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052179076X - Stability and Change in Relationships

Edited by Anita L. Vangelisti, Harry T. Reis and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick

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## STABILITY AND CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIPS

Understanding interpersonal relationships requires understanding actors, behaviors, and contexts. This volume presents cutting-edge research from a variety of disciplines that examines personal relationships on all three levels. The first section focuses on the factors that influence individuals to enter, maintain, and dissolve relationships. The second section emphasizes ongoing processes that characterize relationships and focuses on issues such as arguing and sacrificing. The third and final section demonstrates that the processes of stability and change are embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts. Chapters address cultural universals as well as cross-cultural differences in relationship behaviors and outcomes. The emergence of new relational forms, such as the interaction between people and computers, is also explored. *Stability and Change in Relationships* will be of interest to individuals in a broad range of fields including psychology, sociology, communication, gerontology, and counseling.

Anita L. Vangelisti is a well-known researcher in the field of communication whose work focuses on family interaction and the communication of emotion in personal relationships. She has coauthored and edited several books and has served as associate editor of *Personal Relationships*.

Harry T. Reis is an eminent social psychologist who is known for his research on intimacy as an interpersonal process as well as his work on the development of theories of social interaction. He previously served as editor of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association.

Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, a leading figure in the field of communication, has done extensive research on communication in marriage and has established one of the best-known typologies of marital interaction. She has published more than 75 articles and chapters and has authored and edited several books.

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## Preface

When people think about personal relationships, questions about stability and change jump into mind. An individual's behavior in current relationships is often explained by invoking similar relationships from the past. Feelings about one's present-day relationships reflect not so much current circumstances as the manner in which those circumstances are perceived to have improved or deteriorated. Hopes, fears, fantasies, and goals for future relationships tend not to be conceived in a vacuum, but rather are couched in terms of the present and the past. Among the most common questions that we, as relationship researchers, get from our acquaintances and students are questions about how to avoid repeating the mistakes and misfortunes of past relationships in subsequent relationships (which probably accounts for the widespread appeal of this same question in popular media).

The compelling interest in questions about stability and change evidenced by the lay public is matched by researchers interested in the scientific study of personal relationships. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships decided to sponsor a series of edited volumes on timely, cutting-edge theory and research, continuity and change in personal relationships were identified as a preeminent issue. The chapters collected in this volume testify to the intellectual vigor with which scholars have sought to unravel the complex processes and associations that contribute to relationship stability and change. Thus we believe that readers will find their appreciation of, and knowledge about, relationships stimulated, enlightened, challenged, inspired, provoked, and ultimately, we hope, raised to a new level of understanding.

If nothing else, this volume makes plain the fact that questions about stability and change are far more complex than they first appear. The

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chapters provide nuanced portrayals of how genetic, psychological, and social factors influence relationships, and how relational qualities, in turn, affect individuals and their social environments. The interaction among variables that occurs across these different levels of analysis represents one of the more fundamental themes throughout the volume. Most scholars agree that the causal influences between individuals and relationships are bidirectional – that is, that individual properties affect interactions and relationships and that relationship properties also affect individuals. Researchers also concur that properties and processes predictive at a given level of analysis may not be relevant at other levels of analysis. As is evident throughout this collection, then, questions about the perspective from which stability and change are examined, about the mechanisms associated with stability and change, and about the techniques used to measure stability and change are hotly debated.

In soliciting and organizing the contributions represented in this volume, we were guided by four propositions about relationships and how they function suggested by Sroufe and Fleeson (1986). The first proposition is that relationships are characterized by coherence and continuity. That is, even though relationships and relationship systems may be in a constant state of flux, relational processes often exhibit coherence across contexts and stability across transformations. There is, then, a seeming paradox: Relationships continually change, yet they do so in ways that are both patterned and often remarkably similar. Because relationships have structure, information about one component of the system may allow researchers to predict characteristics of other components. In other words, although relational processes and the behavioral manifestations of those processes may be dynamic and somewhat idiosyncratic, they are nonetheless intelligible. For instance, relationships that are headed toward dissolution may come apart at different times and at different rates, but existing research has identified some of the factors that contribute to dissolution processes and trajectories. Similarly, the interactions that occur between parents and children constantly change, yet scholars can forecast many of these changes before they occur.

