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THEORIES AND MODELS OF ROMANTIC PARTNERING

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As we discussed the history of romantic partnering in Chapter 2, we emphasized the myriad ways that partnering processes are embedded within historical, economic, and political contexts. And yet romantic partnering is at its very core a process of individual attraction and choice, and dyadic interaction. In order to explain how partners come together, a host of theoretical models have been developed over time. The present chapter traces the development of the major theories and models proposed to explain the development of romantic relationships, from compatibility models to stage theories to the current emphasis on interpersonal process.

Early Models

Compatibility Models

Interest in the heterosexual partnering process as a subject for systematic study and theoretical development began in the 1940s. As might be expected, most early research was not guided by formal theory. The earliest theoretical developments centered on models of heterosexual compatibility (Cate & Lloyd, 1988). In fact, notions of compatibility are implicit in much current thinking about the partnering process. Early models focused on the role of complementarity or similarity in values, attitudes, roles, and social background in producing compatibility and stable heterosexual partnerships.

Complementarity Needs Model

One of the earliest formal compatibility models of heterosexual mate selection is a more complex version of the layperson's postulate that "opposites attract." Winch's (1955a) complementary needs theory assumed that individuals have certain psychological needs and that people seek marital partners who can fulfill or "complement" those needs. Supposedly, compatibility is induced by Partner B either enacting behaviors that satisfy a need in Partner A,

or Partner B avoiding certain behaviors that would conflict with Partner A. In other words, complementarity can exist when one partner has a high need in one personality area, with the other partner having a low need in that same area (e.g., one partner having a high need for submissiveness and the other having a low need for submissiveness). On the other hand, complementarity can exist when different needs are gratified within the couple (e.g., one partner having a need to be dominant and the other having a need to be submissive). Winch (Winch, 1955b; Winch, Ktsanes, & Ktsanes, 1954) reported support for this theory through the results of two studies that used psychoanalytic assessments of needs interviews, as well as the answers of interviewees to projective testing. Unfortunately, although the idea of "complementary needs" has great appeal in folk wisdom, there was a lack of empirical support for the theory. The findings of Winch's studies have received serious criticism on the basis of faulty conceptualization and interpretation, as well as a lack of replication (see Murstein, 1976; Seyfried, 1977; and Tharp, 1963, for comprehensive critiques of the theory).

Similarity Models

In contrast to the complementarity model, the similarity model holds that heterosexual mate selection operates according to the lay hypothesis that "birds of a feather flock together." In other words, the theory holds that individuals select marital partners on the basis of whether they are similar to each other on an array of attributes. Empirical evidence appears to support this model, in that both premarital and marital partners have been found to be similar in attitudes and values (Burgess & Wallin, 1953; Schellenberg, 1960), personality (Antill, 1983), physical attractiveness (Price & Vandenberg, 1979), and several demographic characteristics (age, religion, race, ethnicity, etc.; Hendrick, 1981; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). As with complementarity models, similarity models have received criticism. The fact that individuals tend to interact with people living close to them and are likely to be socially similar limits opportunity to select others who are not similar to themselves, thus shedding doubt on whether similarity plays a direct role in the actual decision-making process (Kerckhoff, 1974). In other words, because we live near and are likely to interact with those who are already very similar (in terms of race, education, age, etc.), our chances of meeting a similar other are heightened by mere proximity, rather than systematic choice. In addition, some empirical evidence suggests that the observed similarity in values and world-views of couples evolves over time through their interaction together, rather than being used as an initial selection factor (Stephen, 1985). Other empirical evidence shows that similarity does not distinguish between couples who break up and those who stay together (Hill et al., 1976).

Stage Models

These models of complementarity and similarity led researchers to search for explanations for these contradictory findings. One potential explanation for the contradiction was that complementarity and similarity operated at different stages of heterosexual relationship development (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962; Murstein, 1970). For example, Murstein's (1970) S-V-R model posited that people first select partners on the basis of physical attraction. At the next stage, people were supposedly seeking partners with whom they had complementary values. Finally, people ostensibly sought others with whom they perceived a compatible role fit.

McWhirter and Mattison (1984) developed a stage model for the development of gay male relationships, based on a sample of 156 male couples. Their theory posited that developing male couples go through a stage of blending (characterized by high sexual passion, limerence, and equalizing of the partnership), followed by stages of nesting (including a compatibility testing phase), maintaining, building, releasing, and renewing.

Despite their intuitive appeal, however, stage models were severely criticized on grounds of faulty conceptualization and their lack of empirical support (Rubin & Levinger, 1974), and fell out of favor within the research literature. Indeed, the idea that all couples go through the same set of stages as they form their romantic relationships simply failed to capture both differences across couples and the complexity of relationship formation.

