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ABSTRACT

Noting that scholars often agree that varying investigations of relationship maintenance are only different mappings of the same territory, this paper organizes and criticizes the literature on relationship change from a position that defines maintenance as behavior that functions to sustain interpersonal bonds towards future interaction. The paper points out that communication scholars need to study maintenance for two reasons: maintenance is becoming lost in a sea of other user-unfriendly, ubiquitous terms, such as meaning, interpersonal, and relationships; and the understanding of communication as relationships, already biased by the dominating cultural ideal of what both "should" look like, will most likely be further problematized by a term laden in mechanistic and therapeutic symbolism. Using J. N. Capella's frame for organizing interpersonal research inquiry, the paper offers some conditions and direction for research in accordance with the defined construct and the varying perspectives on relationships and relationship change. The major section of the paper reviews the existing literature on relationship maintenance, looking at various issues of concern (such as the cultural biases of research). In closing, the paper calls for additional considerations when studying relationship maintenance in the future: (1) scholars should begin to rethink gender as more than a biological classification; (2) they should remember that power is implicit in many theories, but not considered when devising studies or interpreting results; and (3) they should consider the very real phenomena that influence human relationships when modeling relationship maintenance and change. Contains 61 references. (RS)

# Putting Relationship Maintenance into Proper Perspectives

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Running head: PERSPECTIVES OF MAINTENANCE

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Abstract

This paper organizes and criticizes the literature on relationship change from a position that defines maintenance as behavior that functions to sustain interpersonal bonds towards future interaction. Using Capella's (1987) frame for organizing interpersonal research inquiry, I offer some conditions and direction for research in accordance with the defined construct and the varying perspectives on relationships and relationship change. Issues regarding the cultural biases of research and the nature of relationships are also discussed as conditions are placed on the maintenance construct.

## Putting Relationship Maintenance into Proper Perspectives

In an upcoming chapter, Attridge (1994) argues that relational and social forces that inhibit marital dissolution can also be used to discuss how those bonds are kept together. This point raises new questions about the nature of marital relations over a life span by redefining how people use exit barriers, like buying a house, as a maintenance strategy. Hence, the blissful picture of relations is repainted to include some seemingly pathetic reasons and desperate actions people identify for keeping their union together.

Not all forms of maintenance are desperate acts by individuals in precarious relationship situations. To be sure, most of that which is construed as maintenance lies somewhere between initiating and terminating a relationship. What constitutes maintenance, however, can be pointed to as one site where varying epistemological and ontological claims about relationships eventually collide.

On the face, scholars often agree that varying investigations of maintenance are only different mappings of the same territory. Motivated by a lack of research on how relationships change and how they stay together, typologies have been derived that identify the strategies people use to manage inherent tensions (Baxter & Dindia, 1987), or maintain equity (Canary & Stafford, 1992), affinity (Bell, Daly, & Gonzalez, 1987), and some desired relational state (Ayers, 1983; Shea & Pearson, 1986). Likewise, advances have been made in the theories that describe the processes of relationship change, including synthesis in dialectical approaches (Baxter, 1988, 1994; Rawlins, 1989), the refinement of exchange models (Bell & Daly, 1984; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Lund, 1985), the mapping of cognitive

schemata (Planalp & Rivers, 1988); and the modelling of cyclical interaction systems (VanLear, 1991).

The diversity in these and other discussions (see Duck, 1988) suggest that a consensus on the nature of maintenance is far from being reached. Arguably, the core of dispute can be located in how a relationship is conceptualized, theorized to move, change, or develop. To be sure, while there are numerous conceptions of maintenance, few scholars are willing to advance their working definition of a relationship.

What remains true in any case, however, is that the enduring quality of interpersonal relationships and how they are sustained over time involves communication directly (Bochner, 1984). Despite one's perspective on the nature of relationships or how they should be examined, without communication, the observable symbolic activity between two actors, there can be no such thing as a relationship. Maintaining relationships, then, should principally be considered an interpersonal communication phenomena.

This reasoning aside, I believe there are two added concerns for communication scholars to study maintenance. The first is that maintenance is fast becoming lost in a sea of other user-unfriendly, ubiquitous terms, such as meaning, interpersonal, and relationships. To lose grasp of such a uniquely communication centered concept only adds insult to this field's identity crisis. The second is that our understanding of communication and relationships, already biased by the dominating cultural ideal of what both <u>should</u> look like, will most likely be further problematized by a term laden in mechanistic and therapeutic symbolism.

