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ABSTRACT

While presenting a critical look at selected aspects of relationship change research and theory, this essay argues that researchers need to investigate a broader range of relationship types, develop a more comprehensive conceptualization of relationship change, and develop more appropriate research methods. The first section deals with the need to investigate relations other than those that are attraction-based (friendship, heterosexual dating, or marriage), so that researchers can see how other factors that initiate relationships, such as kinship, economic necessity, or the requirements for cooperative action, can be understood. The second section contends that researchers must take a broader view of relationship change and stresses the need to determine the inadequacies of the developmental-growth model. Possible alternate models suggested are the generative-transformational model used in theoretical linguistics, and a "trajectory" model of relationship change. The third section elaborates on the need for more appropriate research designs, pointing out difficulties in the area of subject selection, where current work tends to rely too heavily on the college student population. Observation techniques also are criticized, because current studies rely on self-reports in hypothetical situations to the exclusion of investigating real-life interactions. Finally, the paper addresses problems with the inclusion of time in research designs, noting that far too few longitudinal studies are being conducted. Five pages of references are appended. (SKC)

FACT AND FANCY IN RELATIONSHIP EVOLUTION RESEARCH: COMMENTARIES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Abstract

In this essay, selected aspects of relationship evolution research is examined critically. On the basis of this examination, it is argued that researchers need to (1) investigate a broader range of relationship types, (2) adopt a broader conceptualization of relationship change, and (3) devise new research methods that are more appropriate to the phenomena investigated. Specific suggestions in each of these areas are discussed.

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FACT AND FANCY IN RELATIONSHIP EVOLUTION RESEARCH: COMMENTARIES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite continued claims of youthfulness, the social sciences in general, and the study of personal relationships specifically, have accumulated a rich and significant history, and have experienced a considerable amount of developmental change (Berscheid, 1986). In the early years, personal relationship research was largely confined to the study of the individual characteristics that determined such things as sociometric choices, mate selection and marital satisfaction (Backman, 1983). With the emergence, in the late 1950's and early 1960's, of social exchange theory (Homans, 1958; 1961) researchers began to turn their attention to the properties of interaction between people which, in turn, lead to the study of how personal relationships change over time. In subsequent years, a number of models of evolutionary relationship change have been proposed (Winch, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Bolton, 1961; Murstein, 1970, 1977; Levenger & Sneok, 1972; Phillips & Wood, 1983; Knapp, 1978, 1984). Slowly and painstakingly researchers have begun to piece together the puzzle of relationship change. In recent years, several very exhaustive reviews of this body of theory and research have become available (Hinde, 1979; Morton & Douglas, 1981; Roloff, 1981; Ginsburg, 1986). It is not the purpose of this paper to attempt to reproduce these works, instead this paper will present a critical look at selected aspects of relationship change research and theory. Specifically, this essay will argue that researchers need to (1) investigate a broader range of relationship types, (2) develop a more comprehensive conceptualization of relationship change, and (3) develop more appropriate research methods. It is hoped that this essay

will contribute to the on-going dialogue among researchers which in recent years has laid the groundwork for the development of a true science of personal relationships.

The Need to Investigate a Broader Range of Relationships

Several scholars have commented on the fact that theory development and research in personal relationships has focused almost exclusively on attraction-based relationships (Backman, 1983; Berscheid, 1985; Ginsburg, 1986). Specifically, researchers have almost completely confined themselves to studies of friendship (Wright, 1969, 1978) and heterosexual attachments related to dating, mate selection and marriage (Huston, Sura, Fitzgerald & Cate, 1981). The problem of focusing so narrowly on attraction-based relationships is that these relationships possess several characteristics which make it highly unlikely that the results of these studies can be generalized to other types of relationships. Attraction-based relationships, for instance, are generally characterized by free choice (i.e., participants are free too choose whether or not to continue or end the relationships, or even whether or not to have the relationship in the first place), relatively equal power, and are guided by rules and expectations which are negotiated and agreed upon, even if only tacitly, by the participants (Allen, 1979; Wright, 1978; Ginsburg, 1986).

These characteristics clearly influence the quality of the interactions in attraction-based relationships which, in turn, car affect the patterns of relationship change. The characteristic of free choice, for instance, mandates that individuals be concerned with the perceived rewards and costs of relational exchanges for their partners as well as for themselves. As Homans (1961) writes, "The open secret of human exchange is to give the other man behavior that is more valuable to him than it is costly to you and to get from him

behavior that is more valuable to you than it is costly to him" (p. 62). In essence, in friendships and romantic attachments we would expect to see relatively high levels of relational cooperation as both participants attempt to maximize their own rewards and minimize their own costs while at the same time they are helping their partner do the same thing. Given this requirement for mutual satisfaction, it is not surprising that so many theories of relationship development are based in compatibility models of attraction (Byrne, Ervin & Lambreth, 1970; Byrne, 1971), personality fit and needs complementarity (Winch, 1958, 1974), and "filter theories" (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962; Murstein, 1970, 1977).