Contemporary Models and Theories

Dissatisfaction with stage models resulted in relationship researchers exploring other perspectives that might better account for the path to commitment and a long-term romantic partnership. These early conceptualizations were focused on explaining the processes that influenced the movement to heterosexual marriage. Surra, Gray, Boettcher, Cottle, and West (2006) point out that this focus on studying movement to heterosexual marriage has declined because theorists in both psychology and sociology (Berscheid, 1995; Blumstein & Kollock, 1988; Hinde, 1987, 1996) have suggested that researchers should shift their emphasis from studying particular types of relationships (e.g., marriage) to consideration of factors that are salient across several types of relationships (i.e., universal processes). Current research shows that there has been a dramatic shift from studies focused on movement to marriage to those that examine processes (e.g., love, commitment) that are applicable to a wide range of relationship types (Surra et al., 2006). Some approaches have emphasized specific relationship processes (e.g., social exchange, attachment, uncertainty reduction, dialectics) to explain romantic relationship development and maintenance. Others speak to larger processes, such as the intersection of gender, and evolutionary forces. Perhaps the most

comprehensive model is the social ecological model (i.e., interpersonal process model) that has been proposed to account for myriad aspects of the development of romantic partnerships.

It should be noted that the study of universal processes has largely been applied to heterosexual couples. Still, there is room for this perspective to be expanded to the study of gay and lesbian couples. Indeed, using extensive longitudinal studies, Kurdek (2004) has documented the many ways in which gay and lesbian cohabiting couples are similar to heterosexual married couples in love, relationship quality, and relationship stability.

Social Exchange Theories

Social exchange theories have been widely applied to the study of relationship development, primarily in heterosexual couples (Homans, 1961). The most basic assumption of these theories is that people seek partners who will provide more rewards than costs (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Rewards are those concrete (e.g., social support) and intangible (e.g., happiness at being in a relationship) things exchanged between partners that are perceived to be pleasurable. Costs are those concrete (e.g., arguments, monetary sacrifices) and intangible things (e.g., loss of freedom, worry about partner's fidelity) exchanged between partners that are perceived as punishing or undesirable. Kelley and Thibaut (1978) elaborated this basic view of social exchange into a theory of *interdependence*. Interdependence theory provides a straightforward and parsimonious explanation of its central construct, dependency. Dependency is defined by the degree to which people depend on their relationships for their valued *outcomes* (rewards minus costs). Dependency is engendered as a result of *satisfaction* and *comparison level for alternatives*. Satisfaction (i.e., positive affect) in romantic relationships is fostered when relationship outcomes (rewards minus costs) in the relationship are greater than the level of outcomes that people are accustomed to receiving from their past and present relationships (the comparison level: CL). This is expressed as:

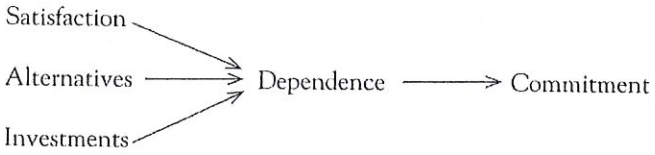
$$\text{Satisfaction} = \text{Outcomes} - \text{CL}$$

The other determinant of dependence in a relationship is the comparison level for alternatives (CL-Alt), which is the attractiveness of outcomes available from other relationships or situations. *Dependence* in a relationship is higher to the extent that outcomes exceed the comparison level for alternatives. Thus, dependence is greater when satisfaction is high and the comparison level for alternatives is low.

Rusbult (e.g., Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Coolsen, Kirchner, & Clarke, 2006) extended interdependence theory with the development of the *investment model*. This model posits that satisfaction and the quality of alternatives alone cannot sufficiently explain dependence. Rusbult reasoned that, because some

relationships persist despite low relational satisfaction or an abundance of quality alternatives, other factors also must contribute to dependence. This reasoning resulted in Rusbult and colleagues (2006) proposing that investment into the relationship also should increase *dependence* on a relationship. Investments can be direct (e.g., partner support, effort, time) or indirect (e.g., children, friends). Investments increase dependence because they raise the costs of ending the relationship (Rusbult et al., 2006).

The significance of increasing levels of dependence is that it fosters *commitment* to the relationship. Commitment is identified as intent to persist, as well as feelings of attachment to the relationship (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult et al., 2006). Thus, the investment model can be illustrated by the following:



The investment model has been widely studied since its first introduction in the early 1980s. Le and Agnew (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 52 studies on the investment model, which found that relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investments were strongly associated with commitment to relationships (across samples of dating, cohabitating, married, heterosexual, and same-sex couples). Another study (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996) found that components of the investment model predicted relationship stability over a 15-year period. This is particularly strong evidence, because it allows one to make causal inferences about the association of the investment model components (satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investments) and later relationship stability and commitment.