An immediate means of preserving objectivity in the term until interpersonal scholars can reshape theory and research around it is to root maintenance in observational properties. This is not a position asserting a single observable reality. The position does insist, however, that realities are grounded in enacted behaviors, whether it be those observed by the actors themselves, or the talk actors share to make sense of their observations. In this piece, I offer some direction and conditions for researching maintenance in relation to the varying perspectives on relationships.

## Defining Maintenance and Relationship Research Domains

Summarizing the research, Duck (1988) states that maintenance may refer to several things, including sustaining the existence of the relationship, regulating intimacy, or stabilizing a bond following trauma. Investigation thus ranges from micro-behaviors that influence specific perceptions to complex sets of behaviors that function as holistic affinity strategies. In any case, the goal is to identify, in part, the processes of relationship change.

Given the numerous perspectives on relationships, change, and the functions of communication, a limiting definition of maintenance appears to be warranted. Relationship maintenance is the enactment of behaviors that function to sustain or prolong the existence of interpersonal bonds by regulating or modifying existing patterns of interaction in ways that influence the nature of future interaction.

Placing conditions on maintenance fulfills a number of needs for organizing past and future endeavors. First, the construct is rooted in observable behaviors, or actions. Thus, when discussing relationships as cognitive representations brought to social

situations (Berger & Roloff, 1982), maintenance may be conceived of as behaviors that sustain mental constructions of the bond, such as talking with others to reduce perceived uncertainty about the state of relationship (Planalp et al, 1988). Similarly, the study of maintenance is not a study of trust or commitment, but the things people do to convey and build trust or commitment.

Second, maintenance behaviors are defined as those which sustain or prolong bonding. For good or bad, relationships are under constant change. The behavior of people in and outside of the relationship may cause change, but people also behave in response to change caused by internal or external forces. Likewise, maintenance behaviors may cause change or respond to change, but function to sustain the existence of a bond by instigating or working through change. No distinction is made between maintenance and repair behaviors, nor do such behaviors necessarily have to preserve or attempt to attain "ideal" states or keep the relationship "growing" in a particular direction. As Dindia and Baxter (1987) report, respondents see repair and maintenance strategies as similar, as well as perceive tactics that increase autonomy as viable for maintenance. In that maintenance can be observed, it is implied that some maintenance behaviors may be distinguished from behaviors that function primarily to initiate new bonds, as well as behaviors that terminate bonds.

Third, maintenance behaviors function by regulating or modifying the patterns of interaction that actors use to define their relationship in ways that influence the nature of future interaction. Depending on the vantage point, studying maintenance

behavior takes different form. From a systems perspective, one may act towards influencing another's action in an attempt to regulate the emergent and future pattern of interaction. From a cognitive approach, one may enact behaviors that modify how the other will perceive the present and future interaction, as well as reinterpret the past. While the direction of influence may vary (e.g. increase, sustain, or decrease the probability of a patterned interaction; retain or modify one's perception), maintenance behaviors always function toward some resultant future.

Finally, the character of a shared past and anticipated future interaction contextualize maintenance within interpersonal bonds (Simmel, 1950). Very often messages with non-personal others function to preserve relationship status and might therefore count as maintenance behaviors. However, work on messages that manage impressions and meet instrumental goals (Brown & Levinson, 1978; O'Keefe & Shepherd, 1987) rely on common pasts and cultural rules to account for the unfolding interaction, or do not directly contribute to the larger endeavor of maintenance research, which is (in my view) to explain the processes of bonds over time.[1]

Clearly, theories on the processes of relationship change has gone beyond observing actors' behaviors. To put this work into perspective I draw upon Cappella's (1987) four general classes of inquiry for interpersonal research. Zero-order inquiry examines sets of behaviors {X} and {Y}, their types and structures (p. 193).

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[1] Couch (1989) differentiates common from shared pasts by noting the former condition is established when two people recognize that they have previously performed activity similar to that called for in the immediate situation, but have not previously acted with each other (p. 259)

First-order inquiry examines baseline probabilities of behaviors, "their production and their perception by receivers" (p. 193). Second-order inquiry is concerned with patterns of behavioral interaction in and of itself. Third-order inquiry focuses on the "linkage between relationship factors and interaction patterns, and interaction patterns and relational outcomes" (p. 193).