The characteristics of relative equality and negotiated rules and expectations also shape the quality of interactions and the process of relationship change in attraction-based relationships. Essentially, these characteristics make it more likely that individuals will invest different, perhaps more personal aspects of their identities and personalities in these relationships. From the perspective of Miller and Steinberg (1976), attraction-based relationships are more likely to be based in "psychological" information about the participants rather than "sociological" or "cultural" information. A number of researchers have been critical of relationship development theory for what they see as a preoccupation with the issue of intimacy as a mechanism of relationship change (Crockett & Friedman, 1980; Delia, 1980; Parks, 1982). The argument I am making here is that this preoccupation is due, at least in part, to the fact that researchers have studied only a narrow range of relationships types which, because of the inherent qualities of the relationships themselves, naturally tend to focus the attention of researchers onto issues such as closeness and intimacy. That personal relationships exist that are based in quali-

ties other than attraction is not merely speculation. Kinship relations, relationships based in economic necessity or the requirements for cooperative action are all examples of relationship types that may exist over a long period of time, but may not be dependent upon interpersonal attraction as the primary motive force behind the relationship and, therefore, may not share the unique characteristics of attraction-based relationships.

It would seem then, that researchers would have much to gain by investigating a broader range of relationship types. This recommendation, however, must be tempered by the fact that the literature on personal relationships provides very little systematic information about relationship types (Ginsburg, 1986). While some researchers, including Rubin (1973), La Gaipa (1977) and Clark and Mills (1974) among social psychologists, and Fitzpatrick (1977) and Tolhuizen (1984) in communication, have tried to identify relationship types, these studies only scratch the surface of an enormous task facing personal relationship researchers. Knapp, Ellis and Williams (1980) identified 62 common language descriptors of relationship types, and even a cursory perusal of their list leaves the uneasy impression that the list could have been expanded almost indefinitely. What is most needed seems to be taxonomic research aimed at identifying fundamental or kernel relationship forms and investigating the associations among these forms and specific relationship types. Once this task has been accomplished, researchers can turn their attention to investigating the properties of evolutionary change within the relationship types without having to assume that the properties of evolutionary change are the same across all forms of personal relationships.

The Need to Take a Broader View of Relationship Change

Besides concentrating on a limited range of relationship types, current

approaches to evolutionary change in relationships have also conceptualized relationship change too narrowly. After reviewing research in these areas, several researchers have commented that nearly all models of relationship evolution seem to depict change as a series of steps or stages that reflect (1) a period of initial interaction, followed by (2) a period of growth or escalation, followed by (3) a period of leveling off or stabilization, which may be followed by (4) a period of deterioration or deescalation, which may be followed by (5) terminating interaction (Wilmot, 1979; Wheeless, Wheeless & Baus, 1984; Tolhuizen, 1986). Thus, the predominant metaphor used by researchers to conceptualize relationship change has been a developmental growth model which, if depicted graphically, would look something like a normal curve with a rising slope describing the escalation phase and a declining slope describing the deescalation phase.

Admittedly, the developmental-growth model seems to make intuitive sense, however, it is important to realize that this sense of correctness is largely self-reflexive and merely serves to confirm itself. Indeed, a good argument can be made that the adoption of the developmental-growth model is actually an outgrowth of inadequacies in relationship change research and merely reflects culturally derived beliefs about relationships. For instance, one reason for the dominance of the developmental-growth model may be the problem, as discussed in the previous portion of this paper, of having studied an overly restricted range of relationship types. In essence, attraction-based relationships, which require participants to invest important aspects of their identities and personalities and seem to be oriented toward intimacy, would also seem to naturally lead researchers to the adoption of a developmental-growth model. Thus, as Backman (1983) has pointed out, attraction-based relationships seem to

carry an imperative for growth.