An additional extension of social exchange is *equity* theory, which has been studied in both same- and different-sex couples (Cate, Lloyd, & Henton, 1985; Scheurs & Buunk, 1996). Equity theory suggests that individuals in relationships are also concerned with issues of justice or fairness. In equity theory, satisfaction is posited to be highest when the ratio of outcomes to contributions (e.g., time, effort, money, emotional support) for each partner in a relationship is equal. For example, if Partner A is receiving eight outcomes and making two contributions to the relationship and Partner B is receiving four outcomes and making one contribution, the relationship is said to be equitable. This can be expressed as follows:

$$\frac{\text{Partner A}}{\frac{8 \text{ outcomes}}{2 \text{ contributions}}} = \frac{\text{Partner B}}{\frac{4 \text{ outcomes}}{1 \text{ contribution}}}$$

Each partner is receiving a ratio of four outcomes for each contribution that they make to the relationship (e.g., A: 8 / 2 = 4; B: 4 / 1 = 4).

An example of an inequitable relationship can be expressed as:

Partner A		Partner B
8 outcomes	=	4 outcomes
1 contribution		1 contribution

In the above case, Partner A is receiving eight outcomes for every one contribution, whereas Partner B is receiving only four outcomes for every one contribution. In this inequitable relationship, Partner A is said to be overbenefited because A is getting twice as many outcomes as B for the same number of contributions, whereas B is said to be underbenefited, because B receives only half the number of outcomes for every one unit of contribution. According to equity theory, people who perceive their relationships to be equitable will have the highest satisfaction, followed by those who are overbenefited, with those who are underbenefited having the least satisfaction. The theory proposes that people who are in inequitable relationships will engage in strategies designed to reduce the inequity (Sprecher & Schwartz, 1996). For example, persons who feel underbenefited can reduce their contributions to the relationship in order to restore equity. Or, equity could be restored by decreasing the partner's outcomes through being less cooperative or pleasant in interactions.

Social exchange theories are not without drawbacks (Bradbury & Karney, 2010). Several theorists argue that the assumption that rationality governs relationships is untenable. Such rationality implies that humans are highly cognitively aware and able to make rapid and accurate assessments of costs and rewards. Other criticisms focus on the lack of specificity about relational processes. For example, the process by which partners move from a state of satisfaction to one of dissatisfaction is not clearly delineated (Bradbury & Karney, 2010). Despite these shortcomings, social exchange theories continue to be used by many researchers to explain relationship development.

Adult Attachment Theory

Since the late 1980s, proponents of adult attachment theory have generated an overwhelming amount of research. Adult attachment theory is an extension of Bowlby's (1969) theorizing about attachment in infants. Bowlby proposed that infants possess an innate predisposition to reduce distress through seeking proximity to their caretakers when they feel threatened. When proximity seeking is met by responsive and sensitive caretakers, feelings of *security* are increased. When proximity seeking is met by insensitive and unresponsive caretakers, feelings of *insecurity* are increased. As people interact with

caregivers over time, they begin to develop internal *working models* of how relationships with caretakers operate. Hazan and Shaver (1987) have applied similar reasoning to adult romantic relationships.

Adult attachment theory suggests that the underlying dimensions of security/insecurity are *anxiety* and *avoidance* (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). These two dimensions can be used to classify individuals into four attachment styles or types (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). However, Shaver and Mikulincer (2006) have proposed a more parsimonious typing. This classification proposes three attachment types: (1) secure (low on both anxiety and avoidance), (2) anxious (high on anxiety), and (3) avoidant (high on avoidance). Secure individuals feel they deserve to be loved, are comfortable with closeness, and believe that relationships are rewarding. Anxious individuals worry about the availability of a partner to fulfill their needs and question the extent to which they deserve love. Avoidant individuals are prone to distrust their partner and try to remain independent and distant from their partners. We use these categories in the remainder of this discussion.

Shaver and Mikulincer (2006) suggest that having a secure versus anxious or avoidant orientation influences the strategies people use during different temporal points in relationship development. The following discussion addresses the first two phases.

Initial Phase

During the initial phase, people's interpersonal predispositions have relatively strong influence on individuals' strategies (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006). Partners have little information about each other and must rely on their developmental tendencies in order to develop interpersonal strategies. Secure individuals will establish a positive, warm climate during interactions, present a balanced view of themselves, and engage in appropriate and responsive self-disclosure. In contrast, avoidant individuals will promote an emotionally detached climate, present an inflated view of self, and engage in low levels of self-disclosure. Anxious individuals set a negative tone, present themselves in a self-defeating manner, and engage in indiscriminate and premature disclosures.

