

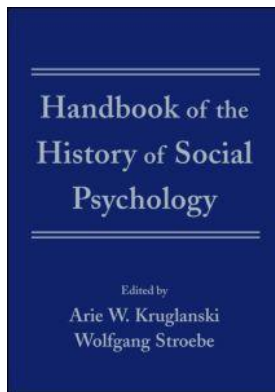
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## **A History of Relationship Research in Social Psychology**

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# 17 A history of relationship research in social psychology

*Harry T. Reis*

No attempt to understand behavior, in the individual case or in the collective, will be wholly successful until we understand the close relationships that form the foundation and theme of the human condition.

(Ellen Berscheid and Letitia Anne Peplau, 1983, p. 19)

A casual observer might be excused for assuming that close relationships have always been a central research area in social psychology. After all, the mission of social psychology is “to understand and explain how the thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings” (Allport, 1954, p. 5) and for most people, the preponderant others in everyday life tend to be partners in ongoing relationships. By far the greater part of social time is spent with family and close friends (Robinson & Godbey, 1997) and many of people’s most salient goals involve beginning, maintaining, enhancing, and repairing close relationships (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cantor & Malley, 1991). Beginning with birth, and continuing throughout the lifespan, our thoughts, emotions, and behavior are profoundly influenced by the behavior of relationship partners, such as parents, romantic partners, siblings, relatives, friends, and coworkers (see Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000, for reviews)—so much so that relationships are now considered a significant factor in the etiology and treatment of physical and psychological illness, and the maintenance of good health (see Reis et al., 2000, for a review). Indeed, most human societies are organized around enduring relationships—that is, dyads, groups, and networks in which significant life activities are carried out by persons known to each other who expect to continue interacting in the foreseeable future (Hinde, 1997). For these and other reasons, discussed later, evolutionary processes shaped the human mind to be able to solve the adaptive problems of living and reproducing within small networks of socially connected persons (Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992).

Although relationships may be focal in everyday life, historically they have not been so within social psychology. Early research and writing in the field paid little heed to the nature or impact of relationships, and only in the later decades of the 20th century did social psychologists turn their attention in this direction. This development has expanded our understanding of close relationships, but perhaps more importantly, it has helped

to better situate social-psychological processes within their indispensable relationship context. That is, and notwithstanding the fact that the integration of relationship principles into social psychology is at best described as nascent, it has become increasingly clear that the operation of many basic social-psychological processes depends on their relationship context (Reis, 2010a). Better understanding of relationships, therefore, helps social psychologists identify boundary conditions for the field’s important phenomena and theories. An additional benefit of the emerging interest in close relationships involves building bridges between social psychology and other disciplines that have longer and deeper roots in studying relationships, such as clinical and developmental psychology, sociology, family studies, and communications (Van Lange, 2006).

This chapter will review the history of close relationships research within social psychology, exploring major developments and trends, as well as some of the reasons for them. I will focus on research within social psychology, drawing links to other disciplines only when that research significantly influenced the work of social psychologists. (See Perlman and Duck, 2006, for a more interdisciplinary review of the history of relationship science research.) Although social psychologists who study relationships investigate diverse phenomena, there is a common conceptual and methodological core that helps define this subdiscipline of psychology. Nevertheless, substantial theoretical advances remain to be made by integrating relationship principles more centrally into the various subareas of psychology, including social psychology, just as advances are currently being made in other disciplines, such as communications, economics, and family medicine, by incorporating close relationship findings. Of course, boundaries between disciplines are necessarily permeable, so research from other disciplines will be described when its link to social psychology has been influential.

It is somewhat difficult to prescribe the topical domain of this chapter. The term “relationship” embodies various meanings among theorists and lay persons alike, and as a result, nearly all encounters between two or more persons, possibly excepting those that are brief and fleeting, can be relevant. Even the term “close relationship” is fraught with ambiguity, given the numerous, often divergent, ways in which the adjective *close* is used (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983). Kelley et al. (1983) explain that the essence of a relationship lies in the interaction

that takes place between partners, more specifically the way in which each influences the other. Nevertheless, relationships involve more than interactions, because relationship partners have history with each other and an imagined future (Duck & Sants, 1983; Hinde, 1981). In other words, each episode of interaction is affected by past interactions and has the potential to affect future interactions. Given these ambiguities, this chapter adopts the convention of emphasizing theories and research about the contemplation, initiation, continuation, or termination of an ongoing, personal connection between two persons. Thus, the chapter considers abstract processes that span romantic relationships, friendships and acquaintanceships of varying types and degrees of intensity, relationships with family members, and associations that occur in role-related contexts (e.g., at work).

The chapter begins with the history of relationships research in social psychology's early history, prior to the Second World War. I then review developments within the expansionary era of modern social psychology, roughly between 1950 and 1980. Next, I describe the rapid growth of relationship research in the 1980s, highlighting several reasons for this as well as the major theoretical trends that defined this expansion. The chapter concludes with a review of the status of relationship research within social psychology during the first decade of the 21st century, along with discussion of the reciprocal benefits to be had from better integrating relationship research within social psychology: how social psychological principles can advance our understanding of relationships and how deeper consideration of relationships can advance social psychology.

### Early roots of relationship research in social psychology

Although 1908 is traditionally identified as the launch of social psychology, because the first two textbooks bearing that name appeared in that year, social psychological theorizing has much deeper roots than this (Jahoda, 2007; Reis, 2010b). Humans have endeavored to express and codify systematic principles for understanding, predicting and regulating social behavior throughout recorded history; that is, at least since capacities such as self-awareness, theory of mind, and symbolic language emerged. Arguably, social interactions and close relationships were at the center of these principles. Evolutionary psychologists posit that social relations provided the principal circumstances for human adaptation, and that therefore many of the human mind's most important evolved processes, were designed to regulate relational activity (Buss & Kenrick, 1998). For example, Cosmides and Tooby (1992) explain that:

the mind consists of a set of adaptations, designed to solve the longstanding adaptive problems humans encountered as hunter-gatherers. Such a view is not controversial to most behavioral scientists when applied to topics such as vision or balance. Yet adaptationist approaches to human psychology are considered radical – or even transparently false – when

applied to most other areas of human thought and action, especially social behavior. Our ancestors . . . needed to construct . . . a social map of the persons, relationships, motives, interactions, emotions, and intentions that made up their social world.

(p. 163)

Our civilization's oldest known prescriptive documents feature rules that regulate social relations. For example, the ancient Babylonian Codex Hammurabi (c. 1760 BCE) contains 282 laws defining properties of interdependence for living in social groups, rules about marital and parental rights and responsibilities, and principles of distributive and procedural justice linked to social status and roles. The precept of "an eye for an eye" (known today as the norm of reciprocity, a cardinal norm in relationships) first appears here. The four canonical Vedas of Hinduism, dating back to c. 1500 BCE, include numerous teachings about social relations, marriage, and sexuality. Many relationship-relevant social psychological principles can be found in the Judaeo-Christian Bible, discussing prosocial and antisocial behavior, self-centered and other-centered motives, the self in relation to others, marriage and family responsibilities, forgiveness, guilt, and jealousy. No fewer than six of the Ten Commandments provide admonitions about behavior toward partners in ongoing relationships. (Interestingly, the other four concern the individual's relationship with God, which many people would consider an important close relationship.) A particularly interesting example appears in the Rule of Benedict, put forward in the 6th century AD by Benedict of Nursia, the founder of western Christian monasticism. He compiled 73 rules describing how a monastery ought to be run and how a spiritual life ought to be lived. These rules covered several social-psychological issues, such as individual responsibility and interdependence in the monks' activities.

Taylor (1998), among others, has argued that Aristotle was the first true social psychologist. This is because Aristotle believed that humans are inherently social, suggesting the need for principles describing how the social environment affects the individual. Thus, in the *Nicomachian Ethics* Aristotle proposed that friendship based on reciprocity of affection was an essential component of the good life. Other Aristotelian ideas that are germane to modern relationships research include a threefold taxonomy of friendship (friendships can be based on utility, enjoyment, or concern for each other's wellbeing) and the notion that friendship incorporates shared cognition (Aron & Davies, 2009). Whatever Aristotle's primacy may be, his teachers Plato and Socrates also established important wellsprings for later social-psychological theorizing and research. For example, Socrates believed that the best route to virtue, the centerpiece of an ideal life, was to focus on friendships and a sense of community, rather than material wealth. As for Plato, his *Symposium* is the seminal description of love, including the first, and still oft-cited, taxonomy of the varieties of love (hence the term *platonic love*, which in its original sense referred to a deep, spiritual affection for beauty and divinity). In short,

modern-day social-psychological research on relationships has clear intellectual roots in human civilization's earliest texts and philosophies.