Sroufe and Fleeson's second proposition is that individuals internalize (i.e., mentally represent) relationships. People know about relationships, particularly their own relationships. They believe that certain things are likely to happen in relationships and they evaluate their relationships in terms of those beliefs. Many popular theoretical

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systems – for example, attachment theory, object relations theory, and social cognitive theories – posit that internalized models of relationships exert potent influence on attention, perception, expectations, memory, emotion, judgment, and behavior (Reis & Downey, 1999). These mental representations, while often quite stable, are also open to change to varying degrees. A major life transition may compel individuals to reinvent their model of what a relationship is and ought to be. Furthermore, ordinary social life causes us to encounter people who possess alternative views of relationships, requiring that we cope with discrepancies between what we “know” about relationships and what others “know.” This may happen in numerous ways. For example, individuals may accommodate diverse views, integrating differences within a more complex mental model; they may attempt to persuade the other person to change his or her views; or they may simply dismiss the differences. The tendency to change relationship beliefs depends to some extent, of course, on the roots of those beliefs. Some beliefs are emotionally charged, whereas others are dispassionate. Some beliefs are founded in personality and may reflect individuals’ genetic legacy, whereas other beliefs are shaped primarily by experiences. The factors that affect differences in people’s mental models about relationships and the ways that these models both reflect and cause stability and change in relationships are the foci of several chapters in this volume.

The third proposition is that representations of prior relationships are carried forward to new relationships. Thus, established relationship knowledge has consequences for subsequent cognition, affect, and behavior in social interaction (Baldwin, 1992; Berscheid, 1994). Assessments of others are profoundly influenced by expectations of what relationships should and should not be. Likewise, emotions, both positive and negative, reflect the correspondence between expectations and circumstances. Relationship knowledge is used to communicate with partners, to select among the various behavioral options available in any given situation, and to help interpret and then respond to others’ behavior and communication. The “carrying forward” of relationship knowledge is based on more than personal development: The application of relational knowledge is situated within, and is influenced by, social, cultural, familial, and historical contexts that cue individuals about the relevance of different relational beliefs. Thus, relationship knowledge may influence future generations as knowledge, beliefs, values, myths, and secrets are transmitted from one generation to the next.

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The fourth proposition described by Sroufe and Fleeson is that relationships are best considered as “wholes” (i.e., more than additive combinations of partner characteristics) and therefore should be examined in terms of the interrelation of their parts (i.e., their organization or structure; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). In other words, relationships operate as interdependent systems of influence and constraint (Kelley, 1983). Thus, when one partner acts, the behavior of the other is necessarily affected. This may be evident, for example, in the tendency of a child to be hostile and reactive to one parent, yet warm and responsive to the other. Similarly, stability or change in one relational domain (i.e., financial contributions to the family) may facilitate or constrain the likelihood of change in another domain (i.e., parental roles). Chapters in this book clearly demonstrate that even a very focused change in one aspect of a relationship may have broad consequences for that relationship (and for the other relationships with which it is associated, as discussed in the next paragraph). The interconnected nature of relational systems presents a challenge for researchers and theorists who aim to understand and explain relational processes.

Relationship systems are characterized not only by the connections and relations between their components but also by the interactions between the dyad and its larger social environment. From birth, individuals and dyads contribute to systems or networks of relationships. As implied by the term “network,” all relationships within a network influence one another to a greater or lesser degree. These influences in turn reflect back on the dyad and the development of the individual partners. The various levels of analysis inherent in this many-tiered system – individuals, dyads, families, groups, societies – are not discrete but rather coexist in a state of ongoing influence and interdependence (Reis et al., 2000). As is reflected in several chapters in this volume, relationship researchers often investigate these systems by examining some of their lower-level elements. For example, in examining family processes, the theorist may consider the mother–infant exchange as the focal point for analysis. Linking levels are feedback loops that amplify or dampen the effects of various interactions in the system.

## ORGANIZATION OF THIS VOLUME

The field of personal relationships is multidisciplinary in large part because a proper understanding of personal relationships demands

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simultaneous focus on actors, behaviors, and contexts. Hence we have organized this volume according to these three important categories. The first section focuses on individuals as they enter, maintain, and dissolve relationships. These chapters turn the lens toward cognitive, emotional, and personality factors that undergird relational stability and change processes. In the second section, we move beyond the individual to examine what transpires between partners. These chapters describe dynamic processes of change that are revealed in interactions and interpersonal behaviors, as well the inferences that partners make about these behaviors. The third and final section considers how the processes of stability and change are embedded in social, cultural, and transhistorical contexts. This contextual perspective includes consideration of therapeutic interventions as well as new relationship variations that are emerging from contemporary technological innovations.

The chapters in this volume represent not so much a definitive declaration on the when, why, and how of stability and change but rather a portal between prior conceptualizations, which naively assumed that a correlation coefficient between two measures spanning a suitable interval would be all that was needed, and the future, in which, we believe, these and yet richer theoretical models will have been supported by empirical evidence. In other words, we hope this volume will do more than describe what is known about stability and change in relationships; we hope it will stimulate new research and new ideas into this perennially compelling topic.

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