Consolidation Phase

During the consolidation phase, individuals begin to concern themselves with establishing a more permanent bond based on mutual goals, support, nurturance, intimacy, and need satisfaction (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006). Secure individuals will develop positive, optimistic beliefs about the relationship, make positive appraisals of the partner, and develop a strong

commitment. In addition, secure people will be comfortable both giving and receiving social support from the partner. Avoidant individuals will develop dysfunctional, distrustful beliefs and negative views of the partner and relationship, and a weak, negative commitment. In addition, avoidant people will be reluctant to either provide or receive support from the partner. Anxious individuals will develop dysfunctional, pessimistic beliefs and negative, destructive appraisals of the partner and relationship, and doubts about the partner's commitment. Anxious individuals also may be reluctant to seek support or be overbearing in seeking support. They may provide support in a compulsive, intrusive way.

The empirical work on attachment is extensive and largely supportive of the basic tenets of the theory (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). On the other hand, certain flaws in the theory have been noted. First, issues with the measurement of attachment have been noted. Studies have shown that attachment measures are unstable over time (e.g., Baldwin & Fehr, 1995). Other studies suggest that most people are found to be secure in their orientations, which raises the question of why so many relationships terminate (Bradbury & Karney, 2010). Adult attachment theory also views relationship outcomes as largely a product of individual differences. Consequently, little attention is paid to interpersonal dynamics or contextual influences on developing relationships.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) focuses on the process by which individuals attempt to understand behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The underlying premise of the theory is that people are motivated to reduce uncertainty by being able to predict future outcomes and explain past outcomes (Berger & Bradac, 1982). Uncertainty in relationships occurs at the beginning of all relationships when individuals are not able to explain or predict the behaviors of their partner. Uncertainty is especially problematic when individuals are unclear about their partners' perceptions of their relationship (Parks & Adelman, 1983). According to URT, uncertainty is high early in relationships when individuals know very little about each other, but decreases over time as relationships develop (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Individuals who experience uncertainty are motivated to reduce these feelings to the degree to which they perceive the possibility of future interaction. That is, if individual P believes that he/she will continue to interact with and potentially begin a relationship with individual O, individual P is likely to attempt to gain as much information about O as possible to minimize uncertainty in future interactions. This desire is heightened when individual P perceives that individual O has the potential to control rewards and costs of future interaction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Given the high levels of

uncertainty at the beginning of relationships, URT proposes that individuals use communication as a means of acquiring information in potential relationships. In the original paper describing URT, Berger and Calabrese (1975) postulate that communication decreases uncertainty in relationships by producing increases in expressiveness, intimacy, liking, and allowing individuals to observe potential similarities in personal traits, values, interests, and social networks. Moreover, as uncertainty decreases, individuals are less likely to engage in information-seeking behaviors and show a decreased need for reciprocity in levels of communicative disclosure.

Past research on URT has identified a number of predictors of uncertainty. Specifically, higher levels of uncertainty are related to higher global uncertainty (Douglas, 1991), low social network involvement (Parks & Adelman, 1983), and higher levels of anxiety (Gudykunst, 1985). Current relational research using URT has proposed an extension of the theory known as the relationship turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001) . According to the model, there are three potential sources of uncertainty within the relational context: self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Self uncertainty occurs when individuals have questions about their own commitment to a relationship, partner uncertainty involves questions about a partner's commitment to a relationship, and relationship uncertainty involves a mutual questioning of the dyad as a unit (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002).

According to the relationship turbulence model, uncertainty in relationships is problematic because it interferes with an individual's ability to process information accurately (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Specifically, uncertainty is problematic during periods of transition because it heightens individuals' reactions to the relational events that they are experiencing (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). Individuals then begin to question their relationships, which casts doubts on the future of the relationship. Such doubts result in negative attributions about surprising events and often result in perceptions that exaggerate the potential threat of these events (Knobloch, 2007).

Past research on the relationship turbulence model has shown that individuals who are experiencing periods of uncertainty perceive less support in their social networks (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006), perceive relational conversations more negatively (Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009), and report high levels of jealousy (Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). In addition, other research has shown that, early in relationships, couples are more likely to attend to their partners' relationship maintenance in order to reduce feelings of uncertainty (Ogolsky, 2009).

Much work has supported the utility of URT in predicting early relationship development, especially during relationship initiation, which is a time in which uncertainty is high. One major critique of the theory, however, is that

it does not explain relationship development in more established relationships void of uncertainty. Moreover, the theory does not postulate how relationship uncertainty governs behavior during relationship transitions such as the transition to marriage or parenthood. An additional critique of URT is its view that uncertainty in relationships is inherently problematic. Although the costly nature of uncertainty has been well documented (Parks & Adelman, 1983), some theorize that uncertainty may help facilitate relationship development by heightening feelings of excitement and attraction (Knobloch & Miller, 2008). As such, rather than being motivated to reduce uncertainty (the central tenet of URT), individuals may be motivated to increase or preserve uncertainty in order to extend positive feelings.