The social psychology that appeared in the first two textbooks to bear that name, published independently by Edward Alsworth Ross and William McDougall in 1908, was, as Jahoda (2007) describes, less the beginning of a new era than the culmination of a prior one. That prior era included writings by the social philosophers and early scientists of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, much of which played a significant role in setting the stage for modern social psychology (Jahoda, 2007). These thinkers often wrote about social interaction and relationships, although it was rarely a focal point of their theorizing. Some concepts from that era with particular relevance to contemporary relationships research include Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract, which explained how people cede certain rights to society in order to maintain well-functioning groups; Thomas Hobbes's account of power-seeking as a basic human motive; David Hume's proposition that sympathy for others provides a foundation for social relations; Adam Smith's celebration of self-interest as a moral good, as well as his theory of sympathy, which argued that the act of observing others fosters awareness of one's own behavior and motives; and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which assigned a prominent role to social relations in sexual and natural selection.

Much as these early thinkers may have set a useful stage for later relationships research, Ross and McDougall's texts did little to advance theorizing in this direction. Ross was a sociologist who stated that "*mental contacts or mental interactions . . . [a commonality between people] [are] social only insofar as [they arise] out of the interplay of minds*" (1908, p. 3; emphasis in original). In this emphasis Ross had been influenced by earlier sociologists such as Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde, who popularized concepts such as crowd psychology and the group mind, relying on suggestion and imitation as mechanisms. The only mentions of close relationships in Ross's textbook are a passing comment that "close relations to a few people – as in the well-knit family – . . . seem to be more favorable to stable character than the loose touch-and-go associations of general intercourse" (1908, p. 88), and an example used to illustrate how social prestige influences imitation—that in marriage and parenting, lower status persons are more likely to imitate the behavior of persons of higher status. Of course, many of the processes that Ross described—for example, imitation, conformity, persuasion, conflict, and negotiation—apply to social interaction within relationships. But there is little in Ross's book that speaks directly to the nature or impact of relationships.

A similar conclusion applies to the other 1908 volume, written by William McDougall, who, as a disciple of Darwin, assigned a prominent role to instincts. Among the instincts McDougall discussed are parental behavior, reproduction, and gregariousness (and, in a later edition, sexuality). Of gregariousness, he speculated that "it must have played an important part in social evolution by keeping men together and thereby

occasioning the need for social laws and institutions . . . but that in highly civilised societies its functions are less important, because the density of population ensures a sufficient aggregation of the people [so as to make the gregariousness instinct irrelevant and perhaps the cause of] injurious social results" (p. 301). McDougall's model of relationship-relevant instincts would therefore seem to have superficial resemblance to contemporary views of innate mechanisms underlying sociality (e.g., the need to belong; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Psychoanalytic theory, another important theory emerging in the early part of the 20th century, did not have much impact on social psychology, particularly with respect to relationships, until much later. Many concepts introduced by Sigmund Freud, as well as by neo-Freudians such as Carl Jung, Anna Freud, Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, and Harry Stack Sullivan, have been influential in recent theory and research, not necessarily as originally proposed but instead reconceptualized with contemporary constructs and terminology. Among significant modern relationship processes that can be traced to early psychoanalytic writings are motivation and perception outside of awareness, the influence of early-life interactions with caregivers on the developing self, ego-defenses and their effects on self-regulation, transference, the impact of perceived relations on behavior, chronic accessibility, and terror management theory.

One branch of neo-Freudian thought, object relations theory, has had particular relevance to relationship research and theory. Originally developed in the 1940s and 1950s by several theorists, notably Ronald Fairbairn, Melanie Klein, and Donald Winnicott, object relations theory proposes that the self is best understood in a relational context; that internalized models of "self in relation to others" substantially affect emotion, thought, and behavior, often outside of awareness; and that self-change often depends on relational experiences (see Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, for an overview). John Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), which, as discussed later in this chapter, has had enormous influence on social-psychological relationship research, exemplifies object relations theorists' extension of psychodynamic thinking in a more relational direction. This is likely due in no small part to Bowlby's reformulation of key psychoanalytic insights using constructs and mechanisms more in keeping with modern (at the time) scientific understandings of ethology, evolution, and cognition.

Spurred by the publication of Ross's and McDougall's textbooks, activity in the newly minted field of social psychology escalated during the first third of the 20th century. The predominant focus of research was behavior in groups. Earlier theorizing, developed mostly in Europe by scholars such as Le Bon, Tarde, Victor-Alfred Espinas, and Emile Durkheim, had described groups largely in terms of their emergent properties, relying on concepts such as the group mind (Jahoda, 2007). In America, however, Floyd Allport (whose PhD had been advised by the German-educated Hugo Münsterberg, one of the early supporters of a scientific social psychology) advocated a

conceptual shift that would have enduring influence. Allport insisted that group phenomena had to be studied in individualist terms:

There is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals. Social psychology . . . is a part of the psychology of the individual, whose behavior it studies in relation to that sector of his environment composed by his fellows.

(Allport, 1924, p. 4; emphasis in original)

Allport's persuasive theorizing led social psychologists to rethink earlier concepts, explaining how "all behavior phenomena of groups are reducible to mechanisms of individual behavior in the social environment" (Allport, 1924, p. 382). Although some commentators believe that Allport and his successors took this idea demonstrably too far (e.g., Jahoda, 2007), there can be little doubt that his individualist emphasis has remained the predominant one in social psychology.

And what of dyadic relationships? Allport's landmark textbook (1924) briefly mentions three topics—sexuality, friendship choice, and marital harmony—but there was in actuality little attention to relationships as a topic of research. For example, it took six years for the first paper on adult relationships—a case study of the "two-love question" (divine and profane love; Dearborn, 1927)—to appear in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, after the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* had expanded its mission statement to incorporate the rapidly growing field of social psychology (Prince & Allport, 1921). The paucity of activity notwithstanding, it is apparent that the individualist emphasis that Allport championed for the study of group phenomena later became (and arguably, still wields strong influence on) the dominant approach for social psychologists who study dyadic relationships (Reis et al., 2000). Thus, although during this era the "social" in social psychology meant groups and not dyads or personal relationships, a theoretical groundwork was being established that would significantly shape later research.

Any discussion of pre-Second World War social psychology would be remiss to omit reference to Kurt Lewin. Lewin, a German social psychologist steeped in the Gestalt tradition, emigrated to the United States in 1933. Lewin formulated field theory (1951) with the goal of characterizing the social environment in terms of relations between individuals who "‘locomoted’ through a field of bounded ‘regions’ impelled by ‘forces’ or drawn by ‘valences’ along power ‘vectors’" (Jones, 1985, p. 68). These forces were both interpersonal and intrapersonal, leading to Lewin's well-known proposal that behavior was a function of the person and the environment,  $B = f(P, E)$ . This dictum is often misconstrued—as Reis (2008) explains, Lewin did not intend  $P$  and  $E$  to be separable, additive factors, but rather "one constellation of interdependent factors" (1951, p. 240, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, his approach effectively set the stage for studies that conceptualized social behavior in terms of motivational processes arising both within

and outside the person. In this sense, Lewin's approach may be seen as a hybrid of the American–individualist and European–group mind traditions. Lewin plainly intended to develop a set of quantifiable constructs, using the mathematics of topology, that could be used to formally test propositions about social relations. Despite the fact that he was not successful in this regard, Lewin's general approach was extraordinarily influential.

Lewin did not distinguish relationships or relationship partners from other entities in the "life space"—that is, the psychological significance of the total situation for the person, which includes both internal and external elements. Few of his papers mention close relationships, focusing instead, consistent with the field's emphasis, on analyzing group behavior in field theory terms. A notable exception is a paper originally published in 1940, entitled "The Background of Conflict in Marriage," in which Lewin explained that "marriage is a group situation, and, as such, shows the general characteristics of group life" (1948, p. 84). Thus, he described how marital interaction follows the general properties of "the relation between an individual and his group" (1948, p. 84), albeit with several special properties: that the group is very small, that it is central to the person's values, desires, and goals, and that it is characterized by "the least social distance" between members (1948, p. 88). Although rarely cited today, this paper offers valuable insights for contemporary researchers (for example, that marital dyads should be studied within the larger social networks in which they are embedded).

