

What Is Good and What Is Missing in Relationship Theory and Research

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## What Is Good and What Is Missing in Relationship Theory and Research

Both theory and empirical research on close, personal, relationships are thriving. There is much about which the relationship science field, now firmly established, can be proud. Whereas celebration is in order, it is important not just to reflect upon what we have learned about also to think about what is missing, and to take on new challenges. In this chapter, I mention a great deal of theory and research in our field but I do not review it in depth for two reasons. The first reason is a good one. It is impossible to review all relationship theory and related research in a brief chapter and do it justice. Second, most of this work already has been reviewed and reviewed well elsewhere. Instead, I will note the domains of theory and empirical accomplishment that now exist (likely missing some in the process) and refer readers to existing good reviews. Then I highlight some challenges we need to face.

### **Where We Are**

There is no dearth of theory in relationship science. Three broad theoretical approaches along with many more specific and narrow theories exist. Together these have guided much of relationship science. Some of the narrower theories arose from the broader ones, but quite a number arose independently.

The three broad approaches include: Interdependence theory which began as a theory not so much of close, personal relationships per se but rather as a theory mapping various forms of interdependence between people and, in the process, documenting of situational constraints on people's behavior and interactions (Kelley, 1979; Kelley et al., 2003; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Later, interdependence theory was applied specifically to understanding the nature of close, personal relationships – especially of romantic

relationships and marriages. Good older and newer reviews of much of the work exist. (See, e.g., reviews by Agnew & Le, 2015; Arriaga, 2013; Finkel & Rusbult, 2008; Kelley, 1979; Kelley et al., 1983; Murray & Holmes, 2009; Reis & Arriaga, 2015; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2012; Van Lange & Rusbult, 2012, and see Agnew & Vanderdrift, this volume). This approach introduced us to thinking carefully about just how people are interdependent with one another and how interpersonal behavior constrained situations (including other people) in ways that drive people's behavior toward one another. This theoretical approach introduced many constructs to the relationships field moving us far beyond early approaches dominated by, sometimes atheoretical, studies of the determinants of initial attraction research. They moved us far beyond merely thinking of how rewards and costs in relationships drive liking and relationship satisfaction. Some of the constructs include the comparison levels people have for their relationships, comparison levels for alternatives, investments into relationships, and social and personal prescriptives, transformation of motivation. They led us to think of satisfaction and commitment conceived of as distinct constructs. They introduced the idea of closeness as the degree of frequent, diverse and strong mutual influence interdependence (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). These continue to be important constructs for our field.

Interdependence theorists have contributed many, many, now classic, studies of relationships to the literature (see Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998 for just three examples of the numerous empirical contributions arising from this approach.)

Interdependence theorists also have provided us an atlas of situations with accompanying discussions of just how such situations shape our relational behavior (Kelley et al., 2003) with which, in my opinion, all relationship scientists should become familiar. Interdependence

theory was and remains a truly social psychological theory emphasizing how situations (including other people) drive our behavior. Researchers coming from this tradition proved critical in moving us beyond simply studying initial attraction to studying the dynamics of ongoing relationships.

The second major, and quite different, influence on our field has been adult attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014 and see Mikulincer & Shaver, this volume). Whereas interdependence theorists have emphasized the impact of situations on all relationships, adult attachment theory has an evolutionary basis (the assumption that infants and caretakers are built to attach to and bond with one another to insure the infants' survival) and adult attachment theorists have emphasized intra-psychic differences between people based on how securely, anxiously, and/or avoidantly attached they were to caregivers and, presumably are to adult romantic partners. This theory arose from clinical and developmental psychologists' work on attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) which was later applied to adult romantic relationships in ways that mirror these styles. Later work shifted to emphasize dimensions of attachment with people being characterized as more or less anxiously attached and more or less avoidantly attached. Although attachment theory is a theory of normative processes and the functions that people serve for one another and is certainly compatible with Interdependence approaches, most strikingly for our field it also provided people with a way to think about individual differences between people in their approach to and behavior within close relationships introducing adult relationship researchers to the constructs of secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment. These individual differences that could be easily measured. The application of this approach to adult close relationships led

to an enormous body of research characterizing the relationships of people with these differing styles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, 2016). Importantly this work focused researchers on intrapsychic processes within people, thought of primarily in terms of individual differences, while interdependence theorists focused on situational factors. However, the work expanded to also include differences in attachment styles an individual might have with different close relationship partners.