Dialectical Theory

The relational dialectics model emphasizes change rather than stability. Romantic partners may develop love and commitment at different rates, and their relationships experience ups and downs, and contradictions that create tension (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). These tensions, termed *dialectics*, put relationships in a constant state of change as each arises. According to the theory, there are three core dialectics that capture the push and pull of relationships: integration–separation, stability–change, and expression–privacy (Baxter, 1993). For example, a relationship might begin as intensely integrated, with partners doing everything together; over time, though, this relationship might move toward separation as partners reintegrate with family and friends, or seek personal space. Therefore, the dialectics approach illustrates the continual push and pull between the two poles.

The core dialectics can be divided into both internal and external dimensions. Internal dialectics represent tensions experienced between the partners; these tensions are termed autonomy–connection, openness–closedness, and predictability–novelty. External dialectics represent the tensions that exist between partners and the external environment, whether extended family, friends, or society; these tensions are termed inclusion–seclusion, conventionality–uniqueness, and revelation–concealment (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2007).

Research examining relationship dialectics has shown that tensions exist in romantic relationships, and that individuals manage these tensions through the use of strategies such as separation (favoring one side or the other), neutralization (avoiding both poles and balancing in the middle), and reframing (adjusting one's perception of the dialectic as complementary rather than tension-filled). Moreover, the use of effective strategies for coping with dialectical tensions is associated with relationship satisfaction (Baxter, 1990).

Although the relational dialectics approach has received empirical support, and has been used to delineate key relational processes from privacy regulation

(Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981) to violence and control (Olson, Fine, & Lloyd, 2005), there is still some question about whether it is a true theory. Proponents of this approach argue that it is a theory because it presents a set of key concepts and propositions, but not a deductive theory meant for prediction. Instead, the dialectic approach is a "sensitizing theory" (p. 17) due to its heuristic value in the way that it illustrates the experience of relating (Baxter, 2004).

Gender and Feminist Theories

Gender and feminist theories have been utilized both to understand how men and women interact in relationships, and to situate romantic relationships within their larger social-structural contexts. Lloyd (2009) identifies five key tools of analysis within feminist perspectives on relationships: gender and sexuality as social constructions, intersectionality, power dynamics, historic and sociocultural contextualizing, and the diversity of romantic relationships.

Gender and feminist perspectives theorize *gender and sexuality as social constructions* that embody culturally specific ideas about femininity, masculinity, heterosexuality, and homosexuality; in this view, gender and sexuality shape our ideas and enactment of what it means to be male and female, gay and straight (Baber & Allen, 1992; Oswald et al., 2005; Wood, 1995). Gender is a social status that organizes many aspects of our close relationships, as it is enacted continuously in our family relationships (often described as "doing gender"; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Such a conceptualization stands in contrast with a biological definition of gender, and with gender-role perspectives (gender as a role with a well-articulated set of socialized behaviors and attitudes). Feminist perspectives also deconstruct sexuality, with an emphasis on challenging binaries, for example, the construction of heterosexuality as "normal," and gay, lesbian, bi-and trans-sexualities as "deviant or pathological." In addition, these perspectives urge scholars to examine ways in which our ideologies about romantic relationships are tightly intertwined with notions of heterosexuality, masculinity, and femininity (Oswald et al., 2005).

Intersectionality emphasizes the ways in which the interplay of social locations (such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nation) influences the identities, privileges, and oppressions of individuals and their close relationships (Allen, Lloyd, & Few, 2009). For example, the intersection of race and gender shapes both the stereotypes of Asian women's romantic relationships and the choices they have in responding to stressors; the intersection of homophobia, race, and gender fundamentally shapes how Black lesbian romantic relationships are viewed by outsiders and experienced by the partners themselves (Lloyd, 2009).

Scholars who emphasize gender and feminist theories also bring to the forefront the ways in which *power* operates within our romantic relationships and social contexts, by highlighting the ways that men and women, gay, bi, straight, and trans, are granted different access to material and social resources (Allen & Walker, 2000; Wood, 1995). Structural inequities play out in a variety of ways, including a view of inequality as an expected outcome of natural gender differences, the demonization of non-heterosexual relationships, and the devaluation of women's care work and work in the paid labor force. These power processes are not always overt; for example, they may be concealed within a romanticized discourse of equality that masks male domination of heterosexual relationships (Lloyd & Emery, 2000).

Feminist perspectives push scholars to go beyond the individual and relational levels to consider the influence of larger *sociohistorical contexts* (Lloyd, 2009). As the previous chapter demonstrates, the history of U.S. heterosexual romantic relationships includes a strong emphasis on couple choice, romantic heterosexual love as the basis for legal marriage, separate spheres for men and women, differential access to economic resources, and the importance of sexual satisfaction. Gay and lesbian relationship history documents the ways that the disengagement of sexuality from procreation, and the development of urbanization and industrialization, opened up spaces for both gay identity and same-sex relationships.