Lewin's lasting influence on relationship research in social psychology has less to do with his theoretical insights than with the students and colleagues he mentored and the research traditions they established. Among these individuals were Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter, John Thibaut, Harold Kelley, and Morton Deutsch, all of whom played important roles in social psychology's rapid expansion after the Second World War, and all of whom had significant impact on relationship research within social psychology. These scholars favored laboratory experiments, which remain a hallmark of social psychological studies of relationship processes. Lewin and his followers also stressed the value of "action research"—that is, research applying social psychological principles to solve human problems. This orientation would bear later fruit in several areas, notably studies of marital interaction and social support.

In sum, relationship research was negligible in early social psychology. Of course, this conclusion must be evaluated in context: Few scholars identified themselves as social psychologists, research was far less extensive and systematic than it is today, and most theoretical commentaries were broad and speculative. Another consideration, discussed later in this chapter, is that social psychology was almost without exception populated by men, whose interests tended more toward groups and collectives than toward dyads. To be sure, the territory staked out by early social psychologists clearly encompassed concepts and phenomena of direct relevance to relationships, but that territory had yet to be entered, much less explored.

## Relationships research during social psychology's expansionary period

No period in the history of social psychology has been as full of growth and promise as the post-Second World War era. The field expanded rapidly, fueled by the growth of universities and their increasing commitment to research. An immediate need for faculty and facilities existed to serve the large numbers of returning American soldiers who were eager to advance their education with funding provided by the popular GI Bill. Funds for psychological research also grew rapidly, reflecting the United States government's investment in science and the mental health needs of veterans and others affected by the war. Many universities were eager to add positions and programs in the relatively new science of social psychology, partly because it resonated well with the national *Zeitgeist* and also because of the availability of scholars with interest and expertise in the subject. This included European *émigrés*, such as Fritz Heider, Kurt Lewin, and Muzafer Sherif, and others who had done social-psychological work as part of the war effort (Cartwright, 1946)—for example, Carl Hovland (whose evaluations of military training films for the Army led to the Yale tradition of persuasion research), Rensis Likert (who advanced survey research methods for programs related to food production, food utilization, and morale), Henry Murray (who conducted personality assessments for the Office of Special Services), and Samuel Stouffer (whose Army experience led to the concept of relative deprivation).

How did relationship research stand in social psychology as this expansionary period commenced? Not very prominently. Little if any research investigated close relationships; at best, they were considered examples of a two-person group, following Lewin's lead, discussed earlier, and therefore were not seen to require targeted research. To be sure, in other disciplines two kinds of close relationships were being studied empirically. First, family sociologists such as Ernest Burgess (1926) and lifespan psychologists such as Lewis Terman (e.g., Terman, 1938) were studying marriage, particularly the sources of marital stability and instability. Reflecting this research, in an early review, Tharp (1963) noted that "After 70 years of research, the broad outlines of a systematic social science approach to marriage may be discerned" (p. 97), but little work by social psychologists was included therein. Second, among developmental psychologists, parent-child relationships were a popular topic. But this work drew scant notice within social psychology—the first edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Lindzey, 1954) contains only passing references to marriage, friendship, or family relations, and no description of relationship principles, processes, or phenomena. More broadly, the social and behavioral sciences revealed few attempts to theorize about or study relationship processes in a general way.

This gap did not go unnoticed. For example, in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Theodore Newcomb remarked, about a topic that later came to be central to relationship research, "I think it not much of an

exaggeration to say that there exists no very adequate theory of interpersonal attraction" (1956, p. 575) and then proceeded to describe the beginnings of one. Similarly, in his own presidential address two years later, Harry Harlow drew the same conclusion about another now-staple topic in the field:

Our assigned mission as psychologists is to analyze all facets of human and animal behavior into their component variables. So far as love or affection is concerned, psychologists have failed in their mission. The little we know about love does not transcend simple observation and the little we write about it has been written better by poets and novelists. But of greater concern is the fact that psychologists tend to give progressively less attention to a motive which pervades our entire lives. Psychologists, at least psychologists who write textbooks, not only show no interest in the origin and development of love or affection, but they seem to be unaware of its very existence.

(1958, p. 673)<sup>1</sup>

That individuals should be "viewed within a web of personal relationships" was even noted by Sherif and Sherif (1956, p. 754) as a "recent development" in the field, but little had been done to flesh out this idea.

Nevertheless, several ideas were percolating through the field that were to be influential in seeding later developments in the study of attraction and relationships. Among these were the following.

- Newcomb's (1943) Bennington College study, which showed how attitudes could change as a function of interaction with other persons in the social environment.
- Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Wheeler, 1974), which led to research on the impact of self-evaluation and self-confirmation in selective affiliation.
- Winch's (1958) proposal that persons with complementary personalities will be more compatible and more attracted to each other (an intuitively plausible idea that has often been tested but seldom supported; Berscheid & Regan, 2005).
- Relative deprivation (Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Star, & Williams, 1949) and exchange (Homans, 1950) theories, which led to equity theory (Adams, 1965), and more broadly, the idea that varying norms could characterize the nature of relational interdependence.
- Allport's (1954) discussion of the conditions under which intergroup contact would be expected to reduce prejudice.
- Goffman's (1959) provocative essay on the presentation of self, which conceptualized social behavior as goal-directed striving to foster particular impressions of self in an audience.
- The "new look" in person perception, which advanced the idea that perceptions of other people are influenced by the perceiver's motives, goals, and needs (Bruner & Taguiri, 1954).

- Schachter's (1959) affiliation research, which suggested that anxiety could increase the desire to affiliate, purportedly to reduce uncertainty.
- The initial version of interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), which introduced the analysis of interaction in terms of patterns of outcome interdependence.

This list is inevitably selective and incomplete; in the 1940s and 1950s, the breadth of social psychology was expanding rapidly and researchers built their advances on what they were reading and discussing, and whichever ideas were available.

If the abovementioned research provided background for the emergence of relationships research, three particularly influential works occupied the foreground. The first of these was Festinger, Schachter, and Back's (1950) study of social pressures among the residents of Westgate and Westgate West, housing communities built after the Second World War by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to accommodate veterans returning to school and their families. Designed to test a series of group dynamics hypotheses in a self-contained natural community, the study yielded findings that have become axiomatic:

Other things being equal, the greater the physical proximity between two people, the greater the probability that, within a given unit of time, a contact between them will occur . . . It is likely that, other things being constant, the more contacts one has with a person, the more easily friendship will develop in consequence.

(1950, pp. 155–156)

This principle of proximity (sometimes called propinquity) and its conceptual kin, familiarity (associated with the mere-exposure hypothesis), have been supported extensively and are considered foundational of interpersonal attraction and friendship formation. Perhaps more importantly, this study (along with the others discussed in this section) indicated that relationship formation could be studied rigorously in natural contexts.

The second important study was Newcomb's (1961) landmark investigation of the acquaintance process among new male students at the University of Michigan. By examining the development over a year of friendship among roommate pairs, Newcomb was able to show that attitude similarity predicted liking. In particular, although pre-existing attitudes did not predict attraction at initial acquaintance, over the course of the year the positive association between attitudes and agreement became stronger, presumably as a result of increasingly positive interactions. This research helped establish similarity of attitudes and values as another pillar of interpersonal attraction research.

The third influence from this period is somewhat more abstract. Earlier, beginning in the 1930s, Jacob Moreno (1934/1953) had proposed a technique he called "sociometry," designed to measure attractions and repulsions among members of a group. Sociometry "changed the face of social psychology"

(Berscheid, 1985, p. 414)—it allowed researchers to empirically quantify an attribute that had seemed elusive for empirical research, namely liking (and, for that matter, disliking, though this has been studied less commonly), setting the stage for nearly all of the attraction research that followed. The lasting impact of Moreno's insight, not merely in social psychology but in all disciplines with a need to establish the extent to which Person A and Person B are favorably disposed toward each other, should not be underestimated. Lindzey and Byrne (1968) observe, "There are few instances where a single individual has exerted so pervasive an influence on the evolution of a social-science area" (p. 454). The availability of sociometric procedures complemented Heider's (1958) observation that "the positive or negative valuation attached to persons and objects, namely our sentiments toward them, enormously influence our behavior" (p. 17). In fact, many consider liking to be an automatic association that underlies all social contact (e.g., Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997). Heider's further observation that sentiment relations can be distinguished from belonging—that is, whether two people or entities are perceived to form a unit—was not as influential at the time, although, as researchers in the 1980s began to disambiguate the concept of attraction from the existence and maintenance of a relationship, it has grown in relevance.

