influence a pair directly (e.g., a rainstorm or an invitation out to dinner). (3) Relational causes (PxO) include a pair's own uniquely developed norms or shared goals or their patterns of interlocking role behaviors.

As Figure 1 suggests, specific interactive sequences are linked to their more general causal conditions in a reciprocal feedback loop. In other words, a pair's personal, environmental, and relational conditions

are not only the source of events that affect the interaction but also the possible result of P-O interaction. However, the impact of (and on) various causal conditions tends to differ depending on the developmental phase of a relationship.

How May Relationships Develop Over Time?

The developmental course of a pair relationship depends in large part on its composition and its cultural context. Friendships between two peers develop differently from those between a student and teacher. The course of a mother-child relationship hardly resembles that of a sibling bond. In this brief space, I will restrict myself to the development of heterosexual pairings between peers that may include marriage. I recently employed a five-phase sequence for analyzing changes in such pairs (Levinger, in press). The five phases are labeled from A to E:

A. acquaintance with another person

B. buildup of a mutual relationship

C. continuation or consolidation of the relationship

D. deterioration or decline

E. ending, either voluntary or involuntary

The last four phases are only potential. Few relationships, in any one person's life, travel in turn over all five phases. For example, of the fraction of one's acquaintanceships that enter Phase B, most are likely to go no further. Nor is deterioration (Phase D) a necessary consequence of having entered a Phase C consolidated relationship. Nevertheless, this five-phase developmental sequence enables one to chart transitions between adjacent phases in relationships, and to look for both facilitating and inhibiting conditions at each possible transition period. Here, however, I must confine my consideration of this circular loop model with regard to relationships buildup (Phase B) and relationship maintenance (Phase C).

Relationship Buildup

When two strangers first become acquainted--the earliest point in any relationship--their interaction is entirely determined by environmental and personal causal conditions, aside from the exigencies of their immediate response sequence. Later, if their relationship should progress, their interaction is also causally affected by relational conditions and environmental and personal factors may recede into the background. To account for temporal changes in the comparative importance of different determinants of interpersonal buildup in heterosexual relationships, several versions of "filtering" models of courtship or mate selection have been proposed during the past twenty years (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962; Lewis, 1972; Murstein, 1970). Let me consider these models from my present theoretical perspective.

Filtering models have conceived of mate selection as a progressive sequence of decisions by two partners about the goodness of fit between their individual attributes. As two people get to know each other, they obtain information about one another through a successive series of filters or screens. At the start of their acquaintance, such information is limited to factors such as the other's spatial and cultural location (E conditions) and the other's information about the other's interactive responsiveness, and then about attitude and value similarity. Still later, one is said to learn about the other's degree of "need" or "role" compatibility. Filtering models imply that at each point in the sequence each partner decides either to continue the relationship, if current outcomes and future prospects remain favorable, or to cool it down. Thus, from point to point in the sequence, a partner's attributes are presumed either to pass or to fail the screening; at any juncture, one either increases, maintains equally, or decreases the level of one's involvement in the relationship.

Filtering models of mate selection imply that all couples follow a similar causal sequence along their developmental path. Although these models are intuitively plausible, they have failed to receive widespread empirical confirmation (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Levinger, Senn, & Jorgensen, 1970; Rubin & Levinger, 1974). Let me briefly examine the weaknesses of such fixed-sequence linear models from a systems perspective.

First, filtering models seem to assume that each person brings to a relationship a pre-existing bundle of characteristics that, if they can only find a proper match with someone else's bundle, will lead to a properly compatible pairing. This assumption is questionable on the following grounds. Although pre-existing personal characteristics are indeed an important determinant of the initiation of relationships, they are subject to alteration as a pairing develops. Furthermore, emerging relational properties are increasingly likely to exert influences on a pair's outcomes.