The third broad theoretical approach has been an evolutionary one (e.g., Buss, 1995; Kenrick & Cohen, 2012; Maner & Shackelford, 2008, Neuberg, Kenrick & Schaller, 2010). Followers of this approach emphasize how people evolved to facilitate mating, reproductive success, and the successful raising of offspring to the point at which they would reproduce insuring the survival of genes across generations rather than on more proximal determinants of attraction and relationship functioning (Kenrick, Neuberg, & White, 2013). This theoretical approach has generated hypotheses and explanations distinct from those generated either by independence or attachment theories, many of which have to do with initial attraction. For instance evolutionary approaches have led scholars to research that has identified what makes a person physically attractive (Langlois et al., 2000) and/or cute (Zebrowitz, Brownlow, & Olson, 1992). Attractiveness and cuteness have, in turn, been shown to capture attention (Brosch, Sander, & Scherer, 2007; Maner, Gailliot, Rouby, & Miller, 2007)) and to have important effects on initial attraction and behavior (Sherman, Haidt, & Coan, 2009; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). Much research about gender differences in mate preferences as well on questions such whether males and females may seek different patterns of attributes in partners, the impact of menstrual cycle phase on attraction of males to females and of females to males, work mate

guarding, flirting and jealousy arose from this tradition; so too did research on how males compete with males and females with females for a target's attraction (see Krems, Neel, Neuberg, Putts, & Kenrick, 2016; Maner, Rouby, & Gonzaga, 2008; for a few of many, many examples of empirical work arising from this tradition). None of this research would have arisen from either interdependence theory or attachment theory.

There is widespread agreement that these three broad theoretical approaches have been major forces behind researchers' growing understanding of close relationships – primarily romantic relationships. Excellent reviews of research done over the past four decades grounded in these theories exist and there is little need here to repeat these reviews. (See for instance, reviews by Murray & Holmes, 2011, and Reis & Arriaga, 2015, of interdependence theory and research, by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, of adult attachment theory and research, and by Simpson, 2017, and Langlois et al., 2000, of work based on evolutionary theory.) However, it is important to note, that many studies and research programs influenced by these approaches cannot be neatly placed within the domain of just one of the three nor is there much value in trying to do so. Instead they represent blends of these approaches with ideas being taken from two or even all three.

It is also the case that there have been *many* other more narrow theories that have contributed greatly to growth and flourishing of relationship science. Sometimes these have influenced by one or a combination of the three broad approaches just mentioned, sometimes they have influenced by theory from clinical work or the fields of sociology, anthropology or other disciplines and sometimes they have emerged independently. These, too, are well worth readers' attention. They include, for instance, self-expansion theory (Aron, Lewandowski,

Mashek, & Aron, 2014), self-evaluation maintenance theory (Tesser, 1988), a distinction between communal and exchange relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979, 2012), Reis and Shaver's (1988) model of intimacy, Karney and Bradbury's (1995) vulnerability-stress-adaptation model, Murray and Holmes' risk regulation model (Cavallo, Murray, & Holmes, 2014; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006), Bugental's (2000) theory of the distinct functions that relationships serve, Fiske's (1992) description of the different ways in which people give and receive benefits to one another, Downey's and Feldman's (1996) theoretical ideas regarding individual differences in rejection sensitivity, Andersen's work on how self-concepts relate to and are shaped by relationships (Andersen & Chen, 2002) and on transference (Anderson, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995), models of empathic accuracy in close relationships (Ickes & Hodges, 2013), of error management in relationships (Haselton & Galpersin, 2014), of destiny and growth beliefs for relationships (Knee & Petty, 2013), of aggression in relationships (Finkel 2014) and the list of more narrow approaches to understanding close relationships could go on. I mention some of the important narrower theories here but note that others are also important and new theoretical views continue to emerge. Moreover, there is much work that appears to be driven by some hybrid of the three broad approaches and/or some combination of other, more narrow theories. Students of relationship science should become familiar with theory in our field broadly even though that may seem a daunting task.