### *Attraction research comes of age: The 1960s*

A rising tide lifts all boats, and it therefore seems inevitable that as the growing number of researchers in the rapidly expanding field of social psychology sought new topics to explore, their interest turned toward dyadic relationships. Most of this early work investigated interpersonal attraction, defined as a "positive or negative attitude toward another person" (Berscheid & Walster, 1969, p. 2). Seminal in this trend was the "attraction paradigm" developed by Donn Byrne (1961). Byrne was captivated by Newcomb's (1956) APA presidential address, described earlier, and was convinced, from both personal observation and the prevailing reinforcement theories of that era, that attitude similarity was the source of reinforcement that produced liking (Byrne, 1997). Byrne devised a laboratory experimental procedure that served as a model for hundreds of subsequent studies—providing bogus information about a to-be-encountered stranger, manipulated to represent varying degrees of attitudinal similarity with the subject, and then assessing anticipated liking along seven-point sociometry-inspired evaluative items. Thus attitudinal similarity as the basis for attraction and relationship formation became a much-studied topic. Moreover, the success of Byrne's paradigm suggested to researchers that other bases of attraction might similarly be studied with rigorously designed, cost-effective laboratory experimental methods.

Interpersonal attraction proved to be fertile soil for research. Following basic reinforcement principles, namely that liking is fostered by the experience of reward (Lott & Lott, 1974) as well as the capacity to reward others (Homans, 1961), researchers

began to explore diverse factors that influence attraction. Many of these were captured in an influential volume, *Interpersonal Attraction* (Berscheid & Walster, 1969). Berscheid and Walster conceptualized attraction in terms of the “rewards others provide”: People will be attracted to others to the extent that interaction with them is perceived or anticipated to be rewarding. Under this rubric, they included reduction of anxiety and distress, propinquity, reciprocity of liking, similarity, and cooperation, all venerable topics in this literature. Soon after, physical attractiveness was added to the list. In the first “computer dance” study, Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, and Rottman (1966) discovered that among students randomly paired at a college dance, personality, intelligence, and social skills did not predict the desire for further interaction with one’s date; only physical attractiveness (which had been added to the study only as an afterthought; Berscheid, 1986) did. Physical attractiveness research did more than identify another reward for social relations. Research on the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype (Berscheid & Walster, 1974) fostered a link to emerging research on stereotyping and prejudice, and, later, to the evolutionary roots of mate selection. In conclusion, the breadth (and some might say ambiguity) of the “rewards others provide” conceptualization allowed the field to grow rapidly and broadly, although, with the benefit of hindsight, in somewhat scattershot fashion.

Reinforcement approaches also led in other directions. Researchers interested in marriage, particularly clinically oriented researchers who sought to develop interventions for the amelioration and prevention of distress and divorce, theorized that one partner’s positive and negative behaviors were the other’s rewards and punishments, respectively (e.g., Weiss, Hops, & Patterson, 1973), a conceptualization that led directly to behavioral observation studies (so that the frequency of positive and negative behaviors could be recorded objectively). During the 1980s, behavioral observation became a major method for studying marital interaction and processes. Social exchange theories also broadened ideas about what was reinforcing in close relationships and how those reinforcers operated. For example, equity theory (Adams, 1965) proposed that partners felt comfortable when the ratio of their own outcomes to inputs was equal to their relationship partners’ ratio. Researchers subsequently applied this idea to romantic relationships, arguing that almost anything that partners put into or got out of their relationships was subject to this equation (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). In a different vein, interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) offered a more dynamic model of reinforcement processes in social interaction, discussed later in this chapter.

During the 1960s, it was not just reinforcement theories that were influencing researchers. Cognitive consistency theories made their mark, including Heider’s (1958) balance theory, Newcomb’s (1953) ABX model, and Festinger’s (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. For example, findings about similarity of attraction were often explained as evidence for consistency

needs—presumably, a friend with different opinions about an important matter would create cognitive imbalance. And the ever-popular Romeo-and-Juliet effect—that parental interference could increase feelings of romantic love—provided evidence of the operation of dissonance processes in romantic relationships (Driscoll, Davis & Lipetz, 1972). Also influential was Schachter’s (1971) two-factor theory of emotion, which led to Dutton and Aron’s (1974) classic “shaky bridge” study, which showed that sexual attraction could be heightened by externally created physiological arousal. Arousal and misattribution remain useful ideas in contemporary theories.

Relationship research, like social psychology and most social sciences, is inspired not only by scientific developments but also by the sociopolitical *Zeitgeist* in which social psychologists work. A key factor that spawned social psychologists’ interest in dyadic relationships was the rise of women in the field. Early in its history, social psychology was the near-exclusive territory of men, much as all academic disciplines were. Beginning in the 1960s, academic institutions began to admit more women at all levels, and social psychology was prominent in this movement (Berscheid, 1992). For example, in 1965, the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (*JPSP*) had a 37-person editorial board, with only one woman (Janet Taylor Spence). The first issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (*JESP*), published that same year, had a 24-person board, again with only a single woman (Helen Peak). By 1979, an approximate end of social psychology’s expansionary era, gender balance had improved: 9 out of 60 members of the *JPSP* board, and 5 out of 31 of the *JESP* board, were women. More important than personnel statistics, though, was the way in which the influx of women altered the field’s research agenda, by fostering a “social psychology that has integrated, and has been enriched by, the different experiences and views that female social psychologists have brought to their work” (Berscheid, 1992, p. 527). Female social psychologists encouraged the field to consider more conspicuously the importance of dyadic relationships, probably reflecting women’s relatively greater emphasis on dyadic social relations, compared to men’s relative focus on groups and collectives (e.g., Gabriel & Gardner, 1999).

Another social trend that helped shape the field’s research agenda reflects the advent of humanistic psychology, part of the 1960s counterculture movement. Prominent humanistic psychologists (e.g., Maslow, 1954) argued with good justification that love, affection, a sense of belonging, and openness in connections with others were important human needs that psychological science had neglected. Among the more empirically minded of these scholars was Sidney Jourard (1964, 1971), who proposed and conducted studies suggesting that self-disclosure was essential both to individual mental health and to relationship development. Jourard’s popular writings meshed well with Altman and Taylor’s (1973) research on social penetration, which in somewhat more detail and with more rigorous experimental methods demonstrated how successively deeper and broader self-disclosures led to increased



acquaintance and the development of relationships. Self-disclosure has been central in the literature, not only as a significant topic in its own right but in stimulating the field to move beyond the study of initial attraction to consider how relationships develop, deepen, and are maintained (Reis & Patrick, 1996).

Any history of the evolution of relationships research in social psychology would be remiss in omitting what has come to be called “l’affaire Proxmire.” In 1975, William Proxmire, then the senior Senator from Wisconsin, bestowed the first of a long series of Golden Fleece awards “for wasteful, ironic or ridiculous uses of the taxpayers’ money” (Benson, 2006, p. 14) on Ellen Berscheid and Elaine Walster for their pioneering studies of romantic love. Recognizing that love was qualitatively different than intense forms of liking (cf. Rubin, 1974), and consistent with Harlow’s earlier observation, Berscheid and Walster had begun studying passion and romantic love (Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Walster & Walster, 1979). Proxmire’s self-serving proclamation garnered widespread publicity, both pro and con, the fateful consequence of which was to impair federal funding possibilities for studies of love and related phenomena and thereby to hinder substantially scientific progress into the nature of close relationships and their impact on human activity. Nearly four decades later, the inexorable curiosity of relationship researchers (particularly Berscheid and Walster, now Hatfield) is evident: Love is a thriving research topic and it is apparent that rigorous scientific methods have much to offer for understanding this quintessential human attribute (see Berscheid, 1988, 2010; Hatfield & Rapson, 1996; Reis & Aron, 2008, for reviews). Nevertheless, political interference remains a concern for social psychological research, particularly in the area of close relationships (Benson, 2006). If nothing else, l’affaire Proxmire taught scientists about the need to respond forcefully when such challenges arise.

In summary, during social psychology’s expansionary era, relationships research was dominated by studies of interpersonal attraction among previously unacquainted persons who had little expectation of future contact. This approach, limited as it may have been, yielded many important findings, principles, and theories that remain influential. Moreover, given the methodological boundaries of this era—standard contemporary tools such as computer-based methods, digital or videotape recording, and the Internet had yet to be invented—it may not be surprising that researchers beginning a research area emphasized the beginnings of relationships.