Second, existing models have not made provision for changes in the partners' environments. Seemingly final decisions may be altered by either interfering or facilitating environmental events. For example, one research couple had decided to move ahead toward engagement but then was forced to separate--and later terminated their partnership--after one member received an irresistible offer of a job 2000 miles away. A contrasting pair, who had decided to end their relationship, found their declining interconnections surprisingly strengthened after one member was in a serious automobile accident; this event led the other into a series of actions that eventually rehabilitated their bond.

Third, whereas filtering models imply a common set of ways in which different relationships develop, the present conceptualization emphasizes a multiplicity of ways. At one extreme, some pairs go speedily from an initial acquaintance toward marriage. At the other end of the range,

couples go through a prolonged and vacillating course of involvement before they eventually commit themselves to marriage (see Huston et al., 1981). Even among pairs who progress at a middling rate, studies of courtship have found varied pathways of locomotion (e.g., Hill et al., 1976). One pair interacts with great intensity on its first encounter and only later diversifies its interdependence. Another retains casual connections for a long time and only much later builds strongly meshed sequences. Different pairs give widely differing accounts of how their mateship progressed (Bolton, 1961), which imply widely different developments among the partners' interactive events and their significant environmental, personal, and relational causal conditions. Further, it appears that many aspects of the buildup are neither deliberate nor voluntary.

Fourth, filtering models do not account for the changes in personal and environmental characteristics that are brought about by changes in the relationship itself. Thus an inhibitory environment is not necessarily immutable; couples whose relationship reaches a point where they feel hampered by an unfriendly environment can change their spatial location or their social connections. Nor are partners' personal characteristics totally fixed. Initial dissimilarity is subject to alteration as a relationship progresses; instead of letting dissimilar tastes or activity preferences interfere, partners have the capacity of converging in their likes and enthusiasms.

The idea of successive filtering, then, may refer to an important aspect of the mate selection process, but not in the linear fashion suggested by existing models. On the one hand, decision processes do not necessarily pass through a single screening and then concern themselves with entirely new decisions; rather, both positive and negative decisions may be reviewed and re-reviewed. On the other hand, the criteria for judging the favorability of outcomes are themselves transformed (see Kelley,

1979; Levinger & Snoek, 1972); whereas early in a relationship an actor's criteria tend to be self-centered, later they appear to become increasingly dependent on the pair's own event history. Theorizing about relational buildup, then, can profit from a continuous loop conception of interpersonal causality.

Relationship Maintenance

The interplay among environmental, personal, and relational conditions continues, of course, after a relationship moves from a tentative phase of mutual buildup to one of enduring commitment--as occurs when a couple gets married. If marriage were viewed as an equilibrium state, it is an equilibrium that is subject to countless pulls and pushes from a large variety of physical and psychological influences. The marriage pair, like any other social system, requires the continuing fulfillment of both task and social-emotional functions. Let us consider this in more detail.

A couple's physical and social environment determine in large part the nature of the tasks that need to be done, and the social environment also affects how they are done or divided. The spouses' personal characteristics (e.g., education or ethnic background) affect their patterns of expectation and skill at doing various tasks. For example, in many traditional societies the woman has been socialized to become the "inside master" and the man the "outside master" of the family (Osgood, 1959); she expects to be in charge of housekeeping and childcare, while he aims to provide economic systenance. Nevertheless, today's young couples--already during the buildup stage--often depart from such traditional norms and develop their own relational norms for dealing with their objective tasks as well as their social interplay. Note that the flexibility of both their environment and their personalities is an important boundary condition; for instance, American working class couples tend to perceive far less opportunity to experiment with their relationship than do college

couples (Rubin, 1976).

The research literature on marriage has often noted a tendency for couples, on the average, to experience a decline in their marital satisfaction from the beginning to the end of their marriage. If that is true--and there is considerable room for debate on this issue (see Levinger, in press)--it would of course be explainable in terms of changes in some combination of the environmental, personal, and relations discussed earlier. I will here confine myself to one particular sort of change: the birth of the first child.