Finally, gender and feminist scholars embrace the *diversity of romantic relationships*, and challenge the idea that heterosexual romantic relationships are universal across time and culture (Allen et al., 2009). Indeed, feminist scholars were among the first to study same-sex romantic relationships, in particular bringing a strengths perspective that is also rooted within an understanding of the unique context of gay and lesbian relationships in a largely heterosexual world. Ultimately, gender and feminist theories have been used to understand same-sex and different-sex relationships alike.

Evolutionary Psychological Theory

Considerable research began in the 1970s and 1980s to address how evolutionary processes were involved in heterosexual mating. A basic assumption of evolutionary psychological theory is that any universal psychological process that exists in humans today is a result of that same process being reproductively advantageous to humans in ancestral times (Buss, 1998). However, these adaptive processes likely were not identical in ancestral men and women (Trivers, 1972). Women in primeval times spent a disproportionate amount of time and energy caring for their offspring relative to men, and, as a consequence, women were reproductively disadvantaged and thus more cognizant of the need for resources. This need required that women focus their mating efforts on finding men who could provide sufficient

resources or provide protection, thus increasing their reproductive ability. On the other hand, men's reproductive success was maximized by mating with as many healthy, fertile women as possible. This required that men mate with women who showed signs of health, such as certain body types. Over the centuries, these sex-related preferences led to virtually universal tendencies in humans.

According to Buss (1998), over evolutionary time, men and women have developed both short-term and long-term mating strategies to maximize the probability that they will be reproductively successful in various contexts. The psychological underpinnings of these strategies differ considerably for men and women. For short-term mating, women seek to acquire many mates for protection, high-quality genes, and gaining increased resources. Men engaging in multiple short-term matings would increase their chances of reproductive success. For long-term strategies, men look for signs of fertility (physical appearance, body shape) and sexual fidelity. Women prefer men who possess greater resources and willingness to commit those resources to her and her offspring. Acquiring these preferences increases reproductive success.

In order to attract and keep a suitable long-term partner, evolutionary theorists suggest that people will employ certain mating tactics to maximize the stability of those relationships (Buss, 1998). For example, women seeking a long-term relationship may communicate their willingness to be sexually faithful because they know men seeking long-term relationships desire that in a partner. On the other hand, a woman may communicate that other available women are promiscuous and not suitable for a man who wants a long-term relationship. A man seeking a long-term partner, however, may talk to a desired partner about the likelihood that his resources will greatly increase over time, thus suggesting his ability to provide for a partner and children in the long run. Alternatively, he may talk about rivals being unwilling to commit to a long-term relationship. When such tactics are successful, the likelihood that the relationship will move to a deeper commitment is enhanced.

There are numerous studies that support evolutionary ideas (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Clark & Hatfield, 1989 ; Thiessen, 1994); however, the evolutionary model also has several weaknesses. This model suggests that contemporary partnering processes reflect behaviors that have evolved over long periods of time. Out of necessity, these assertions about ancestral times are speculative (Eagly, 1997) because it is very difficult for scientists to determine accurately whether or not the relationship patterns that exist currently are due to evolution or to social and economic influences. Indeed, Eagly and Wood (1991), in a reanalysis of data reported in Buss (1989), demonstrate that there is cross-cultural variation in mate selection that supports a social-structural rather than an evolutionary model. Eagly and Wood further

critique evolutionary theory for the ways in which it reifies traditional heterosexual gender constructions. Finally, evolutionary researchers have largely neglected to address how ongoing relationships develop over time (Bradbury & Karney, 2010).

Social Ecological Models

Many of the theories discussed so far have assumed that romantic relationships can be understood from knowing the personal qualities of the individuals involved or how the couple members act toward each other. Those theories largely ignore how the external environment influences the nature of romantic relationships. Several social ecological models have been proposed to take into account these external factors, including the interpersonal process (Cate & Lloyd, 1992), social ecology of committed unions (Huston, 2000), and close relationships (Kelley et al., 1983) models. These models share several common features.