The literature on communication and maintenance is primarily third-order inquiry, but other levels are represented theoretically if not empirically. In addition, many endeavors interact between and across levels. For instance, Wilmot (1987) theorizes change as an on-going cyclical movement of dyadic interaction, and examines the reported strategies used to manage felt tensions and meet personal goals that rejuvenate feelings about the relationship and facilitate change of the cycle's direction (Wilmot, 1994). In this case, inquiry begins at the second-order level, then moves to third-order investigation to understand how emotive responses may impact the direction of a relationship.

Questions regarding behavioral sets and the temporal measure of maintenance asd defined have been discussed elsewhere (see Aleman, 1993). This piece begins then with research classified as first order inquiry, questions asked at the intra-personal level regarding factors affecting the encoding and decoding of behaviors within interpersonal settings (Capella, 1987, p. 204).

First Order Inquiry

Inquiry at this level is primarily concerned with cognition. Thus, first order questions of maintenance have fallen into two

broad categories: Relationships as intrapersonal processes and perceiving maintenance behaviors.

Relationships as Intrapersonal Processes

Intrapersonal orientations to relationship change, such as uncertainty reduction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Planalp, 1985) contend that relationships are essentially mental representations of relational information. In that knowledge of self, other, and relationship is in flux with the advent of new information, the study of maintenance from a first-order perspective would inquire, "Once information becomes known, what do actors do to reduce new uncertainty about their relationship?" This provides focussed investigation on (1) the cognitive processes that attempt to organize newly presented information; (2) the behaviors individuals engage in to assist in organizing new information; and (3) the interpersonal action taken to decrease uncertainty in how the relationship develops, such as stabilizing the bond. The first two points can be discussed as first order inquiry since they examine the manipulation of one's own knowledge base, perhaps as a result of action and interaction, towards a level that facilitates future interaction. The third point, although more representative of the work intrapersonal oriented theorists perform, is addressed under third order inquiry.

The most prolific line of research on the processing of new information about relationships is that on personal attributions, especially those that serve controlling functions by explaining past (Heider, 1958) or predicting future interaction (Kelley, 1979). Likewise, study in the cognitive processing of unexpected behavior,

processes that confirm (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977) or adapt to new information (Weber & Crocker, 1983), provide critical insight into the bases for behavior in relationships. However, cognitive processes cannot be considered as maintenance per se since they are neither behavioral or directly observable by others. That is, despite that mediated systems now allow scholars to explore mental processes via concurrent protocol (see Vangelisti, Miller, & Aleman, 1992), it is unlikely that these same processes can be observed once outside of the lab.

On the other hand, there are more readily available behaviors that individuals do to assist in processing information, such as make accounts. Accounts serve a justification and sense-making function, as well as enhances a personal sense of control, closure, catharsis and emotional release (Harvey, Agostinelli, & Weber, 1989). Accounts need not be public, and may in fact differ in their processing function when expressed (Antaki, 1987). For the most part, the primary function of the accounts studied has been a personal desire to understand some unexpected or traumatic event.

Other behaviors also help to organize new information and reduce uncertainty about a relationship. Planalp et al (1988) found that to cope with events that increase uncertainty, people reported thinking alone, continuing contact with the other, avoiding contact with the other, and talking to people outside the relationship. People also use interrogative probes and questions to reveal more information from ambiguous message sources. Finally, Baxter and Wilmot (1984) report people may use "secret tests" to obtain more information about the state of on-going relationships.

But while process-assisting behaviors are observable, there is little reason to expect that they should be any different than those behaviors used to reduce uncertainty during the initiation of personal relationships, or make sense of the day to day interaction with non-interpersonal relations. Hence, they fall just outside of the maintenance construct. Furthermore, one can argue that at best the form of uncertainty-reducing behaviors that involve others may vary from direct to indirect (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

Perhaps one avenue for observing behavior that helps process new information and qualifies as maintenance would be the routine sharing of accounts between dyads. Such interaction creates a common understanding of experiences that simultaneously organize the relationship for future interaction. As Simmel (1950) has argued, constructing a shared knowledge base of experience is necessary for social bonding. The sharing of accounts functions as maintenance since the accounts are embedded in interaction, the effect of which might be viewed in subsequent interaction patterns as actors reflect upon and recant those told stories.