These approaches have produced the rich bodies of empirical work and there are many reviews of empirical work that cross cut these theoretical approaches in attempts to summarize what is currently known about relationships (e.g., Clark & Lemay, 2010; Finkel, Simpson, & Eastwick, 2017). There also are texts on relationship research to guide newcomers to the field

each from somewhat different perspectives – a broad overview organized by topic but including theory as well (Miller, 2015), a more theoretically organized, social and evolutionary psychology driven text (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2013), a text with more emphasis on both theory and empirical work with a more clinical bent (Bradbury & Karney, 2014) and a text focusing on communication issues in relationships (Knapp, Vangelisti, & Caughlin, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Given the range of reviews available what seems more critical to our field is raising questions about what we have *not* done to date and thus, theoretical issues to which we might attend more now.

### **Challenges for the Future**

We have moved from a position of lamentations regarding the dearth of theory and related empirical work on close relationships (Berscheid, 1986) to celebrating its beginning and initial growth, or what Berscheid called the greening of relationship science (Berscheid, 1999a; Berscheid & Peplau, 1983). From there we have moved to the development of relationship science or what Reis has called its ripening of relationship (Reis, 2007) and, most recently, to the blossoming and flourishing of relationship science (Campbell & Simpson, 2013. Also see Reis, 2012, for an overview of an excellent history of relationship science and Perlman, Duck and Hengstebeck, this volume). Our very success means that we can step back, see the forest of relationship research (and its gaps and edges) rather than our many, generally quite healthy

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, there also are many, many –popular books on relationships often written with no reference to refereed research, which, for researchers and students of research, should either be avoided or read very critically in light of empirical work. As researchers we also need to be more outspoken in commenting on misleading and potentially harmful views promulgated in such literature.



trees. We do need to think about what's missing from the overall picture. I mention just five here. Each is important but I readily knowledge more challenges exist as well.

### **Challenge I**

#### ***Integration of Our Empirical and Theoretical Work From Different Relationship Science Laboratories***

Whereas the amount and quality of work relationship scientists have been producing and continue to produce is impressive much of the work remains too siloed. Our discipline provides rewards for establishing one's own new theoretical ideas and new empirical work more so than for integrating work across relationship science laboratories. This is not the first time this has been said nor am I the only one to have said this (see Berscheid & Collins, 2000; Reis, 2007; Campbell & Surra, 2012; Holmes, 2012, Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2014; Campbell & Simpson, 2013), but it remains important -- very important. To be sure, we often are well aware of one another's work, know one another personally, publish in the same journals, attend many of the same conferences and hear one another's talks at those conventions. Yet, although there are certainly exceptions (see, for instance, Finkel, Simpson, & Eastwick, 2017). We rarely try to integrate social psychological, clinical, and communication work done on the basis of different theories or individual difference work that utilizes different measures. That fact has not slowed the accumulation of findings in our field. It has, however, hampered our field, from becoming as coherent and cumulative as it might be and ought to be.

Many examples of this might be given. I will use just one. We have consensus that people being embedded in responsive relationships in which each member effectively strives to understand, to accept, and to care for the other results in a sense of security for those

members as well as better mental and physical health (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010) as well as consensus in recognizing and documenting that people vary in their ability to approach, initiate, grow, and maintain such relationships due to some lack of trust in other people. But what exactly is the nature of these deficits? We have many measures of this deficit -- measures exist, for instance, of having explicit self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), having implicit self-esteem (Greenwall & Farnham, 2000), being anxiously attached (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000), being avoidantly attached (Fraley et al., 2000), being rejection sensitive (Downey & Feldman, 1996), and having low communal orientation or being high in exchange orientation (Clark & Mills, 2012). If one extends a consideration of such measures beyond social/personality psychology to clinical psychology, the list grows to include measures of social anxiety and of generalized anxiety disorder (See Julian, 2011 for a discussion of measures to tap these clinical disorders). These measures all overlap in the sense of people having low trust that others care and having tendencies to socially self-protect. Yet just what is it that overlaps and how, when, and why do these measures overlap? If they are distinct, just how, when, and in what ways are they distinct? Addressing these questions is crucial for integrating our work.