The social ecological models discussed here posit that the interaction between individuals in the relationship is of primary importance in shaping the pattern of development to increasing levels of commitment (cf. Duck & Sants, 1983). Interaction can be described as "two chains of events, one for *P*, and another for O, that are causally interconnected" (Kelley et al., 1983, p. 27). These individual (*P*, O) chains consist of actions, thoughts, and affective events that are causally connected to each other, while the two chains are also causally interconnected. For example, a fictional couple, Chris and Alex, are discussing where to go on their vacation. Chris suggests that they go somewhere close to the ocean (an action). Alex reacts by remembering that they went to the ocean last year and had a miserable time (a thought). Alex's thought creates anxious feelings about the same happening again (an affective event). Alex expresses reservations about going to the ocean (an action). Chris thinks Alex is placing too much emphasis on last year's trip (a thought) and becomes irritated with Alex (an affective event). Alex responds negatively (an action), while Chris responds, and so on. This interaction "is well summarized by the term 'interdependence,' which refers to causal connections in both directions" between two partners (Kelley et al., 1983, p. 31). These interdependent chains make up the basic data of relationships from which researchers draw conclusions about the nature of romantic pairings. For example, if observation of Chris and Alex's interactions over time shows that Alex's actions are more influential than Chris's, Alex may be deemed to be the "dominant" partner in the relationship (Huston, 1983). Of course, "dominance" is only one of many properties of interdependence that can be deduced from examination of interconnected chains of events (e.g., love, commitment, conflict; Kelley et al., 1983).

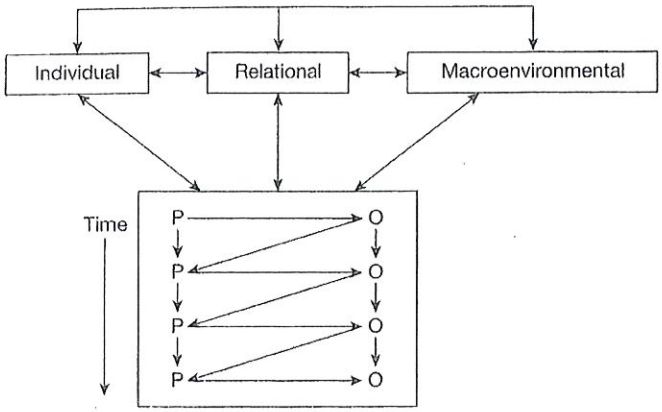


Figure 3.1 The Social Ecological Model

Social ecological models posit that the interactional context described above is causally connected to three other contexts: the *individual*, the *relational*, and the *macroenvironmental* (Kelley et al., 1983; see Figure 3.1).

The *individual* context is composed of relatively stable personal attributes, such as personality traits, attitudes, general beliefs, beliefs about the partner, and habits. These factors are assumed to influence the interaction between partners in relationships. For example, Chris's irritation with Alex's reservations about going to the ocean may arise from Chris's general propensity to negatively interpret others' opposition to his ideas. Or, Chris may be irritated because of a belief that Alex always opposes suggestions. Of course, both factors may simultaneously influence Chris's irritation. Figure 3.1 also illustrates the reciprocal association between the interactional and individual contexts. In other words, social ecological models assume that the interactional context can induce changes in the individual context, as well as the opposite causal direction. For example, if Chris encounters rejection of suggestions by Alex over time (i.e., the interactional context), it is plausible that Chris will form a belief that Alex generally opposes all suggestions (i.e., the individual context).

The *relational* context is composed of factors that can only be deduced from knowing each partner's status on a particular attribute (Kelley et al., 1983). For example, a couple where one partner is assertive and the other is passive are said to complement each other. Other relational constructs are attitude similarity, role complementarity, and division of labor. Some relational factors exist from the beginning of a relationship (e.g., each partner brings a set of attitudes to the relationship), which can be either similar or dissimilar. This pattern of similarity/dissimilarity of attitudes has implications for how couples

function in the interactional context (e.g., dissimilarity in attitudes may lead to aversive interactions). The reverse causal connection can be illustrated by the emergence of an unbalanced power structure (e.g., the relational context) after many episodes where one partner makes all major decisions (the interactional context).

The *macroenvironmental* context includes aspects of the *social* and *physical* environment that are external to the relationship between partners (Kelley et al., 1983). Social ecological models assume that these environments influence the interactional context of romantic relationships. For example, Chris's irritation with Alex's opposition to Chris's vacation preferences (i.e., the interactional context) could partially stem from a stressful interaction with co-workers (i.e., the social environment) that continues to bother Chris at home. Or, Alex may be oppositional toward Chris because the rainy day has frustrated and thwarted Alex's plans for the day (i.e., the physical environment). On the other hand, the interactional context can induce change in the physical and social environments. The irritating exchange about vacation plans (i.e., the interactional context) between Chris and Alex may result in one or both of them avoiding each other (i.e., the physical environment) until their irritation fades. The macroenvironmental context includes a multitude of factors, from the historical context of our romantic relationships, to ways in which economic resources intersect with individual and dyadic interaction, to the interplay of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Social ecological models are not based on specific theories (Huston, 2000). Such models are "intended to provide a conceptual blueprint, one that provides a sense of the types of questions that would be asked about marriage from an ecological perspective" (p. 299). Investigators can utilize different theories to examine the links between ecological contexts. One researcher might attempt to explain the link between the individual context and the interactional context by reference to personality factors, whereas another researcher may explain the link by reference to attachment orientations.