Similarly, reminiscence may offer gainful insight into how people mentally construct their relationships. Perhaps more a joint activity that account making, reminiscence helps actors make sense of the present through the past (Baines, Saxby, & Ehlert, 1987), as well as symbolically repositions the social-situational identity of teller(s) and listener(s) (Buchanan & Middleton, 1993). To be sure, reminiscence appears to be an interpersonal activity that follows the changing lifespan of relationships.

Perceiving Maintenance Strategies

Perceiving maintenance implies that an one can accurately identify a pre-existing or existing pattern of interaction, as well as those behaviors that modified or will modify that pattern towards some result. Most third-order inquiry that investigates the effectiveness of behaviors for maintaining relationship dimensions does so by analyzing the perceived use of behaviors. However, only a few begin or continue their investigation by theorizing factors that might enhance or inhibit perceptual accuracy.

An initial study by Stafford and Canary (1991), for instance, could not find significant differences between relationship type or gender and the perceived use of maintenance strategies. However, when a later study analyzed perceived equity in the relationship, gender-linked effects were markedly demonstrated (Canary & Stafford, 1992). That study found that underbenefited husbands perceived the least amount of spousal effort to maintain the relationship. In fact, husband-defined equity scores consistently affected their perceptions of spousal strategy use, but had no affect on perceptions of their own behaviors. Conversely, to the extent that wives defined equity in the relationships, their perceptions of own and other's maintenance behaviors were significantly influenced. The interaction between perceived equity and gender then is one factor that influences people's perceptions of strategy use.

Scholars of nonverbal communication, however, have long held that person's level of confidence is related to the perceptual and decoding accuracy of enacted behaviors. While a moderate level of confidence enhances perceptual accuracy, over-confidence results in

decreased accuracy (DeTurk et al, 1990). Since bonds are characterized by high levels of confidence in attributions of behavior, greater misperception of maintenance behaviors should occur in relationships over time. Perhaps then it's no wonder that couples who have been together for years become oblivious to one another's attempts to modify an unsatisfying pattern of interaction.

My point is not to invalidate the findings by Canary and Stafford, since the matter can be easily addressed by assessing partner confidence. However, it does raise issue on the reliability of single respondent perceptions, advocates a careful consideration of other processing factors, and calls for comparing partners' data to a common focus of behaviors within a specific context. Since any number of factors can potentially influence the perceived use of strategies, those theoretically linked to coherent explanations of cognitive and relationship processes, and which might lead to expected behaviors deserve attention. Aside from the continuing work on equity, other variables appear to be fruitful here including self-monitoring, locus of control, and message design logic.

Self-monitoring refers to the ways individuals plan, act out, and regulate their behaviors in social situations (Snyder et al, 1977). High self-monitors seek out social and situational information and are keenly aware of interpersonal behavior that might offer cues on how to appropriately act. Low self-monitors seek out information on how to best demonstrate their true self. High self-monitors, then, would be more likely to perceive and act upon maintenance behaviors in specific interaction contexts than

would low-self monitors. On the other hand, low self-monitors would probably be more consistent in perceiving their own behaviors.

Rotter's (1966) work on locus of control, stable dispositions regarding the sources of positive and negative reinforcements for behavior, offers insight into how pairs might evaluate behaviors that function towards maintenance. People with an internal locus of control view rewards as emanating from internal sources, while those with an external locus view rewards as emanating from outside.

Patterns of interaction are influenced as pairs attempt to manage tensions from internal (relational) and external (social) sources (Montgomery, 1988). Assuming that maintenance is a positive (desired) outcome of enacted behaviors, one might expect pairs of internals to more likely perceive, recall, and act upon behaviors that mange relational tensions (i.e. we decided we wanted to be more close), or see maintenance as a product of their own action (i.e. we compromised our schedules so that we could be together more often). Conversely, pairs of externals would more likely perceive, recall, and act upon behaviors that manage social tensions (i.e. we needed time away from our friends), or see maintenance as a product of outsider's actions (i.e. Our friends really gave us support). In short, the locus and agents of tension management (relational or social), and the subsequent defining of future interaction, may be influenced by where the source of reward is perceived.

Finally, message design logic (O'Keefe, 1991), a person's rationality scheme for viewing the function of communication, is useful in accounting for the (mis)perception and production of messages. Logics vary in relation to cognitive complexity and level

of construct differentiation. People with an expressive logic perceive and use messages at a literal level, while those with a conventional logic perceive and use messages according to social norms. The highest form of logic, rhetorical, builds on the latter to use messages in complex and situationally transcendent manners. Certain expectations can be suggested providing that the manner of interaction can be identified. Under normative discourse conditions and where actors are of dissimilar logics, Expressives would more likely misperceive the function of a message than a Conventional or Rhetorical. On the other hand, Rhetoricals would be expected to more accurately perceive behaviors, as well as possess the greatest repertoire from which to produce maintenance messages.