The appearance of the first child transforms the family from a dyad into a triad and has many ramifications for the maintenance of the marital relationship. Until very recently, though, social scientists have had very little knowledge about how, why, and to what extent parenthood exerts important influences on family relations. Early studies by family sociologists (e.g., LeMasters, 1957) emphasized the stresses associated with a first birth "crisis." Some recent national surveys (e.g., Campbell et al., 1976) have indicated that parents of small children have lower marital satisfaction than comparable couples without children, thus implying that "having children" damages a marriage. There are also contrary survey findings which indicate that a majority of surveyed parents believe that having reared children actually brought their marital relationship closer together (Hoffman & Manis, 1978). How shall such contradictions, derived from almost entirely cross-sectional research data, be reconciled?

In an ongoing longitudinal study of "becoming a family," Cowan and Cowan (1981) have measured couple properties before and after the birth of the first child, as well as each spouse's own personal properties. The Cowans' research assumes that the impact of the baby depends on a combination of influences that include the quality of the pre-birth marital relationship and on how the couple experiences the events associated with the birth and

its sequelae. The Cowans' preliminary findings suggested that, on the average, couples' sharing of household tasks declined substantially from pregnancy to six months after birth; most pairs in their sample became more "traditional" in their household roles following the baby's arrival. Since the mother now had to spend so much time at home, her husband often seemed to assume that she could just as well take over a larger portion of the housekeeping. Mothers whose subsequent role arrangements were least equal tended to report the least role satisfaction, which was associated with a drop in their marital satisfaction. In contrast, mothers whose partners were relatively involved in sharing household and childcare tasks had relatively high role satisfaction. Thus, while the study's preliminary findings were that the majority of young couples experienced more negative than positive changes in the spouses' self-esteem, communication, and conflict, there were some marked exceptions to that trend. Couples most "at risk" were those whose pre-birth relationship had been rated the poorest, whereas "well-functioning" couples before birth tended to cope well with the experience of parenthood.

These findings show that the supposedly "same" objective event of a child's birth is dynamically far from identical across different couples. Not only do couples differ widely in their PxO conditions, but also in the interplay among environmental and personal factors. One couple's physical and economic resources may be ample, thus putting little stress on its interpersonal problem solving; another couple lives in a crowded place, has insufficient cash, and has little support from any reliable network of family or friends. If the latter couple then experiences the birth event as highly stressful, this experience is likely to reverberate negatively on their further marital communication and their contacts with their external environment.

Data on these and other complexities of relationship maintenance are important to obtain, preferably in longitudinal research that is able to disentangle the contributions of such varying causal conditions. For example, although some major advances have recently been made in the analysis of husband-wife conflictual interaction (e.g., Gottman, 1979), such research has generally been conducted without attention to the enduring and the changing macro-conditions that play an important part in the feedback loop. Elsewhere, I have tried to discuss such issues in greater detail. (Levinger, in press).

Conclusion

In the brief time at my disposal, it is impossible to pursue the many different implications of the circular loop conception of close relationships. The model itself may appear embarrassingly simple, but I don't believe it is thereby trivial. The idea that interpersonal behavior is a function of personality and environment goes back all the way to Kurt Lewin's old formula: $B = f(P, E)$. The present conception of relationships is indeed Lewinian, but it goes beyond Lewin's earlier thinking in several ways.

For one thing, whereas Lewin emphasized the contemporaneity of the life space, the present conception focuses on longitudinal change over time. Within that developmental perspective, the personal or environmental properties do not necessarily change very much, but it is very likely that the relational Person-Other properties do change. What is particularly important is that the PxO intersection, which is negligible at the beginning of a relationship, becomes itself a most potent source of interactive events and event sequences.

Another important emphasis of the current conception pertains to its provision for circular feedback. That feature underlines the limitations of purely linear theories or data gathering. Hopefully, though, it corresponds more closely to the complex realities of developing interpersonal relationships.