Nevertheless, the need for conceptual broadening was fast becoming evident, highlighted in an influential edited volume edited by Huston (1974). The transition to a broader view of relationships underscored at least three themes. First, prevailing models of attraction as attitude were complemented by newer models that construed attraction more diversely, particularly as affect or feeling. The advantage of this new approach was to open relationship research to the insights of the burgeoning field of emotion (Berscheid, 1985; Clark & Reis, 1988). Second, researchers began to consider the impact of relationship stages,

or the idea that attraction had to be studied in the context of ongoing relationships, such that feelings toward a partner would be related to the nature of partners’ interactions with each other, their history and goals with each other and other partners, as well as environmental variables affecting their relationship. Two widely read papers described three levels of relationship, proposing that the relevant interpersonal processes varied systematically from one level to another. These were papers by Murstein (1970), whose stages were named Stimulus (in which potential partners perceive and evaluate the other’s attributes), Value (in which partners appraise the rewardingness of their interaction), and Role (in which interacting partners consider their suitability for a long-term, role-defined relationship), and by Levinger and Snoek (1972), whose stages were unilateral awareness, surface contact, and mutuality. Third, researchers were becoming increasingly aware that the very limited context of existing research—laboratory studies of attraction among unacquainted college students—was unsuitably narrow for the development of a general, accurate, and useful understanding of relationships (Berscheid, 1985; Huston & Levinger, 1978). All of these factors contributed to the coming transition in relationship research.

### A subdiscipline matures

For several reasons, the early 1980s can be considered a watershed for relationship research within social psychology. Arguably, the most visible reason lies in the development of an infrastructure for scholarly communication. In the summer of 1982, the first International Conference on Personal Relationships was held in Madison, Wisconsin. Organized by Steve Duck and Robin Gilmour, it brought together scholars from several disciplines (chiefly social, clinical, and developmental psychology; marriage and family studies; sociology; and communications) with an interest in personal relationships. The atmosphere at this meeting was electric. Here the focus on relationships was front and center, rather than peripheral, as it was in the mainstream disciplines. Moreover, researchers with similar interests but different disciplinary homes discovered one another. A collection of essays based on papers presented at this meeting documents the forward energy of the meeting (Gilmour & Duck, 1986). In its opening statement, Kelley (1986) heralded what was to come by describing three implications of thinking about personal relationships as a new science: that relationship processes are distinct phenomena, to be understood in their own right; that focused study of relationships might provide knowledge needed by other, neighboring disciplines; and that “*there are systematic laws to be discovered that apply over a variety of specific types of relationships*” (1986, p. 7). Kelley’s vision proved to be prophetic.

The 1982 International Conference on Personal Relationships galvanized subsequent developments. The conference became a biennial (sometimes annual) event. A series of smaller meetings, held at the Nags Head Conference Center between 1983 and 1988, was also formative in establishing collaborations and

communication among social psychologists who studied relationships. In 1984, the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships (ISSPR) was formed, and a specialty journal, the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, began publication. In 1987, a second organization was established, the Iowa Network on Personal Relationships, which in 2003 merged with the ISSPR to create the International Association for Relationships Research (IARR). A second journal, *Personal Relationships*, owned and operated by the ISSPR (and later IARR), was inaugurated in 1994. Books began to appear with the term “personal relationships” in their titles, including the field-defining *Handbook of Personal Relationships* (Duck, 1988). Even the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (JPSP)* acknowledged and fostered the emergence and subsequent growth of relationships research: When I became editor, my editorial statement highlighted relationships and studies of interdependence as key “newly developing” areas that I hoped to feature in *JPSP*’s pages. Books, journals, and meetings of course provide essential outlets for publicizing research; additionally, these venues provided outward signs of legitimacy for the emerging field, as well as a stimulus for crossdisciplinary communication.

Crossdisciplinary fertilization has been fundamental in fostering “The Greening of Relationship Science” (Berscheid, 1999), or in other words, the emergence of a broad movement to consider from the perspective of multiple disciplines the nature and impact of relationships. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the inherent diversity of methods and assumptions that multiple disciplines entail, a less than desirable degree of fractionation is evident (Perlman & Duck, 2006). Partly for this reason, relationship science, which spans the disciplines mentioned earlier as well as biology, economics, political science and medicine, is still more multidisciplinary than it is interdisciplinary (Reis, 2007). Social psychology is a central player in relationship science—for example, social psychological research on relationships is cited regularly by researchers in these other disciplines. Correspondingly, social psychologists studying relationships have adopted concepts or methods from several other disciplines, particularly from clinical psychology and family studies, in two respects: using observational studies of marital interaction to identify patterns of interaction that contribute to functional and dysfunctional relationships, and longitudinal methods. Cognitive psychology has also been influential, in providing models and methods for examining cognitive mechanisms related to relational behavior. Methods and insights from neuroscience appear on the near horizon.

A more basic reason why relationships research grew incrementally in the 1980s reflects technological advances. New tools allow researchers to ask more complex theoretical questions, thereby enhancing knowledge. Several valuable methods for relationships research appeared during this period. For example, diary methods such as the Experience Sampling Method (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983) and the Rochester Interaction Record (Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977; Reis & Wheeler, 1991) became available, allowing research to

examine relationship processes as they unfold in everyday life. Videotaping became routine, allowing researchers to record laboratory interactions, which could then be coded in minute detail for evidence of theoretically relevant processes (e.g., Gottman, 1979). The introduction of microprocessors provided computerized technology for measuring reaction times within milliseconds or for presenting stimuli at predetermined exposure lengths, opening the door to a far deeper level of analysis of cognitive processes within close relationships. New and specialized statistical tools also became prevalent. For example, structural equation modeling, the Social Relations Model (Kenny & La Voie, 1984), and, somewhat later, multi-level modeling encouraged researchers to formulate more complex questions about interaction and relationships, and to answer them with greater precision. In particular, the fundamental interdependence that characterizes interaction and relationships is now routinely assessed directly (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). In short, social psychology’s expanding toolbox afforded unprecedented opportunities to ask questions that earlier researchers could scarcely imagine.

No transition as consequential and far-reaching as the one that began in the early 1980s occurs for purely organizational and methodological reasons. While research on interpersonal attraction subsided, research on social psychological processes affecting the development, maintenance, and termination of close relationships accelerated (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). This growth has been both vertical (increasing depth of understanding) and horizontal (increasing breadth of coverage). Several factors contributed to the change of emphasis, some of which were noted at the conclusion of the prior section. Perhaps the best explanation is the most obvious one: Researchers recognized that there is more (much more) to relationships than mere attraction, and social-psychological theories and methods offered powerful tools to advance this evolving field.

The field’s emerging interest in relationship processes was further encouraged by public and practitioner demand for studies into the causes of marital deterioration and dissolution, spurred by the increasing divorce rate during the 1960s and 1970s. As noted above, marital research had begun earlier, in the 1920s and 1930s, but it accelerated in the early 1980s, following two broad developments. One was the idea of observing marital interaction under controlled laboratory conditions, introduced by Raush, Barry, Hertel, and Swain (1974) and then popularized by Gottman and his students (see Gottman, 1994, for a review), who capitalized on the availability and convenience of videotaping to develop and use finely detailed systems for coding marital behavior. The second development was the field’s growing appreciation for longitudinal studies, which are better suited for identifying processes of deterioration than are cross-sectional studies, facilitated by the funding and statistical tools that such work requires (Bradbury, 1998). Studies of marital deterioration and dissolution (as well as intervention studies designed to preclude or remediate these effects) are most often conducted by clinical psychologists, sociologists, and family studies scholars. Nevertheless, social

psychologists are also active in this work (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1991; Huston & Houts, 1998; Levinger, 1979). Moreover, and less parochially, social psychological theories (notably including the three major perspectives discussed below) are often influential in the research being conducted by scholars in other disciplines.

If attraction research “‘just grew,’ proceeding without the advantage of a master plan . . . [resulting in] a relatively young area of inquiry marked by not a few irregularities and peculiarities, many of which are neither intrinsically logical nor reflective of an optimal development of knowledge” (Berscheid, 1985, p. 417), the emerging study of relationship processes seemed to do better. Much of the work conducted since 1980 fits under one of three conceptual umbrellas. Of course, individual studies and theories do not necessarily fit neatly within a single category—some have multiple influences, others contributed to an approach only in hindsight, and still others fit loosely (if at all). Nevertheless, because a large portion of the research on relationships being conducted by social psychologists reflects one or more of these broad theoretical perspectives, I use them to provide a conceptual framework for reviewing the rise of relationship research.