In sum, first-order questions of processing information and perceiving behaviors give added insight into how actors view their relationship, then use behaviors to produce some desired interaction outcome. However much of relationship maintenance and relating itself occurs outside of actors' intentions and conscious attempts.

Second Order Inquiry

Second-order questions address the pattern of interaction between persons directly, patterns of association between adjacent or lagged behaviors regardless of the message source or intent that provide the base for relationship. The smallest unit of analysis in second-order research is the interact, and the primary unit is the interact chain. Second-order research on maintenance falls under two related classes: (1) relationship as patterned interaction, and (2) message-intrinsic modelling.

Relationship as Patterned Interaction

Patterned interaction orientations to relationship processes, such as cyclical systems (Fisher & Drecksel, 1983; VanLear, 1991) and relational communication (Millar & Rogers, 1988) approaches contend that relationship change is represented in the emergent interaction patterns between people. Observing maintenance then requires a holistic look at interaction change over time, rather than an individual's enactment of particular behaviors. Depending on the theoretical framework, an emergent pattern may present itself as characteristic of interaction (Ting-Toomey, 1983), or as a result of systemic constraints that specify change (Altman et al, 1981; VanLear, 1991). From a second-order vantage, then, an investigation of maintenance is not so much identifying specific behaviors that sustain bonds as it is a description of how people relate.

While models of relationship based on a second-order vantage vary, one thing seems for sure: few researchers actually use the interact as their unit of analysis. For instance, Wilmot (1987) theorizes relationship change in terms of regressive and progressive spirals of dyadic interaction that move between critical limits. To examine the exchanged behaviors that set and perpetuate interaction along a progressive or regressive spiral constitutes maintenance research at one level (second-order), while identifying the global tactics individuals use to prevent spiraling beyond their relatively defined critical limits is another (third-order). For the most part, that research places emphasis on the latter.[2]

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[2] On the use of constructs that are inconsistent with theory, Rogers (1993) notes that "too frequently in the relationship literature, researchers make conceptual promises their data cannot keep" (p. 13).

Conversely, Ting-Toomey (1983) insists that relationship and maintenance should be examined according to the sustaining character of partners' verbal interaction patterns. Remaining true to her framework, she presents a 12-category system for describing married couples' negotiating strategies and sets no expectations for future patterns. Other exemplars of consistency between theorizing and observing second-order phenomenon are Gottman (1979) and Rogers and Millar (1988), the latter offering the most comprehensive framework for a full-scale investigation of interpersonal relating. To be sure, recent work in relational control has identified differences in the patterns of couples who subsqently "repaired" versus those that terminated (Courtright, Millar, Rogers, & Bargozzi, 1990).

This work is not without limits. The research generally relies on transcriptions of only a few dyads in conflict or counsel. Such instances offer pivotal points for observing interaction and change, but are narrow observations on how interaction reflects or redefines associations between actors in their daily lives. Do couples carry out this form of interaction all the time, or just when they are in conflict? If under conflict, do those couples vary their patterns with topical or temporal conditions (Baxter, 1988)? Samples of more diverse interaction contexts then is crucial for a broader picture of relationship movement and the behaviors that sustain movement.

Significant work needs also to be made on other elements of interpersonal relating. Rogers and Millar (1988) and associates clearly demonstrate that how messages of control are patterned form specific relations of dominance. But social relations are more than power associations. Messages of trust and commitment also define

(Rogers & Millar, 1988) and are in timely need of modelling and investigation consistent with second-order theory.

Alternatively, Couch's (1991) framework and the "New Iowa" school of symbolic interaction are promising for maintenance since it provides an account of how action may be constrained once actors have aligned themselves into particular relationships. Couch contends that partners routinely align their actions to (re)produce particular forms of social relationship. At least two universal forms of social relations, parental and solidary, are said to cross all societies and interaction settings. Seven less universal forms are also identified: authority, romance, exchange, charismatic, representative, and tyrannical relationships. The perspective is an innovative one for understanding how behaviors are organized, and has yet to be fully and rigorously tested.