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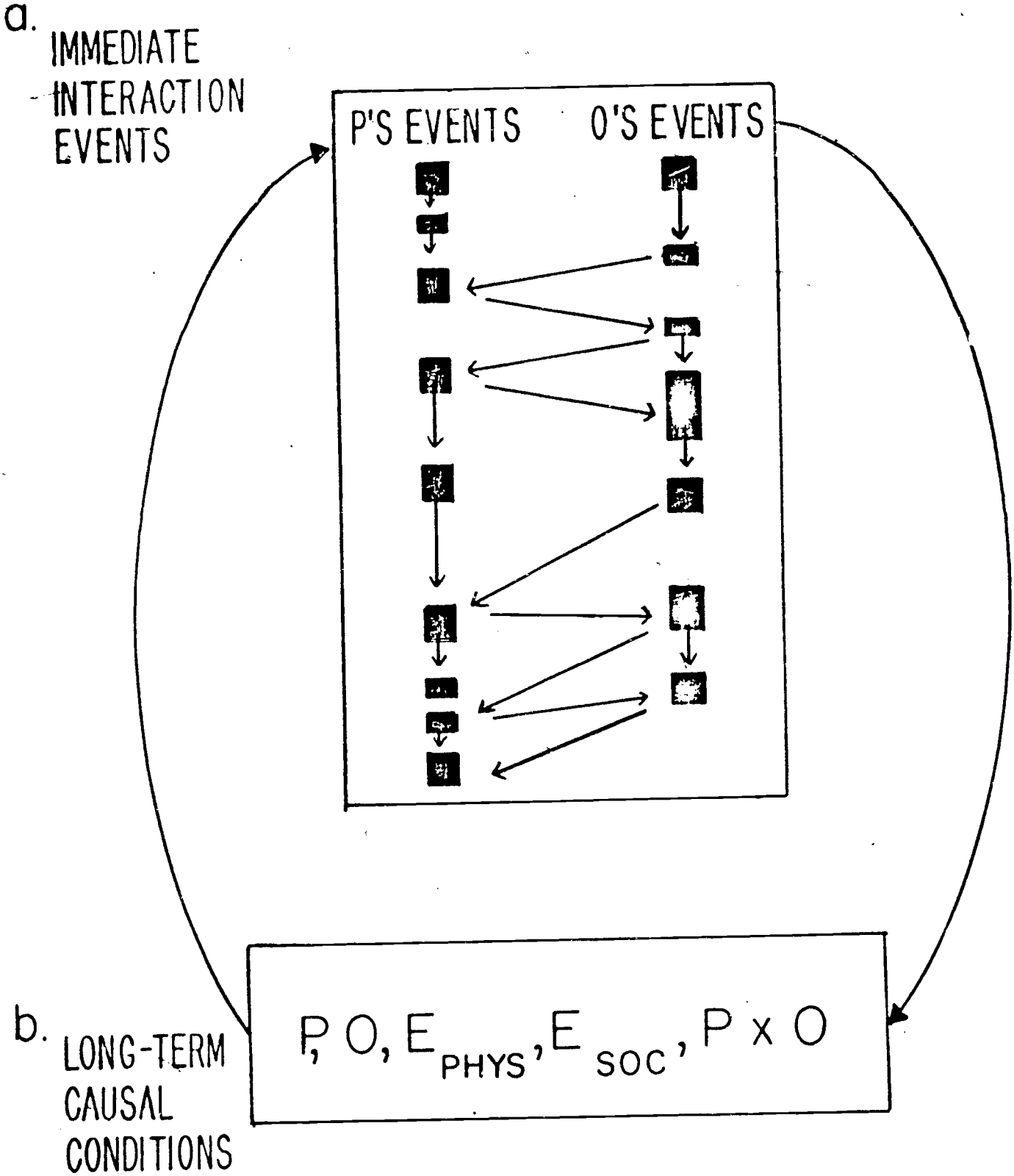

FIGURE 1. A CONTINUOUS LOOP MODEL FOR VIEWING THE P-O RELATIONSHIP.