We *Should* Study Relational Trajectories, But We Should Think through the Meta-Theoretical Framework More Broadly

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Research on initial attraction and on the nature and functioning of close relationships is flourishing. Yet Eastwick, Finkel, and Simpson (in press) correctly point to a current dearth of findings on how romantic relationships are initiated, grow, change, and deteriorate across time. Eastwick et al. (in press) advocate for increased attention to three aspects of the shape of relationship trajectories across time, specifically urging us to focus on the ascent, peak, and descent of the overall judged quality of these relationships as seen by their members. They urge us to determine where thresholds (for such things as commitment to a relationship) are reached. They also urge us to attend to the composition of aspects of relationships that contribute to the trajectory of these evaluations of romantic relationships. Finally, they urge us to place the trajectory of any given romantic and/or sexual relationship in the context of the trajectories of other concurrent, prior, and subsequent romantic relationships.

We strongly agree that our field of relationship research would be strengthened by documenting the nature of relationship trajectories across time and by attending to all five factors to which Eastwick et al. (in press) point. We also agree with their advice that we should document both normative trajectories of relationships as well as individual differences in those trajectories, capture the very beginnings of relationships when possible, and examine trajectories of each member of a relationship and compare members' trajectories when possible. Yet before researchers map out relationship trajectories using Eastwick et al.’s (in press) meta-theoretical framework as a guide, we advocate stepping back and thinking carefully and broadly about their framework and its five dimensions. We, personally, would broaden their framework in some ways and alter the characterization of their framework in other ways before utilizing it to investigate our own research questions. Here we provide some suggestions for adding breath and precision to the framework.

First, we note that Eastwick et al. (in press) write about and apply their framework specifically to romantic and/or sexual relationships. Yet the dimensions they identify are important for studying *all* close relationships and, indeed, all relationships, close or not, that endure across time. Second, in terms of relational outcomes to be tracked, Eastwick et al. (in press) emphasize only “*arc-shaped* *evaluative*” trajectories. We believe relationship researchers should track many different outcomes and combinations of outcomes, not just romantic or sexual feelings or other, valenced evaluations such as romantic interest, relationship quality, and commitment. There are many different relationship characteristics as well as many different intra- and interpersonal processes worth tracking across time. Moreover, evaluations of outcomes need not always be the overarching and primary construct. Which construct or constructs will (and should) be primary will (and should) depend upon researchers’ own theories and purposes. Third, we suggest differentiating dimensions related to the shape of trajectories across time from dimensions such as thresholds, composition of processes underlying the shape of overall evaluations, and density of relationship trajectories. Connected to this last point, we propose the abandonment of the term “*arc-*shaped trajectories” in favor of the simple term “shape of trajectories,” because not all possible trajectories necessarily include the curves to which the term “arc” alludes even though we suspect many will. We also suggest an expansion of constructs considered in the latter group of dimensions (i.e., threshold, composition, and density). We elaborate briefly on each point next.

**Relationship Trajectories of Many Different Types of Relationships Should Be Tracked**

Our first point is simple. Eastwick et al. (in press) advocate for a set of meta-theoretical dimensions to which to attend when studying relationship trajectories in romantic and/or sexual relationships. Their research examples follow suit. Whereas most recent close relationship research does focus on romantic relationships, tracking and coming to understand relationship trajectories and dimensions of these trajectories is important for the study of *all* close relationships -- for friendships, for sibling relationships, for parent-child relationships and, indeed, for the study of all relationships (save one-time interactions with strangers) across time.

Further, even for researchers primarily interested in the functioning of romantic relationships, when considering at least one of Eastwick et al.’s (in press) five meta-theoretical dimensions—density—including a variety of types of close (and, perhaps, other) relationships seems important to us. Any given person is likely to have many types of relationships co-occuring in that person's life and those relationships are likely to influence one another. Researchers might ask how the advent and growth of a romantic relationship impacts and is impacted by the trajectories of simultaneously existing friendships and work relationships, as well as a person's own “relationship” with that person's job or career itself. One might ask how the birth of a child and the development of a relationship with that child interacts with the trajectory of the parents’ relationship with one another across time. There exist large gaps in our understanding of the trajectories of many types of relationships, and the density and nature of a person’s romantic relationship trajectories likely interact with the density and nature ofthat person’s other relationship trajectories.