Relationship as Message-Intrinsic

Like situation contexts, relationships define how people interact, but how people interact also defines their relationship. This latter position has been referred to as the message-intrinsic view of relationship (Hopper & Drummond, 1992), and is echoed in several communication-based relationship theories (e.g. Baxter, 1988; Rawlins, 1989; Rogers & Millar, 1988), but studied by few.

Message-intrinsic approaches, and more recently conversational analysts, argue that the phenomenon of relationship can be located as a feature of interaction, something that actors accomplish in conversation. For instance, Hopper & Drummond (1992) write that telephone openings are accomplished by the performance of specific components, or cannonical instances. By observing how conversants

vary their performance of these acts, the defining features of interaction that serves to distinguish stranger and intimate relationship can be recorded.

But if relationship can be identified in specific interaction contexts, it follows that relationship form itself can be identified in the patterns of a pair's conversation. That is, relationship is produced by accomplishing the defining features which characterize particular interaction forms. Maintenance then can be studied as conversationalists enact behaviors that accomplish interaction patterns which confirm relationship. Transformation might be studied as actors routinely produce behaviors that disconfirm the emergence of the previous form, thereby forcing a renegotiation of how interaction will be patterned. Given that scholars rarely define what they mean by "relationship", newer message-intrinsic models hold great promise for studying maintenance by articulating the very matter being sustained.

Second-order inquiry then directs focussed attention at the specific behavioral change associated with relationship maintenance processes. Third-order inquiry address how respondents report using maintenance behaviors, why they use them, and some of the relational outcomes associated with their use.

Third Order Inquiry

Third-order inquiry focus on associations between interaction patterns and relationship outcomes. Empirical investigation and reviews of maintenance have largely been approached from a third-order level of inquiry (Attridge, 1992, for barriers; Baxter, 1994,

for dialectics; Canary and Stafford, 1992, for equity; and Knapp & Vangelisti, 1992, for social-penetration).

Most third-order studies of begin with relationships a priori, viewing them as a holistic experience of interaction, cognitions, feelings, and expectations. In general, people are said to use maintenance behaviors to attain relationship goals or interaction patterns otherwise perceived unattainable. Therefore, maintenance is considered a strategic form of interaction.

Given the available reviews, I will not detail the existing literature on third-order investigation. Rather, strategies are reviewed as they perform two major functions: (1) maintaining dimensions of relationships, and; (2) managing tensions.

Maintaining Dimensions of Relationships

Relationships are multi-faceted, composed of many features that vary in definition over time. The relative satisfaction with these relational features and the nature of the relationship in part motivate one's attempt to alter the relationship. Maintenance strategies, then, function to regulate the changing features, or instigate change in static relational features to a level that is satisfying for at least one member.

This view of relationships as entities moving between "states" is a predominate one in the literature. The process of assessing satisfaction in relation to multiple factors that influence change in relationships have been best articulated by exchange theories, such as social-penetration, privacy regulation, uncertainty-reduction, affinity-seeking, and equity approaches. Detailed within each approach are particular relational features or dimensions

considered salient to sustaining bonds, including affection (Bell & Daly, 1983; Canary & Stafford, 1992), control (Canary & Stafford, 1992), commitment (Lund, 1985; Canary & Stafford, 1992), intimacy (Knapp & Vangelisti, 1992), and trust. Depending then on the exchange approach taken, maintenance behaviors influence how specific relational features will emerge in future interaction.

For instance, Canary and Stafford (1992) examined how inequity in marital relationships affected perceived and reported use of maintenance strategies, and influenced partners' ratings of control mutuality, commitment, and liking. They found that although husbands' and wives' perceived inequity influenced their perceptions of maintenance strategies, the strategies themselves best predicted ratings of relational features. Self-reported use of positivity strategies was a primary predictor of control mutuality for both husbands and wives, while perceptions of a partner's use of positive strategies predicted liking. Husband's commitment was most affected by perceived assurance strategies, while wives' ratings were best predicted by their own use of assurance strategies. The findings confirm that although third-order relationships are holistic experiences of a multi-faceted phenomena, sustaining features of a relationship is the result of interaction-based efforts.

Of concern, however, is the scope of existing dimensional research and the generalizability of its findings. What is being examined in such work is <u>relational</u> maintenance, the specific features of bonds, not the relationship itself. To be sure, those endeavors appear to be more concerned with sustaining the exchange

framework and a cultural ideology for conceptualizing the processes of relationships.