So too do our theories sometimes predict different effects and our laboratories sometimes produce seemingly disparate findings. When disparate results have been obtained and/or when theories conflict we need to map out the boundary conditions for each. Just who helps friends more than strangers *and* feels good about it (Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987; Williamson & Clark, 1989) and who will hurt friends more than strangers in order to feel good him or herself – meaning not envious (Tesser & Smith, 1980)? And when do these things happen? When do we share partner's joys and help them capitalize on them (Gable, Reis,

Impett, & Asher, 2004) and when do we experience jealousy and envy (Salovey & Rodin, 1984)? When is it best for people and relationships for support to be invisible (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler (2000) and when might it fine and even better for benefits to be quite visible (Clark & Mills, 1979 )?

We have the literatures documenting numerous contrasting effects such as these. Often within these literatures there are hints that explain the difference (and allow us to develop new theory relevant to understanding close relationships.) Yet we need to more systematically map out the boundary conditions for our phenomena and create a more complete, integrated, map of when they occur and when they do not (and something quite different may occur.)

There are some good examples of this beginning to happen. For instance, consider the question of just when, and for whom, and with whom is forgiveness good for a relationship (e.g., Rusbult, Hanon, Stocker, & Finkel, 2005) and just when, for whom, with whom is it bad for a relationship (e.g., Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010; McNulty, 2010)? In 2016 McNulty and Russell tackled a part of this question – namely the “with whom” part of it. In a series of studies they found good evidence that forgiving a partner high in trait agreeableness reduced that partner’s subsequent offending (presumably because such partners want to reciprocate the kindness) but that forgiving a partner low in trait agreeableness resulted in increased offending (presumably because they discovered their partner was not easily angered). Yet more mapping is needed to answer questions about how the magnitude of the offense, the nature of the forgiver (and many other variables) matter.

The bottom line is that an important challenge is to integration theory and the extant (and quickly growing) body of empirical work in our own field. Sometimes the pieces will fall together neatly and provide additional knowledge in the form of establishing boundary conditions for effects. Sometimes figuring things out will be challenging. Continually striving to meet this challenge will make for a more coherent understanding of relationships.

## **Challenge II**

### **Integration of Relationship Science Work With Work in the *Rest* of Psychology (and Other Fields Which Deal With Psychological Phenomena)**

I doubt that many theorists and researchers beyond those recognized as relationship researchers would disagree that people are fundamentally social in nature. We also certainly seem to have consensus that people are built to form bonds with others. As Berscheid (2003) has stated, humans' greatest strength is almost certainly their ability and inclination to bond with other humans. Many have emphasized this point (Beckes & Coan, 2011; Bowlby, 1969, 1979, 1980). Humans are built to mate with one another, to bond, and raise offspring together, to form coalitions, and to set up business-like relationships for reciprocity purposes (Bugental, 2000) and we seem to need to do this not just to survive but to thrive (Feeney & Collins, 2015).

As relationship researchers we have focused a great deal of attention on what attracts people to one another and the dynamics that occur within these relationships which determine whether we are satisfied with and commit to these relationships (Clark & Lemay, 2010). So too have we, together with health psychologists and epidemiologists, established links between having these relationships and mental and physical health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Yet, increasingly, researchers have demonstrated relational context influences wide ranging

psychological phenomena.<sup>2</sup> Our own identities shift with relational context (Chen, Boucher, Andersen, & Saribay, 2014), our judgments about how steep hills are and how formidable foes are shift when with friends (Schnall, Haber, Stefanucci, & Proffitt, 2008; Fessler & Holbrook, 2013), our judgments of how dangerous our communities shift when we have children (Eibach, Libby, & Gilovich, 2003; Eibach & Mock, 2011; Eibach, Libby, & Erlinger, 2012; Fessler, Holbrook, Pollack, & Hahn-Holbrook, 2014), and so too do our judgments of how painful a cold pressor task is shift with relational context (Martin, Hathaway, Labester, Mirali, Acland, Niederstrasser, ... Mogil, 2015). So too do judgments of how pleasant scenes are (Boothby, Smith, Clark, & Bargh, 2017) and how good food tastes (Boothby, Clark, & Bargh, 2014; Boothby, Smith, Clark, & Bargh, 2016) shift with relational context.