**Researchers Should Consider Not Only the Trajectories of Relationship (and Partner) Evaluations But Also the Trajectories of a Wide Variety of Relational Outcomes and Processes**

Eastwick et al. (in press) focus primarily on the importance of tracking trajectories of romantic partners’ summary evaluations of their relationships (for example, their satisfaction or happiness with the relationship). Such trajectories are interesting and important, but focusing primarily on overarching evaluations of relationships and partners across time—even when considering what Eastwick et al. (in press) call the composition of those trajectories—will be limiting. In studying relationship trajectories, one might focus primarily on the shapes of the trajectories of a wide variety of intra- or interpersonal outcomes or processes. Which ones should be studied will depend upon the researchers’ own theories or, in the absence of theory, general exploratory questions.

In sum, while we strongly agree with Eastwick et al. (in press) that studying relationship trajectories is important, we urge having an open mind about which dependent variables (and combinations of variables) ought to be tracked across time with attention to their ascents, peaks, maintenance, fluctuations, and declines (or lack of any of those aspects of trajectories). We also urge tracking shapes of a variety of summary characteristics of relationships beyond just evaluations (for example, trust, commitment, communal strength, felt duty to be responsive), as well as of the trajectories of a wide variety of intra- and interpersonal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors across time (for example, self-disclosure, expression of emotion, self-protective behaviors, shared activities, partner evaluations, positive illusions, inclusion of the other in a person’s self-concept), as researchers’ purposes dictate. In so doing, it will be important to include both evaluations of relationships and intra- and interpersonal processes that are (or seem) constructive in nature (e.g. judgments of love and responsive actions) and those that are (or seem) destructive in nature (e.g. disillusionment with the relationship, physical and verbal abuse). We further urge studying varying combinations of such constructs across time, again as researchers’ purposes dictate. Researchers will have to pick and choose constructs and combinations of constructs to track governed by their own theories as studies, especially longitudinal ones get complex and burdensome for researchers and participants alike very quickly.

In other words, time should remain as the x-axis in the graphs that Eastwick et al. (in press) call for us to create. Yet the outcomes depicted on the y-axis should and will vary considerably depending upon the goals of individual theorists’ and researchers’ work. Moreover, researchers need not designate one outcome as primary.

We will give just one example from our own theorizing about the nature of one of the gaps which Eastwick et al. (in press) point out as currently existing in the relationship literature, namely the gap in our knowledge of relationship initiation. Our theory of relationship initiation (Beck & Clark, 2010; Clark & Beck, 2010; Clark, Beck, & Aragón, 2019) posits that, following initial attraction to a potential romantic partner or friend, people initiate close relationships, in part, by working through three tasks in concert, each in a self-focused and primarily self-serving manner. Specifically, people: (a) Strategically present themselves as a good relationship partner in order to win over the potential partner over, (b) Evaluate the potential partner as a relationship partner for them deciding whether or not to continue to pursue a relationship with that person as they do so, and (c) Protect themselves from rejection by not revealing vulnerabilities to the potential partner in order to avoid the pain of rejection. These processes undoubtedly interact and influence one another across time. For instance, to evaluate a partner it is important to assess whether that partner will be responsive to one's needs yet expressing those needs (to determine whether the partner will response) reveals vulnerabilities which may interfere with self-protective processes.

We further suggest that, ideally, when these three tasks are successfully completed (which will happen in some but not all cases), people ideally transition from being primarily self-focused and pursuing each of these tasks to dropping pursuit of all three tasks. That is, people no longer strive to impress the partner through strategic self-presentation (and, instead, present themselves authentically), no longer regularly evaluate the partner (and, instead, accept the partner), and no longer protect themselves from rejection (and, instead, reveal vulnerabilities and seek and accept care). We believe some relationship partners will be able to transition to enacting an ongoing communal relationship, which includes having a more flexible, less consistently self-directed focus of attention and attending to both the partner’s welfare and to one’s own welfare, as well as to jointly beneficial activities (Clark, Graham, Williams, & Lemay, 2008; Clark, Hirsch, & Monin, in press). Yet some will not.