Take, for example, social-penetration theories that examine strategies people use when confronted with a partner who desires a more or less intimate relationship (Ayres, 1983; Shea & Pearson, 1986). Generally, participants are solicited and asked to recall the strategies they use to maintain intimacy, or are placed in a hypothetical scenario with a defined "other" who desires some change in the relationship. Scenario participants are then given a list of strategies that regulate intimacy to select from. This research concludes that although acquaintances and friends vary in levels of developed intimacy, relationship type has no effect on the strategies used to maintain relational intimacy. Shea and Pearson (1986) also conclude however that intentions for the relationship does affect strategy selection, as females used more direct strategies to stabilize their relationship when intent differed.

In this example, relational features and relationships are put on an equal level. Social bonds are theoretically defined in terms of intimacy, even though acquaintances may not exist on the same track as friends, or be characterized by any level of intimacy. Relationship definition is said to occur as actors "stabilize" the bond by using strategic communication to manage intimacy. Given the behavioral options and relationship typology, however, participants have no choice but to select among strategies grounded in intimacy to move or to keep them at some static level. Thus, the social-penetration model of relationship change is sustained theoretically

and methodologically despite no differences found between bond type and strategy selection.

Such approaches are problematic in that they are embedded in a dominant cultural ideology of what relationships should look like (Bochner, 1984). Although Montgomery (1988) writes that it is important for researchers to investigate that which lay people think is important, scholars should also reveal those biases by presenting competing and alternative notions about the nature of bonding. For instance, Johnson (1991) writes that the U.S. culture's insistence on intimacy (particularly as it is defined as sexual) as a gauge for relationship quality has bound couples (and particularly women) into on-going evaluation and labor to meet cultural standards (see also Wood, 1993). The social penetration framework, then, is part of a cultural ideology that pervades beliefs about how communication should function in personal relationships.[3]

As another example, despite the multiple internal and external factors that influence relationship movement, competing assumptions of relational maintenance assert that specific personal dimensions are primary in accounting for change in relationships. Two major assumptions, however, are again embedded in the dominant cultural ideology: (1) that the nature of relationships exists outside of historical and cultural contexts, and; (2) that people are in complete control of their lives. However, Arendt (1958) contends that the marking of intimacy as an important dimension for personal

[3] Others have similarly argued that viewing communication as influence, or functioning primarily for persuasive purposes, reflects a cultural ideology of competition and control, despite that communication also functions to connect.

relationships arouse during a historical setting that reshaped interaction patterns between dyads. Likewise, the importance of equity in relationships is no doubt a product of the division of labor between men and women, and may soon become even more critical as women come to be dissatisfied with its existing definition (see Cobb, 1993).

In short, there is an important need to examine the relative importance of relational dimensions in accordance to social change and in avoidance of cultural assumptions about relationships. For instance, Sillars and Wilmot (1989) describe several external factors that influence the sustaining of bonds, and note that while few would admit that their relationship is sustained by factors such as financial debt, the reality of the matter is that under severe economic conditions the lack of resources compels many bonds to stay together. Given the appropriate demographics and historical/ economic contexts, related efforts may be extremely useful in interpreting data and broadening accounts of how bonds are assessed and maintained.

Lest we throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, future research on maintaining relational dimensions should begin to deconstruct their accounts of relationship processes and methods used to gather and interpret data. Simple deconstruction can be performed by using opposition terms to describe the dimensions that characterize satisfied relationships. For example, scholars might begin to examine how satisfied partners attempt to increase privacy, unilateral control, disliking, jealousy, antagonism, and apathy. If initial accounts of relationship processes are correct, then a

pattern of association between strategies and opposition dimensions much akin to original findings should emerge, accompanied with some sense of comfort that respondents were not reacting to cultural "God-like terms" for satisfied relationships.

More complex deconstruction involves in-depth analysis of the assumptions underlying theoretical frameworks of relationships and relationship processes and how assumptions might be historically and culturally grounded. Complex deconstruction may also require the return to interaction, but this time through interpretive and ethnographic approaches in an attempt to understand the significance of strategies within specific cultural and community settings. For instance, social rituals such as renewing marital vows or going to church together might impact couples differently depending on cultural significance of the ritual itself, and how culturally embedded that couple is.