### *The interdependence approach*

Although interdependence theory (IT) was first proposed in the context of group processes (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), it is instructive to note that many of the examples in that book concern dyadic interaction, especially between spouses. In the late 1970s this focus became explicit, with implications for both IT researchers and the field at large. Two theoretical statements were central in this development: a series of essays by Kelley (1979) and a coauthored volume by Kelley et al. (1983). The latter was based on a series of National Science Foundation-sponsored meetings convened by Harold Kelley with a small group of researchers, beginning in 1978, to create a blueprint for research that would investigate relationships in a more theoretically complex and appropriate way than prior laboratory studies of attraction between strangers. The 1983 volume emphasized interaction, which is visible and measurable, because “close” relationships had been defined previously in many different, often limiting (e.g., in terms of positive sentiments) or conceptually vague ways. Thus, Kelley et al. proposed that “a prominent feature of a ‘relationship’ is that events associated with one person are causally connected to those associated with the other person” (1983, p. 24), thereby opening the door to defining relationships in terms of interdependence: the manner in which interaction affects both partners’ outcomes.

This general idea has turned out to be highly influential in shaping the nature and direction of relationship research. For one, it suggested that the study of relationships could not be reduced to the study of individuals—in other words, that the manifestations of individual tendencies in cognition, affect, and behavior would vary in response to the relationship circumstances in which they were expressed. Researchers would need

to study not only both persons in a relationship, but more importantly, how each affects the other. This principle also provided a conceptual rationale for dyadic data analysis (Kenny et al., 2006), which requires that interacting parties’ potential or actual influence on each other be statistically modeled. It also directed attention to questions about how partners respond to each other’s needs and desires, how people balance their personal goals with the necessity of coordination with partners, the role of individual differences in responses to interdependent situations, and what sort of cognitive and affective processes could facilitate or impair effective interdependence (Kelley et al., 2003).

A more specific contribution of IT was to distinguish processes related to satisfaction, or enjoyment, from those related to dependence, or the extent to which one partner’s outcomes depend on the other’s behavior. Satisfaction reflects comparisons between current outcomes and one’s comparison level (CL), whereas dependence reflects comparisons between current outcomes and what the individual believes to be obtainable elsewhere—the comparison level for alternatives (CL<sub>alt</sub>). This insight led to Rusbult’s Investment Model of Commitment (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Coonsen, Kirchner, & Clarke, 2006). According to this influential model, commitment, or the intention to persist in a relationship, is based on increases in satisfaction, declines in the desirability of available alternatives, and increases in investments (e.g., time, money, effort). Among various valuable findings, the investment model helps explain why abused women stay with their partners. Many had suggested that such women must have low self-esteem, but Rusbult and Martz (1995) pointed to dependence on partners and restrictive situations as more central. Other research shows that commitment fosters cognitive and affective linkages with partners and a willingness to engage in pro-relational behaviors, such as accommodation, forgiveness, and sacrifice (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001), all of which are now considered key elements of relationship maintenance and predictors of relationship deterioration and dissolution.

IT also highlighted the impact of expectations about a partner’s intentions. Confidence about a partner’s benevolence toward oneself facilitates openness, positivity, and risk-taking in a relationship, whereas distrust engenders defensiveness, negativity, and self-protection (Holmes, 2002; Holmes & Rempel, 1989). The risk regulation model (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006), which proposed a series of contingency rules that relationship partners adopt to balance the goal of seeking closeness and interdependence with the goal of minimizing vulnerability and potential rejection, is a direct product of this theorizing.

By no means has the impact of IT been limited to researchers working directly within that tradition. Indeed, the general notion that relationships involve partners’ causal impact on each other is widely considered axiomatic (even if this principle is not fully embodied in research practices). For example, some researchers study how and with what consequences relationship partners become cognitively interdependent, by “including the

other in the self” (Aron, Aron, Tudor & Nelson, 1991). Other research addresses the properties of different patterns of interdependence. For example, Fiske (1992) described four types of interdependence—communal sharing, equality matching, authority ranking, and market pricing—each of which explains an elementary and distinctive manner of influencing, and being influenced by, relationship partners. More empirically, an extensive program of research by Clark and her colleagues (e.g., Clark & Mills, 1979; 1993) has examined various implications of communal and exchange relationships. The former are characterized by partners’ concern for each other’s welfare and responsiveness to needs, whereas in the latter, benefits are contingent on normative rules of exchange.

### *Evolutionary approaches*

With the benefit of hindsight, readers may not be surprised to learn that principles grounded in Darwin’s theory of evolution have come to provide a prominent foundation for relationship research. After all, evolutionary processes derive from natural or sexual selection, and it is manifest, even in Darwin’s (1859, 1872) seminal writing, that in humans (and many other species) these are intricately and inseparably interwoven with social interactions and relationships. As Buss and Kenrick summarize:

evolutionary psychology places social interaction and social relationships squarely within the center of the action. In particular, social interactions and relationships surrounding mating, kinship, reciprocal alliances, coalitions, and hierarchies are especially critical, because all appear to have strong consequences for successful survival and reproduction. From an evolutionary perspective, the functions served by social relationships have been central to the design of the human mind.

(1998, p. 994)

Early application of evolutionary principles in social psychology featured inherited, relatively immutable dispositions (for example, studies of genetic effects in assortative mating, Jensen, 1978; or studies asserting universal sex differences with little attention to individual differences or context, Buss & Barnes, 1986), which seemed poorly suited to the complexity and variability of relationship behavior. Social psychologists became more interested in evolutionary approaches as these began to emphasize flexible behavioral adaptations designed to solve particular problems of survival and reproduction. In relationships, this idea can be seen in two aphorisms: that “passionate love solves the attraction problem” whereas “companionate love solves the commitment problem” (cf. Gonzaga, Keltner, Londahl, & Smith, 2001), meaning that passion fuels the initiation of romantic, potentially reproductive relationships, whereas intimacy fosters bonding, thereby contributing to relationship maintenance and hence the survival of offspring. Furthermore, as Kenrick and Trost (1997) explain, “modern evolutionary theorists assume that natural selection operates on specific

environmentally triggered mechanisms, rather than producing individuals designed to think, feel and act in ways that are ‘generally adaptive’” (p. 176), making evolution an ideal framework for social psychologists who seek the causes of behavior in situations. Indeed, the rise and fruitfulness of evolutionary thinking is evident in the fact that there is no single evolutionary social-psychological theory but rather a diverse collection of phenomena and mechanisms, all of which are hypothesized to reflect the impact of natural and sexual selection in our ancestral environment (Fletcher, Overall, & Friesen, 2006).

Just how this transition took place is not immediately apparent, but it likely involved the persistence of advocates for evolutionary theorizing along with researchers’ growing recognition that evolutionary models could provide important clues for understanding why certain key relationship mechanisms exist and how they function. Arguably the most prominent examples in this regard have concerned mate selection and romantic relationships, because these are directly germane to reproduction. Knowledge about phenomena such as intra-sexual competition, sexual attitudes and behavior, love, bonding, jealousy, infidelity, mate poaching, and domestic violence, some of which are noteworthy for their contributions to relationship deterioration and divorce, also has been enhanced by evolutionary thinking. A particularly popular example is sexual strategies theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), which contextualized sex differences in mating strategies by proposing that both men and women possess a repertoire of short-term (relevant to brief encounters) and long-term (relevant to enduring relationships) reproductive strategies, the choices among which are dictated by innate preferences and by situational factors. This theory was instrumental in moving sex differences research, a venerable topic in this literature, from a focus on compiling lists of differences to a deeper understanding of the ways in which biological differences present men and women with distinctive adaptive problems, leading them to enact dissimilar solutions to those problems (Thornhill & Gangestad, 2008).

Evolutionary theorizing has also fostered insights and hypotheses in other areas of relationship research. Attachment theory, described in the next section, grew out of Bowlby’s desire to create an evolutionarily plausible theoretical account of his observations of infant–mother attachment-related behaviors. The need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) is predicated on the impact of interpersonal bonds on survival and reproduction, as is research on the costs of social exclusion, ostracism, and loneliness (Williams, 2001). Cosmides and Tooby (1992) argue that mechanisms central to trust, deception, and the detection of deception evolved with respect to the formation of cooperative coalitions and other group-living arrangements. Other areas that reveal the impact of evolutionary thinking in relationship research include prosocial behavior, aggression, social identity, ingroup favoritism and outgroup rejection, status hierarchies, dominance and submission, and kinship.