We know, in other words, that relational context changes our experiences of the world. When relational context has been taken into account it has clearly been shown to shape the form that many phenomena in many domains take including, but certainly not limited to, prosocial behavior, social influence, person perception, self-concepts, self-regulation, and judgments of non-social stimuli (see Clark, Lemay, & Reis, 2017; Reis, 2006, 2009 for a discussion).

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<sup>2</sup> Relational context itself is captured in various ways in our literature -- as relationship type; as individual differences in orientation toward relationships; as relationship character (the personality; so to speak; of the relationship); as relationship histories brought forward to influence current thoughts, feelings and behavior; as the point in the development (or dissolution) of a relationship; and as where a relationship sits within a larger network of relationships. See Clark, Boothby, Clark-Polner, & Reis, 2015 or Clark, Lemay, & Reis, 2017 for an extended discussion of this. We need to be inclusive in thinking about what relational context means and in taking it into account.

Yet, curiously, we have not made sufficient inroads toward *integrating* our theoretical and empirical relationship science work with that done in many other areas of psychological work including challenging the generalizability of much extant research. The same point, actually, might be stated more broadly for need to integrated our theoretical and empirical relationship science work with work on psychological phenomena even more broadly including with work done by communications theorists, economists (especially those now known as behavioral economists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and, increasingly philosophers now known as experimental philosophers, see also Campbell & Surra, 2012). We *know* relationships shape many phenomena, yet we are not jumping to doing research or even commenting on the relevance of relationships to many “non-relationship oriented” areas of psychological research. This is true even in areas of psychological work in which it seems obvious that relational context should and will shape psychology. Consider, for instance, recent work research on morality including a great deal of work relying on individuals in isolation making decisions on the trolley problem (Thomson, 1985) or games such as the ultimatum or dictator games (e.g., Baumard, Andre, & Sperberg, 2013) in which other people are either hypothetical or complete strangers. There is much work of this sort and a reviews of such work (e.g., Cushman, Young, & Greene, 2010) shows little overlap with relationship work. Indeed, typically, no relationship work is referenced. Would anyone guess that relational context makes little difference to judgments of morality? I suspect not (and see Bauman, McGraw, Bartels, & Warren, 2014 for a critique of this literature). As Berscheid and others have argued, eloquently and convincingly, it is unwise to draw general conclusions about human behavior that is removed from the relational contexts in which it normally occurs (Berscheid, 1999b; Reis,

Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). In a different paper (Clark & Boothby, 2013) I've personally called some analyses of moral behavior "strang(er)" analyses of morality. Why aren't we players in this field? We should not place the blame solely on researchers in that domain – it's we who have the theory and data and methodologies to suggest how and why results will likely differ in different relational contexts and we ought to be players in such fields. We need to step up to that challenge.

Morality is just one obvious area of research with which relationship science work ought to be integrated. There are many other obvious areas with which we ought to integrate our work and theory such as work on whether individuals are fundamentally cooperative or competitive, work on prosocial behavior, and work on emotion. We should also be open to the integration of our work with that of other psychologists in areas that are not quite so obvious. There was a time when no one believed there would be such tight ties between the existence and functioning of relationships and physical health, but we now know there are important links there (Holt-Lunstad, this volume) and medical researchers are paying attention. Other unexpected ties are likely to exist as well.

### **Challenge III**

#### **Studying a More Diverse Set of Close, Interpersonal, Relationships With an Eye Toward**

#### **Theory Development**

A third challenge has to do with the fact that over the last two decades relationship scientists have, primarily, studied one type of close relationship – romantic relationships (from initial attraction, through dating and marriages) and to a much lesser extent friendships. Harry Reis, at a relationships meeting preceding the 2016 annual meetings of the *Society of*

*Experimental Social Psychologists* observed that, back in the 1980s, we celebrated the, then new, move away from studying interactions between strangers who did not know one another and did not expect to see one another ever again, to studying the close relationships including romantic relationships. The trend toward studying romantic relationships, in particular, certainly took off such that studies on such relationships abound. Reis called for studies of a more diverse set of close relationships echoing a similar call from Berscheid nearly two decades earlier to which we've paid insufficient attention (Berscheid, 1995). I concur. There are many other types of important close relationships including friendships, young adults' relationships with their own parents, relationships with siblings, and relationships with mentors (and see Koerner, this volume.). We need to think carefully about what functions these relationships serve for people and we need to focus on ways these relationships are comparable to one another in process and in ways they are not comparable.