A second reason leading to the adoption of the developmental-growth model may be cultural. Gergen and Gergen (1981), for instance, have argued that developmental-growth models reflect important cultural values inherent in American and Western European societies. In simple form, this argument holds that success tends to be conceptualized in terms of "progress" and "growth" in these societies, and that failure is conversely defined in terms of "stagnation" and "deterioration." In addition, it is argued that this growth value is a pervasive aspect of social life in these cultures and is routinely applied as an interpretive sense making device for a wide range of different social experiences including education, business, economics, politics and personal relationships. Like all perceptual filters, this growth value has shaped currently held conceptions of relationship change in very powerful ways. Furthermore, as Berscheid (1986) has pointed out, since the value is presumably shared by both researchers and research subjects alike, the "body of knowledge" that has been generated through studies of relationship development may be hopelessly confounded with cultural expectations. This is not to say that growth and deterioration are not important properties of evolutionary change in some relationships at certain times. But, it seems unlikely that developmental growth is the only form, or even the principle form of relationship change as the preponderance of current research seems to suggest.

If existing models of relationship development were to be abandoned or modified, what new models could be adopted to take their place. Osterkamp (1980) suggests a transformational model similar to Noam Chomsky's generative-transformational grammar model. Osterkamp argues that internal cognitive items which make up an individual's self-identity are analogous to "deep structure"

sentence meaning and that people must transform these items into "surface structure" messages for communication. These transformations may be either relatively simple and straight forward or very complex. As with linguistic transformation, the more complex the transformation, the less directly the surface structure message reflects the deep structure meaning. Consequently, relationship growth processes might vary considerably both across relationships and within relationships at different periods of time depending upon the complexity of the transformations of self-information.

Others have suggested that researchers should take a closer look at "trajectories" of relationship change (Duck & Perlman, 1985). Similar to the "equifinality" attribute of systems theory, the notion of trajectories of change assumes that there are usually multiple avenues or methods of achieving desired relationship goals. Thus research attention would be focused on the patterns and sequences of interaction which lead to specific relational outcomes. Working from this perspective (Baxter 1984, 1985) has been able to map the trajectories or relationship disengagement.

Both of these suggestions seem to be valuable contributions. Osterkamp's transformational approach, for instance, may help explain differing rates of relational development, and the notion of trajectories could someday help explicate the variety of different ways relationships change from one state to another. Neither of these suggestions, however, seem to be intended to replace the developmental-growth model, and neither seems to possess the metaphorical power to produce a fundamental reconceptualization of relationship change. The need for a new model seems apparent, but to date, a model of sufficient scope and power has not been suggested. Personally, I feel that the idea of adaptation, loosely borrowed from biological evolution, represents a potentially

powerful metaphor for relationship change. It seems to me that a model based on this conception may have several distinct advantages. One advantage, for instance, would be that current lines of research would be subsumed within the new model rather than abandoned. Thus, relationship growth would be retained as one possible form of adaptive change. Perhaps the most important advantage, however, would be the way in which the adaptive change metaphor redirects researchers thinking about relationship change. Dance's (1967) helical-spiral model of communication may be particularly instructive on this account. Instead of focusing narrowly on the upward and downward swings in relational intensity, attention would be redirected toward the constantly metamorphosing, emerging qualities of relationships.

The Need for More Appropriate Research Designs

Over the last several decades, a tremendous volume of research on personal relationships has been produced. On the whole these studies reflect a truly impressive degree of methodological sophistication, insight and inventiveness. Nevertheless, the research designs and methods often seem inadequate to the problem of creating a true science of personal relationships. In this section of the paper, three particular areas will be discussed in which researchers need to develop new research strategies. These areas include subject selection, observation techniques, and the inclusion of time in research designs.

Subject Selection

Even a cursory review of studies in personal relationships reveals the overwhelming tendency for researchers to use college students as subjects (Ginsburg, 1986). That researchers rely so heavily on college students is understandable. Most researchers work in academe, and college students are both readily available and generally willing participants, usually in exchange

for a little money or course credit. However, the narrowness of this subject pool seriously limits researchers ability to generalize their results. Research subjects are predominantly white, middle class, young, single, and above average in intelligence. Certainly it is obvious to most that these subjects represent only a subculture within the general population, but this subject pool may also effect personal relationship research in additional ways. Berscheid (1985), for example, has argued persuasively that overreliance on college student subjects has influenced both the types of relationships studied and the questions researchers have addressed. Young college students, many of whom are away from home for the first time, seem naturally disposed to face the problems of establishing social contacts and creating social networks. Thus the previously discussed problems of having studied an overly narrow range of relationship types and having focused too heavily on developmental-growth features of relationship change may be related in complex ways to the subject pool researchers have chosen to study. It seems clear, then, that researchers need to expend more energy to develop means of drawing subjects from a broader range of the population.