### *Attachment theory approaches*

Rarely does a single paper stimulate research activity to the extent that a paper by Hazan and Shaver (1987) did. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) was already a major theory of child development, but, notwithstanding Bowlby's observation that attachment processes applied "from the cradle to the grave," it had received relatively little attention in studies of adult relationships, particularly among social psychologists. Hazan and Shaver (1987) hypothesized that adult romantic relationships fulfill many of the same functions that relationships with caregivers serve in childhood (e.g., a secure base, a safe haven when distress occurs), and offered a tripartite typology of adult attachment relationships paralleling Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall's (1978) primary types of infant-caregiver attachment. Hazan and Shaver's creative theorizing ignited substantial interest, so that by now hundreds of studies have studied adult relationships and related behaviors from the perspective of attachment theory.

Why did social psychologists find attachment theory so persuasive? Chief among the reasons must be the theory itself, an example of "serious, coherent theorizing" (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008, p. xi) that offers a compelling, broadly applicable account about some of humankind's most important, intriguing behaviors. Bowlby devised attachment theory by synthesizing insights from evolution, ethology, cognitive control systems, and psychoanalytic theories. Much of the theory's appeal rests on his proposition that internal working models of self in relation to others, formed on the basis of experiences in early-life relationships, structure expectations, information processing, affect, social motivation, and self-regulation throughout adulthood. Importantly, though, particularly for relationships research, attachment theory directly addresses interaction processes, such as those that transpire when conflict threatens partners' sense of security in a relationship (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992) or when one partner's distress might be ameliorated by the other's responsive caregiving (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000). Among the adult relationship processes to which attachment theory has been applied productively are love, pair-bonding, social support, caregiving, social and emotional self-regulation, intimacy, bereavement, marital conflict and its resolution, relationship deterioration, divorce, sexuality, reactions to separation, organizational functioning, and parenting (see Cassidy & Shaver, 2008, and Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for reviews). Few theories can match the breadth and staying power of attachment theory.

A second reason for the appeal of attachment theory is that it encompasses both normative processes and individual differences. So-called "attachment styles" originally sorted individuals into one of three categories, based on self-reported typical experiences in close romantic relationships: secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant. These categories corresponded to Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) categories for infant-caregiver relationships. (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991, added a fourth category, fearful, which blended characteristics

of the anxious and avoidant types.) Subsequent psychometric studies, bolstered by solid theorizing, have indicated that a two-dimensional continuous model is more tenable (e.g., Fraley & Waller, 1998), such as Brennan, Clark, and Shaver's (1998) model, in which one dimension represents comfort with closeness, the other anxiety.<sup>2</sup> These and similar dimensional schemes were readily assessed by self-report scales, such as the popular revised Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR-r; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). Two key advantages of these measures are their simplicity and their effectiveness: They can be administered easily to large samples and are effective predictors of a variety of informative outcomes. Although researchers sometimes lament that the ease of correlating self-report individual difference measures has distracted researchers from the theory's emphasis on normative processes and processes that occur outside of awareness (Zeifman & Hazan, 2008), there is little doubt that these measures have contributed to the evident popularity and substantial knowledge base of attachment theory.

Third, attachment theory dovetailed with the prominence of social cognition in mainstream social psychology. During the past three decades, social psychologists have devoted significant attention to the cognitive mechanisms that underlie social behavior. Bowlby anticipated such interest when he posited that "internal working models"—that is, a set of mental beliefs, expectations, memories, and affect regulation strategies about self and attachment figures—supply the mechanism by which the attachment behavioral system accomplishes its epistemic and motivational functions. In Bowlby's era, however, few available tools had the precision to explore these functions with much depth or empirical rigor, particularly because Bowlby believed that many of these mechanisms operated outside of awareness—that is, in contemporary terminology, that they were part of the experiential information-processing system, which operates affectively, implicitly, and automatically, rather than the rational information-processing system, which tends to govern self-reports (Epstein, 1994). Social-cognitive researchers now have many sophisticated tools for investigating cognitive processes, both those that work with deliberate awareness and those about which people tend to be unaware—for example, priming, lexical decision tasks, and various implicit assessment procedures. Social psychologists have thereby been able to occupy a unique niche among attachment researchers—indeed, some of the most influential attachment research conducted by social psychologists relies on these methods (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Furthermore, other social-cognitive models of mental representations of self and others, although not formally linked to attachment theory, are also informative (e.g., Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006).

### *Other approaches*

Although these three "grand theories" have stimulated much of the relationship research conducted within social psychology since the 1980s, other approaches have also prospered. For

example, emotion theories have made major contributions, such as models of emotional experience and expression in relationships (e.g., Berscheid & Ammazalorso, 2001; Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001) and of emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Researchers have continued to pursue questions about empathy and its role in relationships, such as Ickes's (1997) rigorous method for studying the accuracy of empathic inferences. Influential theories that adopt a more cognitive approach include self-expansion theory, which proposes that close relationship partners can "expand the self" by incorporating the other's perspectives and resources with one's own, leading to insightful predictions about the nature of love and romantic relationship growth, maintenance, and deterioration (Aron & Aron, 2001), and transference research, which demonstrates how judgment and affect toward a current interaction partner may be affected by that partner's resemblance to prior partners (Andersen & Chen, 2002). Intimacy also remains a vital topic, as represented in work by Reis and colleagues (see Reis, Clark & Holmes, 2003; Reis & Patrick, 1996 for summaries), which broadens research on self-disclosure to a model of perceived responsiveness in social interaction.

Research on social support processes represents another important area whose development accelerated during the 1980s. Ever since Kurt Lewin urged researchers to conduct "action-oriented" experiments in field settings (Lewin, 1943), both because such studies were useful in assessing the viability of a theory in practical contexts and because they had social value, social psychologists have had interest in the practical implications of their work. Early on, when research focused narrowly on attraction studies, the link to helping people solve real-world relationship problems was at best tenuous. The field's transition from the study of attraction to the study of relationships coincided with two influential statements in 1976, one by John Cassell, an epidemiologist, and the other by Sidney Cobb, a psychiatrist, calling for research and intervention on what has come to be known as "social support"—a process by which assistance from other people can lessen the harmful impact of stress. Since their appeals, a great many studies have been conducted examining whether and by what means social support is related to physical and psychological health (see Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996, and Uchino, 2004, for reviews). Diverse processes have been studied under this heading, and although the question of how social support affects health remains open, the weight of evidence that positive social relations are associated with better health outcomes appears incontrovertible (Reis et al., 2000). Social support interventions are also common (Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000), some conducted by teams including social psychologists and many others informed by the findings of social psychological research.

A final trend that became evident somewhat later, around the turn of the millennium, reflects the impact of the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology seeks to identify the factors that contribute to human happiness and wellbeing, and in this regard several

literature reviews point squarely at relationships. For example, as Lyubomirsky, King and Diener ask and answer:

Do happy people have better social relationships than their less happy peers? Our review reveals this to be one of the most robust findings in the literature on well-being.  
(2005, p. 823)

If nothing else, the positive psychology movement led relationship researchers to more explicitly theorize about the factors that contribute to relationship thriving. For example, topics such as forgiveness, gratitude, exploration, social sharing of personal good news, support for personal growth, and affection became noteworthy. This represented something of a change of pace, in that prior research, following the lead of clinicians who sought to identify interventions for distressed couples, had emphasized the causes and consequences of relationship distress, dissatisfaction, and divorce (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Of course, "Relationships are people's most frequent source of both happiness and distress" (Berscheid & Reis, 1998, p. 243), and relationship toxicity—for example, loneliness, relationship violence, bereavement, and jealousy—remains a major focus of research. Several researchers have called for closer examination of the relative impact of appetitive and aversive processes (e.g., Baumeister, Bratlavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Reis & Gable, 2003), although debate continues about just what sort of factors fall into each category (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Maniaci & Reis, 2010).

### The future of relationship research in social psychology

If people are as poor prognosticators of their affective future as research shows (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005), there may be little reason to expect much better in predicting future directions for relationship research. More than a decade ago, Berscheid and Reis (1998) described relationship science as "young, sprawling, dynamic, enthusiastic, and growing at a feverish pace" (p. 253), requiring researchers to assimilate a formidable volume of work conducted with diverse methods and spanning many different conceptual perspectives. Since then, the pace of activity has, if anything, intensified, and the field, which was earlier characterized as being in its adolescence, has begun to mature as a science (Reis, 2007). Predictions about the future, then, are at best informed hunches. Nonetheless, in the hope that this brief history will help young researchers continue the field's advance, I conclude this chapter with my assessment of the current status of relationship research within social psychology, along with suggestions about potentially valuable (and in one case, absolutely essential) new directions. My hope is that these comments will be seen not as "buy recommendations," but rather as fingers pointed at conceptual gaps whose exploration may contribute to existing knowledge and its application.