We have conducted some tests of normative aspects of this theory (Beck & Clark, 2009b; Beck, Clark, & Olson, 2017) and of individual differences in people’s ability to tackle the tasks of relationship initiation (Beck & Clark, 2009a; Ketay & Beck, 2017; Ketay, Welker, Beck, Thorson, & Slatcher, 2018). Yet it is clear to us that optimal tests of our theory will involve following Eastwick et al.’s (in press) advice to track relationship trajectories from the time people first encounter one another through and past times at which some of them commit to romantic relationships and friendships. In Figure 1 we illustrate some *possible* trajectories of all three processes (strategic self-presentation, partner evaluation, and self-protection) as proposed to occur between a person’s initial attraction to a potential friend or romantic partner and ideally, their commitment to and maintenance of a truly communal relationship. (In actuality, we would expect considerable and predictable variation in what occurs. For instance, we suspect that avoidantly- and anxiously-attached people may be less likely to reach the point of having a well-functioning communal relationship than will securely-attached people, and that anxiously-attached people will experience more fluctuations in all three processes than will either avoidantly- or securely-attached people.)



Figure 1. Possible trajectories of three relationship initiation processes across relationship time and eventual commitment to an ongoing, truly communal relationship among securely-attached people.

Note that to test our theory, at least to start, we would *not* make a person’s overarching evaluation of the potential partner primary, although engaging in active evaluation of the partner (which is distinct from the actual content of the evaluation) would be one of the variables we would need to track to test the theory. It would be tracked along with indices of self-protection (primarily by suppressing expressions of vulnerability) and of strategic self-presentation as a good communal relationship partner, as well as other traits the potential partner may value (e.g., physical attractiveness, material resources, social connections). It also would be valuable to track flexibility in focus of attention indices of a communal relationship truly existing. For instance, other research suggests that across the transition from the initiation to the establishment of an ongoing communal relationship, we ought to see movement from offering more support than we request from partners to showing a more even balance of offering and requesting support (Beck & Clark, 2009b; Beck et al., 2017), as well as movement from strategically avoiding any appearance of keeping track of inputs into joint tasks to not bending over backwards to do that (Clark, 1984).

In conjunction with our point that what is tracked in relationship trajectories will depend upon researchers’ own theories and purposes, we note that Eastwick et al. (in press) suggest that, *if* a third dimension is added, that that third dimension ought to be the degree of interdependence between two people (or, in other words, the extent to which two individuals’ thoughts, feelings and behaviors have frequent, diverse, and strong impacts on one another; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 2004). Yet we are not sure that that third dimension of interdependence should *always* be tracked. Again, individual researchers’ theories will dictate whether that should be the case. For instance, imagine a study designed to test Berscheid’s theory) of the experience of emotion in close relationships *across time* (Berscheid, 1982; Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001. Berscheid and colleagues suggest that relationships that are highly interdependent have the greatest potential for generating emotions because disruptions in interdependent routines create arousal, which may be labeled and experienced as any of a variety of positively- or negatively-valenced emotions. For the purposes of this theory regarding the experience of emotion in relationships, tracking both emotional experience (as the primary construct in this case) and levels of interdependence across time makes very good sense to us. For the purposes of tracking trajectories to test *other* theories such as our own relationship initiation theory, we are not sure that adding levels of interdependence will always be the best place to *start*, given limitations in what researchers and participants can and will do in initial longitudinal investigations of relational phenomena. Of course, as relationships are initiated and endure across time it will be interesting and, likely, theoretically important to watch what does happen to overall interdependence across time. Our point is that we, personally, would *start* studies of trajectories examining more specific sorts of interdependence.