In this regard we ought not rely solely on lay language to differentiate between relationships nor simply determine if the intra- and interpersonal processes we have identified in romantic relationships apply (or do not) to friendships, sibling relationships, etc. as is sometimes done (See Clark-Polner & Clark, 2014 for examples from neuroscience and Clark, Boothby, Clark-Polner, & Reis, 2015 for examples from the field of prosocial behavior). Rather we need to develop new theory about how, conceptually, these relationships are similar and distinct from one another, and what that means for interpersonal processes. Then we ought to do the empirical work necessary to test our theoretical ideas.

In doing this I think it is likely to be wise to take cues from Bugental (2000) as well as from Neel, Kenrick, White, and Neuberg (2016), in taking a functional approach in combination



with a relationship type approach to making advancements. It is one thing to note we all are social creatures but necessary and wise yet to figure out *why*. What functions do relationships serve for us? Bugental (2000) points out some important basic functions relationships serve for us including, mating, attachment, establishing power, coalition building, and reciprocity.

Kenrick et al. (2013) more recently have suggested that people have a somewhat different set of fundamental goals which are social in nature – self-protection, disease avoidance, affiliation, status accrual, mate acquisition, mate retention, and kin care and can all be met using social connections. Not every social connection will address or fully meet every goal. We turn to different individuals and different sets of individuals to assist us in meeting different goals. Thus, we are unlikely to fully understand how individuals strive for and reach (or fail to reach) the social goals they have unless we study more than one type of close relationships and unless we study them in concert. What goals are and are not pursued in romantic relationships, friendships, sibling relationships, relationships with family members and relationships with mentors and mentees? How do we distribute our time and effort and necessary interpersonal processes across these relationships? Which goals take precedence for which people and when? Only by broadening the types of relationships we study and by studying them in concert will we be able to answer these questions.

#### **Challenge IV:**

#### **Including More Diversity in the Individuals (Within Relationships), Again, With an Eye Toward Theory Development**

Most work in relationship science has focused not just on romantic relationships but also upon relatively young people (in their late teens through about 35 to 40 years of age), on

middle or upper class, on white (with a smattering of others) and on heterosexual participants. We need to do better simply to insure the generalizability of our results to more than the narrow range of types of people whom we've studied well. Yet insuring generalizability is not the only reason we should be more inclusive. We need to ask *how* age, specific cultures, sexual orientations and socio-economic status, theoretically, ought to make a difference. If there are reasons it should, we ought to specifically test our ideas. And, if theoretical ideas do not apply to new populations in just the ways we thought they should, we need to pay attention to that and develop new theory coming out of research.

In this regard, work by Karney and Bradbury (2005, 2010) provides valuable lessons. These researchers found evidence that although relationship skills identified as valuable in preventing marital decline among middle or upper class populations may be teachable to those in lower socio-economic populations, actually doing so had little impact on relationship success in those populations. This seemed to them true because people in lower socio-economic groups face powerful external forces that impede their ability to practice those skills. They found that teaching people couples problem solving skills, for example, mattered little for couples who themselves have little time and ability to interact due to demands outside their marriage and/or to those who are especially likely to face issues such as substance abuse, domestic violence and infidelity. What this means, is that being in a low socioeconomic class has correlates and challenges that being in a higher socioeconomic class does not. Being low in socioeconomic status carries with it demands that must be addressed prior to couples being able to make use of interpersonal skills that matter to relationship functioning among others. Ultimately this means the causes of marital dissatisfaction among those who differ in socio-

economic status differ. In this research taking socioeconomic status into account started with the assumption that those determinants would be similar, but led to the realization that the because people must prioritize needs, that improving marriages at different socio-economic levels almost certainly requires distinct interventions. Although couples at all income levels report communication problems in marriage, low income people are more likely to report problems with drugs and with infidelity and finances. Teaching communication skills may work with high income people but not with low income people who have bigger problems and stressors with which to deal. Other work by Karney and Bradbury (2005, 2010) has shown us that links between attitudes and behavior also depend upon the level of outside stressors to a relationship. Although low income groups report the more negative attitudes toward sex prior to marriage and more negative attitudes toward cohabitation than do high income groups, they also report the highest incidences of premarital sex and cohabitation presumably not because attitudes and behaviors are not linked generally but rather because external forces are strong.