Observation Techniques

Research on personal relationships has simply relied too heavily on self-reports as a method for obtaining data. Liska (1986) has pointed out that in any communication event there are at least four realities; a self, an other, interaction or messages, and a situation in which the first three realities are embedded. A not atypical design of personal relationship studies, however, is one in which subjects are asked to imagine or remember a situation with an imagined or remembered other, and to indicate, either on a set of rating scales or by some other means, the messages that they did use, could have used, or

would be most likely to use. In short, in many studies only one of the four communication realities is real.

Such studies seem to assume that people respond to hypothetical people and situations and paper and pencil messages in the same way that they respond to real people, real messages and real situations. Liska contends that this assumption is false, that these research designs actually investigate the cognitive processes of perceivers and only indirectly, if at all, communication events. As a result, Liska argues, subjects are encouraged to apply culturally supplied causal rules and expectations in making their responses rather than actually searching their memories or predicting what they would actually do or say. A very similar argument is made by Ginsburg (1986) who points out that these culturally supplied expectations may be best thought of as post-experience systems for accounting for actions (Scott & Lyman, 1968) rather than the means by which people decide on actions.

The problems inherent in studying perceived communication rather than real behavior are fundamental to the field of personal relationships, and the discussion outlined here only skims the surface of its impact. Others, for instance, have discussed the influence of needs for social desirability and approval on subject's responses to self-report measures (Crowne & Marlow, 1960; Daly & Street, 1980). It seems increasingly obvious that researchers need to abandon many currently used designs in favor of creating new designs that permit them to study the actual behavior of people in real relationships.

The Inclusion of Time

Over a quarter of a century ago, David Berlo (1960) advanced the now taken-for-granted notion of communication as a process. The idea of process has, perhaps, influenced communication theory in more dramatic ways than any

other single idea in our generation. Indeed, current interest in evolutionary relationship change is a natural outgrowth of the idea of process. Unfortunately, researchers have not been generally successful in including process notions, especially time, in their research designs. Baxter and Wilmot (1986), for instance, have pointed out that despite the almost universal agreement among researchers on the process view, the overwhelming majority of studies reported in the personal relationships literature utilize designs which preclude the study of relationships in process. Instead of looking at the process of change over time, researchers have often taken the "slice-of-life" approach and studied communication at specific intervals in what is assumed to be the relationship life-cycle. Thus, for example, there have been studies of communication in initial encounters (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger, Gardner, Clatterbuck & Schulman, 1976), communication aimed at maintaining relationships (Ayers, 1983; Shea & Pearson, 1986), and communication during periods of relationship dissolution and termination (Baxter, 1979, 1982; Cody, 1982), while at the same time very little information has been generated about the communication dynamics which explain the on-going, gradual changes in relationships (Tolhuizen, 1986). Forgas (1979) has pointed out that recurring communication experiences are the building blocks from which relationships are constructed. Therefore, as Baxter and Wilmot (1986) conclude, data must be gathered about communication over time in successive encounters before reliable conclusions about relationship change can be made. If this is to be accomplished, it seems there is little choice but for researchers to do a better job of including time as an important feature in their research designs.

The need for longitudinal studies of relationships poses several problems for researchers. Perhaps most obviously, longitudinal studies take much longer

to plan for, design and to complete. Current pressure within the academy to encourage scholars to be "productive" are not apt to motivate researchers to adopt designs that take many months, perhaps years to complete. Secondly, longitudinal studies involve subjects in the research for longer periods of time and in more involved ways. Consequently, the problem of obtaining subject consent will become predictably more severe, as will the problem of subject mortality. Finally, designs for longitudinal studies have received so little attention that techniques for data collection are not very sophisticated. The few longitudinal studies that have been reported have used some form of the diary method for collecting data (Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977; Reis, Nezlek & Wheeler, 1980; Duck & Miell, 1986; Baxter & Wilmot, 1986). While use of these procedures has opened the door to longitudinal studies, information derived from the diary method must be considered to share many of the shortcoming of other forms of self-report data. Nevertheless, the promise of longitudinal research is indeed great, and there is little doubt that the technical problems can be overcome once researchers begin to apply their considerable ingenuity and creativity to seeking solutions.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, selective aspects of relationship change research and theory have received critical examination and commentary. These commentaries point to needed changes in three areas, specifically, the need to investigate a broader range of relationship types, the need for a broader conceptualization of relationship change, and the need to develop more appropriate research methods. While the problems facing personal relationship researchers will be

difficult to solve, the resources for solving the problems are available. If can continue to work on these problems the promise of personal relationship research, which I believe is great indeed, can be realized.

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