I begin with consideration of reciprocal influences between relationship science and social psychology. In one direction, the

impact of basic social psychological theory and research on relationships work has been substantial. As discussed throughout this chapter, both early and contemporary relationships research have been strongly influenced by assumptions, theories, concepts, and methods popular among social psychologists. (This is of course not coincidental. Twenty-three of the 30 most-cited personal relationships researchers in the 1990s received their PhD training in social psychology; Perlman & Duck, 2006.) This influence continues. Significant contributions to relationship research appear regularly in social-psychological journals, and papers published in interdisciplinary journals often reflect a social-psychological approach to a research problem or possess considerable social-psychological content.

Nonetheless, several popular themes in current social-psychological research have yet to have more than passing impact on relationships research. For example, implicit processes and assessment have not yet made as broad an inroad into relationship science as they have in certain other areas in social psychology, despite the likelihood that much of importance to relationships occurs outside of awareness. Another cutting-edge topic, automaticity, has received similarly scant attention, even though automatic processes seem likely to play a more prominent role in relationships than the more commonly studied deliberate processes do (Berscheid & Ammazalorso, 2001; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). Social cognitive neuroscience has yet to have widespread impact among relationship researchers, despite the fact that relationship-relevant phenomena are of great interest to social neuroscientists. Also, researchers have yet to untangle the effects of general relationship history and beliefs relative to one's history and beliefs with a particular partner (Berscheid & Reis, 1998), a distinction that may be illuminated by hierarchical models of person knowledge (e.g., Kunda & Thagard, 1996). Other popular social-psychological topics that may prove fruitful for relationships research include embodied social cognition, power and social dominance, and research on social identity and categorization.

A perhaps curious gap concerns individual differences. To be sure, individual differences have been correlated often with innumerable relationship states and outcomes. Nevertheless, more than two decades ago, Clark and Reis (1988) noted that "we know little about how personality factors interact with relationship types, even though varying relationship characteristics ought to make different personality traits more or less salient" (p. 650), and that remains true today (albeit with a few exceptions; cf., Murray et al., 2006). Furthermore, and notwithstanding Funder's (2006) declaration that the person-situation debate has largely been resolved in favor of the interactional  $P \times S$  approach, little research has considered how the nature of person by situation interactions may vary as a function of relationship qualities (Reis, Capobianco, & Tsai, 2002). For example, self-esteem and attachment security predict differential responses to threat (Murray et al., 2006), but this effect may vary by relationship stage. Such research seems

likely to advance our understanding of the impact of individual differences on relational behavior.

If the impact of social psychological theory and research on relationships work has been substantial, it cannot be said that the reverse is true. To be sure, relationships research appears with increasing regularity in mainstream books, journals and conferences. (For example, the fifth edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* has two chapters on the topic, one covering affiliation, acceptance, and belonging, the other reviewing close relationships.) Introductory social psychology textbooks routinely cover close relationships, but it is important to note that this material without exception appears in a stand-alone chapter, rather than being integrated across other topics in social psychology. The net effect is thus that the central findings and theories of relationship research have had relatively little impact on research and theory in other areas of social psychology. In general terms, relationships are still considered a peripheral topic in the field, with many graduate programs having no coverage at all.<sup>3</sup> Better integration of relationship research into the mainstream of social psychological theorizing and research practice would be beneficial for at least four reasons.

First, as described in the opening paragraph of this chapter, few life activities occupy as much of our attention, thought, and goal-directed behavior as the initiation, development, maintenance, deterioration, and aftermath of close relationships. Moreover, from education and work to household routines and recreation, most life activities involve interaction with others, which typically means persons with whom we have ongoing relationships, particularly friends and family. In other words, the "social" in most human social behavior is relational.

Second, because close relationships provide one of the more personally meaningful contexts in which social psychological processes operate, researchers wishing to establish the generality of basic (i.e., acontextual) processes ignore relationships at their theory's peril. For example, few circumstances elicit emotions as commonly or as forcefully as relationship events do. Similarly, the motivational underpinnings of many key processes, such as those involved in self-regulation, social cognition, and social influence, are most likely to be evident when motives, goals and needs are activated, as they commonly are in relationships or when relationships are sought.

Third, social psychological theories are increasingly influenced by evolutionary thinking; in other words, many social psychological processes take account of the neural architecture that evolved as a result of the adaptational problems our ancestors faced (Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). As discussed earlier, these adaptational problems and their solutions commonly involved relationships. Early humans (and our mammalian ancestors) lived in small groups of interdependent individuals; interactions with strangers tended to be infrequent, and often when they did occur, those strangers were potentially threatening members of outgroups. Any attempt to understand human neural architecture as it applies to social behavior, therefore, ought to consider the very different role of

relationship partners and strangers in shaping behavior during our ancestral past.

Fourth, and most importantly, elsewhere I have argued that social psychological research would benefit from greater attention to the relational aspects of situations (Reis, 2008, 2010a). Social-psychological research and theorizing often emphasize the impersonal features of situations to the relative neglect of their interpersonal core (Kelley, 2000). Like Kelley, I believe that the ability of social psychological theories to explain human behavior would be enhanced by greater emphasis on the latter: consideration of the impact of who else is affected by, or has an effect on, the individual. In other words, people do not respond to the same stimuli in the same way across relationship contexts (Reis et al., 2000). To what extent do basic social-psychological processes vary as a function of the relationship context in which they are investigated? To the degree that they do, then our theories will need to construe these phenomena less as general (i.e., acontextual) human tendencies and more as reflections of contextually grounded processes, one major component of which is relational.

For example, consider attributional egotism, the tendency to take credit for success and deny responsibility for failure. Most textbooks present this result as a basic principle of human social cognition. Yet Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, and Elliot (1998) demonstrated this pattern only in distant dyads; in close dyads, no such bias was evident, suggesting that self-serving attributional biases may not predominate when they imply invidious comparisons with close others. Other studies (e.g., Beach et al., 1998; Scinta and Gable, 2005) have reached similar conclusions. The literature includes many other examples in which so-called basic social-psychological phenomena and processes are moderated by the relationship context in which they occur (see Reis, 2008, 2010a, for reviews).

Note that this line of reasoning is entirely consistent with decades of social psychological theorizing. Social psychology is fundamentally grounded in the premise that context—i.e., the situation—affects behavior (Ross & Nisbett, 1991; see Reis & Holmes, in press, for a review). The nature of a person's relationship with others who are involved in the situation, and with whom behavior must be coordinated in order to produce desired outcomes, is necessarily a key component of that situation (Kelley et al., 2003)—and, in fact, to participants, it may be *the* key component. Thus, relationships are intrinsic to understanding the impact of situations on behavior. Better integration of relationship processes across the spectrum of social psychological theories would emphasize the role of interpersonal factors in shaping social behavior. It would also contribute to theory-building, by specifying interpersonal boundary conditions for social psychological phenomena.

## Conclusion

In concluding the seminal 1983 volume on close relationships, Kelley referred to relationship science as an essential science:

Basic knowledge within the social, behavioral, and biological sciences is essential to an understanding of human relationships. Here we wish to make a case for the opposite point, that basic knowledge of close relationships is *essential* to the other disciplines, especially psychology and sociology . . . Since many human characteristics are determined by the nature of social relationships, the knowledge contributed by a science of relationships . . . is indispensable for the full development of both psychological science and social science.

(p. 486; emphasis in original)

In my opinion, there is no branch of science in which Kelley's assertion rings truer than in social psychology. In the increasingly interdisciplinary world of modern science, social psychology's niche is to elucidate the influence of the social world on human thought, affect, and behavior. Few components of the social world in which we live our lives have as diverse or as potent effects as the relational components. Greater integration of relational theorizing into the mainstream of social psychology can only enhance the validity and usefulness of our theories, and the impact of our work on other sciences.

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## Notes

1. Abraham Maslow had offered a similar observation four years earlier: "It is amazing how little the empirical sciences have to offer on the subject of love" (1954, p. 235).
2. Thus, for typologically minded theorists, attachment security reflects high comfort with closeness and low anxiety; anxious-ambivalence by comfort with closeness and high anxiety; avoidance by discomfort with closeness and low anxiety; and fearfulness by discomfort with closeness and high anxiety.
3. On two occasions I have had representatives of major international social-psychological organizations request that relationships not be the topic of invited participants for international meetings.

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