Just as working with people of different socioeconomic statuses led Karney and Bradbury to caution all of us to be careful in assuming our results will generalize beyond the socio-economic groups in which we have tested them, broadening the scope of the types of people (in many ways) whom we study also will almost certainly led to additional new theory and insights.

### **Challenge V: Coming to Understand Relationships as They Are Embedded**

#### **in and Influenced by Larger Social Contexts**

Relationship scientists have ample evidence that to establish an adequate understanding of human behavior it must be studied in relational context as relationship

context shapes (moderates and sometime completely changes not just inter- but intra-personal processes (Clark, Lemay, & Reis, 2017; Clark et al., 2015). Yet we must also begin to take into account and investigate the fact that close relationships themselves are embedded in larger social networks and, indeed, in cultures. How a person behaves toward a partner will be shaped by whether the couple is alone or with another couple or parents or even in a general public setting. How responsive partners will be to one another will depend upon obligations they have to other partners and how needy each partner is at a given time. Moreover, cultures will shape the nature of obligations people have for various members of their social networks. For instance, in a study conducted in Egypt and the United States, Pataki, Fathelbab, Clark, and Malinow (2013) men in Egypt felt that they should feel more communal strength toward their mother than toward their wife whereas in the United States the reverse was true. There has long been work on cultural differences in marriages and friendships focused on contrasting Eastern versus Western cultures and more of work continues to emerge (see, for instance, Karandashev, 2016 for a review of the nature of romantic love in different cultural and historical contexts from an interdisciplinary perspective). There is also work on how becoming a parent influences marriages (see, for instance, Huston & Vangelisti, 1995) and on how being single (or not) is tied to relationships with a person's broader social network (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016). Yet there remains very little work on how differences in ethnic and socioeconomic groups shape social relationships within those groups (although the Karney and Bradbury work described above does provide an exception to this and other exceptions have begun to appear, Rogers, Niwa, & Way, 2017) and there is little work on questions such as how

marrying influences psychological processes in friendships. Far more work is needed on how the social and non-social situations within which relationships exist influence their functioning.

### **A Few Concluding Comments**

Theory and the empirical research in relationship science are in good shape. I have taken note of varying theoretical approaches we have taken and of many reviews of this work. Other theories and reviews exist as well so this commentary ought not be considered exhaustive.

Yet there still much work to be done. For relationship science to have firm grounding and for it to be cumulative, for our being able write the best texts, and or us to teach the best courses we need to focus on integrating our own work with other work in the field (or perhaps there are people new to topics we study who can better step back without prior biases, read many different researchers' work and suggest integration from the outside.) So too must we work toward our research and theory being inclusive of and representative of diverse people, diverse situations, and of diverse types of relationships. When we find (or do not) differences in relationship phenomena between diverse people, between groups, and, very importantly, types of relationships we need to develop new theories and understandings of why those differences exist. It has taken even social psychologists some time to realize and to demonstrate the value of considering relational context in all it's forms for understanding human behaviors. We have learned a lot. Our knowledge is rapidly growing. Yet it is now time to attend to having that knowledge inform studies in other areas such as the study of morality, of cooperation, of behavioral economics, of social neuroscience and many other domains. I've highlighted some challenges for the future as have others (e.g., Campbell & Simpson, 2013) but certainly not all.

We also need to continue work demonstrating the importance of taking a dyadic approach to psychological phenomena (Campbell & Simpson, 2013), to having a seat at the table when public policy is debated and formed and applied (Campbell & Simpson, 2013) and to tracking the trajectory of relationships across time striving to understand movement from attraction, through relationship initiation, maintenance, and dissolution when it occurs. Others may (and should!) raise other challenges as we all step back to look at the forest we have created and evaluate it.

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