Managing Relationship Tensions

An alternative to the relational dimension approach is the holistic perspective of tension management. Relationships here are said to be in constant flux, rather then stabilizing in or moving to static points. Relationships are also characterized by inherent tensions of opposition that must be managed if bonding is to be sustained. Managing these tensions pushes the relationship along a cycle of recurring but phenomenologically different tensions. Maintenance, then, are the tactics employed to manage the recurring presence of tension, as well as the interaction that accompanies movement between tension points.

This process of tension management has been articulated best by dialectical theorists (Baxter, 1994; Rawlins, 1989). Baxter (1994) argues that relationships must manage tensions between the competing desires of those involved (internal), as well as the competing forces of a social world (external). Both forms of tension occur at three primary sites: Integration/Division, Change/Stability, and Expression/Information Control. Relationship pairs momentarily manage the presence of oppositional tension by using strategies that select, separate, neutralize, or reframe competing forces.

Dialectical approaches, and more recently Baxter's turn to dialogism, then, provide a holistic view of relationship maintenance by explicating tactics for managing inherent tension, as well as discussing the role the everyday behaviors that sustain a bond's interaction. The conceptual use of opposing forces assists in observing relationship movement apart from a cultural ideology that binds other frameworks. Finally, maintenance is cast in terms of behavioral interaction capable of observation.

Unfortunately, research on dialectical tensions has not met the rigorous methodological considerations warranted by its theory. First, tension points and the management of tension is a dyadic experience, but research continues to rely on individual's self reports. Second, while tension and movement is presumably embedded in talk (Baxter, 1994), research has failed to investigate actual conversation, although Rawlins (1983) has described dialectical experiences within conversation. Finally, there appears to be some discrepancy on the locus of tensions (internal to an individual or

dyadically emergent) and the exact nature of tension management (self-appeasement or discursively resolved).

While this last point may be more an issue of how theory is used, the former should be addressed. Comparing conversation management with reported experiences of tension may reveal a missing link between interaction and the nature of relationships. VanLear (1991) attempted to meet these challenges by examining the presence of openness, the internal form of the Expression dialectic, in dyads' conversation over time. How conversationalists actually manage openness would be the next question of interest, although it requires a significant amount of conversation data over a period of time. Finally, by asking actors to identify the conditions where they manage by selection and separation, researchers can examine conversation within specific tension-managing contexts. A cross-sectioning of such conditions might then provide a more encompassing view of how talk emerges between and within tension points.

## Closing Remarks on the Study of Relationship Maintenance

In this piece I attempted to organize, place conditions, and provide direction for studying maintenance by asserting that the sustaining of interpersonal bonds should be viewed as behavioral processes. Two recurring themes underlie my thought. First, maintenance is uniquely a communication phenomena that should be theorized and observed by communication scholars. Second, scholars must break from restrictive traditional orientations of studying personal relationships. This would include viewing maintenance as more than that which occurs between the initiation and termination

of bonds, and recognizing the limits of a single ideological base for conceiving and observing relationship change.

In closing, some additional considerations should be made when studying relationship maintenance. First, scholars should begin to rethink gender as more than a biological classification. Although several studies of interaction have found no significant differences between the sexes, all have failed to address that people behave in gendered manners. In this light, the study of interaction is not so concerned with how gender affects communication in relationships, but how communication in relationships affects gender. Sustaining social bonds, and cross-sex relationships in particular entails the enactment of anticipated gendered behavior. Therefore, insight into relationship maintenance can be obtained by studying how gendered behavior is controlled in interaction.

Second, power is implicit in many theories, but not considered when devising studies or interpreting results. Like gender, power is a social construct that relating respondents bring forth, negotiate, and reflect upon during interaction and when being studied. Although studies have focussed on the negotiation of power during interaction (defined as relational control, see Rogers & Millar, 1988), few take it into account following the collection of data. How respondents conceive of power in their generalized or specific relationships, then, should be understood prior to interpreting data explicating power-based constructs, such as control, equality, or equity in bonds.

Finally, the very real phenomena that influence human relationships should be considered when modelling relationship

maintenance and change. As Sillars and Wilmot (1989) and Attridge (1994) point out, not everything is in the control of human actors. But even if humans are granted a high degree of control for managing their relationship, they must exert effort on a bond that does not exist in a social vacuum. For instance, how are efforts to maintain relational stability affected by economic instability? How do strategies that maintain openness and expressiveness function in a negatively sanctioned social relationship? To be sure, the interplay between internal and external factors must be taken into consideration by exchange and dialectic scholars if a thorough understanding of how these factors influence change is to be had.

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