Summary

Theoretical views of romantic relationship development have evolved over time, with the development of models that reflect an increasing awareness that the partnering process is complex. The features of these models have also mirrored a change over time in partner selection that has moved from familial and societal control to personal control of choice. Early theories of relationship development focused on the compatibility between romantic partners. One compatibility theory was based on *complementarity* of personality traits (Winch, 1955a). For example, this theory posits that a dominant person would seek a partner who was submissive. Another prominent theory proposed that compatibility was maximized when romantic

partners had *similarity* of attitudes and beliefs. These compatibility models were further developed into *stage* models. Stage models postulated an ordered sequence of factors (e.g., similarity in values, complementarity, and role compatibility) that operate during the process of partnering and propel people to marriage. These models were deemed inadequate on the basis of conceptual and methodological problems, as well as a lack of replication.

More recently, theories of partnering have been developed that are based on more general theories of social behavior. *Social exchange theories* propose that the partnering process is driven by people's desire to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs. The *investment model of social exchange* proposes that the development of commitment is higher when satisfaction with the relationship is high, alternatives to the relationship are low, and investments into the relationship are high. An *equity model of social exchange* focuses on the fairness of exchange. This model posits that romantic partners will attempt to maintain a proportional equivalence of outcomes to inputs into the relationship. Those receiving the same proportion of outcomes to inputs are said to have an equitable relationship and should be highly satisfied. Those partners receiving proportionately less than they deserve are said to be underbenefited and the least satisfied. Those receiving proportionately more than they deserve are said to be overbenefited and have satisfaction levels between equitable and underbenefited partners.

Adult attachment theory proposes that people have interpersonal predispositions that develop during childhood due to interactions with caregivers. The predispositions (i.e., anxiety and avoidance) are used to create three types of attachment: secure, anxious, and avoidant. Secure individuals approach relationships in a positive, comfortable way that promotes successful relations. Anxious individuals present themselves to potential partners in a negative and self-defeating manner. Avoidant individuals approach relationships in an emotionally detached manner and develop pessimistic and negative beliefs about the relationship.

Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) was developed by interpersonal communication theorists. The theory posits that relationship development is motivated by the need to predict the partner's behavior. Uncertainty is reduced through communication processes. An extension of URT, the relational turbulence model, suggests that uncertainty that occurs during relational transitions sensitizes partners to events in the relationship. These events may induce doubts in the relationship and result in negative attributions that lead to relational concerns.

Dialectic perspectives emphasize the inherent tensions that our romantic relationships embody. These tensions, termed dialectics, put relationships in a constant state of change as each arises. Three core dialectics capture the push and pull of relationships: integration–separation, stability–change, and expression–privacy. The core dialectics can be divided into both internal and

external dimensions: internal dialectics represent tensions experienced between the partners; and external dialectics represent the tensions that exist between partners and the external environment, whether extended family, friends, or society. Individuals manage these tensions through the use of strategies such as separation, neutralization, and reframing.

Gender and feminist perspectives emphasize perhaps the broadest factors as they affect romantic relationships. These perspectives examine the social construction of both gender and sexuality, and challenge a strictly biological view of the differences between men and women, and heterosexuals and homosexuals. They also emphasize an examination of the intersections of gender and sexuality with race, culture, and class; the analysis of social-structural and interpersonal power dynamics; the importance of examining our romantic relationships across history and social context; and the diversity of romantic relationships, including same-sex and different-sex pairings.

In contrast, *evolutionary theory* posits that behavior in relationships is a result of strategies implemented in ancestral times that increased people's success in reproduction. Women were reproductively successful when they mated with men who had material and physical resources needed to sustain the life of offspring. Men were reproductively successful when they mated with as many women as possible. Consequently, over evolutionary time, men more than women evolved preferences for those with physical attributes indicative of ability to reproduce, whereas women more than men evolved a preference for partners with resources.

Finally, *social ecological models* of partnering have been developed. These models posit that partners' behavioral interactions help drive the development of romantic relationships. At the same time, these models acknowledge that the causes of partner choice can exist at several levels (i.e., individual, relational, social environment, and physical environment).

Key Concepts

Anxious attachment (pp. 42–43, 52)
Avoidant attachment (pp. 42–43, 52)
Commitment (pp. 38, 40, 43–44, 52)
Compatibility models (pp. 36, 52)
Complementary needs (pp. 36–37)
Dialectical tensions (p. 45)
Dialectics (pp. 45, 52–53)
Equity (pp. 40–41, 52)
Evolutionary psychology (pp. 47–49, 53)
Feminist perspectives (pp. 46–47, 53)
Gender perspectives (pp. 46–47, 53)
Intersectionality (pp. 46, 54)

Additional Readings

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