**For Purposes of Tracking Trajectories, Are the Five Dimensions to which Eastwick et al. (in press) Point to the Only Dimensions We Should Consider? How Should These Dimensions Be Grouped and Thought About?**

Whereas we applaud Eastwick et al.’s (in press) call to examine relationship trajectories across time, we urge further thinking about which dimensions all researchers should investigate. Consider first the points about the shape of arcs to which Eastwick et al. (in press) urge us to attend. We think that examining the shape of those trajectories, including rates of ascent, peaks, and existence and nature of fluctuations, should be standard. Additionally, we value the idea of examining both partners’ trajectories within a given relationship as their trajectories unfold and interact across time.

Note that we would fold Eastwick et al.’s (in press) fluctuations in relational trajectories into the overall list of the *shape* of trajectories to which to attend. In addition, we would advise searching for and taking note of plateaus in those trajectories as well as discontinuities in processes (i.e., points at which evidence for whatever construct a researcher is focusing upon suddenly appears or disappears). As an illustration, we return to our own theory of relationship initiation (Beck & Clark, 2010; Clark & Beck, 2010; Clark et al., 2019). A sudden dropping (i.e., a discontinuity) of a tendency to evaluate a partner (as a more negatively valued partner for the self) when the partner commits an embarrassing act and the appearance of responding with care and reassurance in such instances might be taken as a marker of the end of relationship initiation and the start of commitment to a communal relationship. In contrast, a steady state of such evaluations (i.e., a plateau) might indicate that relationship initiation has stalled. Thinking about plateaus and discontinuities also makes us question whether the term “arc” is the best term to use to describe trajectories. Arcs imply curves. Although trajectories may typically include curves, we would suggest using the more neutral term “shape” in place of "arc," referring to something seen in outline.

We see the three other, non-shape, dimensions of Eastwick et al.’s (in press) meta-theory (thresholds, composition, and density) as distinct from this collection of characteristics of the shape of trajectories across time. We agree that all three dimensions should be considered and studied, although we see the choice of studying them as intertwined with the point we made above: Just what outcome variables and combination of outcome variables should be tracked should be theory and question dependent. As also should be apparent, we agree that questions of density should be considered, but we would broaden that concept to include not just the density of romantic relationships but of many different types of close and other relationships.

Yet, after separating the Eastwick et al. (in press) meta-theoretical variables into those relevant to the nature/shape of trajectories for any given construct and other constructs to consider (that are conceptually distinct from shape), we urge researchers to consider adding to the latter category of constructs dependent on what is important to their own theories and research purposes. Additional constructs characterizing the overall situations in which relationships are embedded might well be as relevant to studying relational trajectories across time as are the densities of similarly categorized relationships (in Eastwick et al.’s (in press) case, other romantic relationships). We already have pointed to people’s other close relationships as potentially relevant, and we would add that factors such as people’s work conditions and intensity (and trajectory) of their job, their economic status (and trajectory of that status), and their educational status (and trajectory of that status) may all impact relational trajectories. Thus, we would broaden Eastwick et al.’s (in press) advice so as to advise that as one studies relational trajectories, it will often be wise to study the wider situations in which those relationships are embedded and the trajectories of aspects of those situations that co-evolve across the same period of time.

**Summary**

We very much like the push Eastwick et al. (in press) have given relationship researchers, ourselves included, to attend to the dimension of time in relationships and fill in gaps in our knowledge of the nature and functioning of relationships across time. We appreciate Eastwick et al.’s (in press) emphasis on considering multiple aspects of the shape of relational trajectories—rates of ascent, peaks, declines, and fluctuations—and we suggest attending to plateaus and discontinuities (i.e., abrupt decreases and increases or, indeed, gaps in a process), as well. We agree that it is wise to attend to thresholds for important events and transitions occurring in relationships and to the composition of events that drive summary evaluations in relationships across time. Yet we would suggest that rather than assuming that relational evaluations should be the primary construct to which researchers ought to attend and that thresholds, composition, and density (of romantic relationships) are *the* important variables to which to attend, we ought to be more open and theory-driven in determining what each researcher tracks across time. We urge attention to relationship trajectories in a wide array of types of relationships. Moreover we would extend considerations of context beyond the context of other similar, ongoing, relationships to considering the context of participants lives far more generally including their likely many relationships of many types, their jobs/careers, their socio-economic status, their health and other aspects of their context that scholars deem important to consider.

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