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978-0-521-36990-9 - Stability and Change in Relationships

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

Excerpt

[More information](#)PART ONE**ACTORS: THE SCAFFOLDING  
OF STABILITY AND CHANGE**

A scaffold is a temporary structure built to support workers as they erect a new structure, or repair, reinforce, or demolish an existing one. Individuals and their distinctive personalities, emotions, and cognitions provide the scaffolding for change and stability in relationships. There is a continually evolving dynamic association between the factors that characterize individuals and those that define their relationships. The mental models, emotional history, and personality that individuals bring to their relationships create a context that promotes certain relational outcomes while discouraging others; these outcomes, in turn, affect the actors' personal qualities in numerous respects. Although the term "personality" is difficult to define, several contemporary approaches emphasize the characteristics that facilitate individuals' adaptation to the environment. Adapting to the social environment is, of course, one of life's most important and challenging tasks. Thus, studies of those dimensions of personality – and their manifestations in thoughts, feelings, and behavior – that regulate interpersonal relationships are likely to provide important insights into the processes of stability and change. The growing evidence that many genetically determined individual differences are designed to address common adaptive situations faced during human evolution (which, of course, prominently included interpersonal situations), and that other genetic differences interact with features of the environment in shaping the individual, testifies to the centrality of relationship-relevant personality factors in studying the processes of stability and change.

People's understanding of relationships is best considered as a work in progress, amenable to revision by experience, especially experience in current relationships. In other words, the "relationship outcomes" traditionally studied in research are not so much end states as they are

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way stations in an ongoing chain of relational states. Pietromonaco, Laurenceau, and Feldman Barrett provide an insightful discussion of processes that are associated with stability and change in representations of relationship knowledge. They describe existing literature on relationship knowledge representation and review evidence supporting representational stability. Then, having discussed several processes that help maintain stable relationship knowledge structures, they go on to propose how and when people's representations of relationships may change over time.

The effects of personality on people's interpersonal relationships are the focus of Asendorpf's contribution to this volume. Asendorpf begins by describing some of the difficulties researchers face in trying to establish causal links between personality and relationships. He then reviews studies that demonstrate effects of personality on relationships, including investigations of the influence of parents' and infants' personalities on infant attachment, and of the impact of children's aggressiveness and shyness on peer relationships. Asendorpf concludes with an insightful description of three mechanisms by which personality may affect relationships and speculations about future research concerning the strength of personality effects on relationships over the life span.

Next, Bryant and Conger take a developmental approach to understanding romantic relationships. They argue that the interpersonal competencies that influence the probability of success in romantic relationships can be traced back to interaction within individuals' family of origin. Building on current theories of intergenerational effects on relationships, Bryant and Conger propose an intergenerational conceptualization of romantic relationship development called the DEARR model (Development of Early Adult Romantic Relationships). This model offers relationship researchers a set of constructs for predicting how certain behavioral, cognitive, and emotional qualities in the family of origin may foster particular ways of relating to romantic partners. Bryant and Conger also present a preliminary test of their model that demonstrates the broad range of questions for which the DEARR model serves as a useful heuristic framework.

In the final chapter in this section, Lykken provides an intriguing account of "How Relationships Begin and End." Using twin research, he argues that mate selection is a largely fortuitous phenomenon. Lykken suggests, for example, that the well-documented finding of mate similarity occurs not because people prefer similar others as part-

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ners but rather because people choose partners from their pool of associates and those associates tend to share similar qualities. By contrast, Lykken argues that relationship disruption or divorce is strongly associated with partners' genetic characteristics, supporting this claim with such striking evidence as the 250% increase in the risk of divorce among monozygotic twins whose cotwin has experienced divorce. Lykken closes his chapter with several controversial suggestions about the initiation and dissolution of romantic relationships.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Change in Relationship Knowledge Representations

*Paula R. Pietromonaco, Jean-Philippe Laurenceau, and  
Lisa Feldman Barrett*

Over the past decade, researchers have begun to examine how people think about and construct their knowledge of close relationships. Little agreement exists about the nature of representations of relationship knowledge, although many theorists have proposed general definitions using concepts such as relational schemas (Baldwin, 1992, 1995; Miell, 1987; Planalp, 1987), internal working models (Bowlby, 1973; Collins & Read, 1994), prototypes (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Fehr & Baldwin, 1996; Klohnen & John, 1998), lay relationship theories (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996), interpersonal schemas (Safran, 1990), interpersonal scripts (e.g., Baldwin, 1992; Stern, 1985; Tomkins, 1979), and stories (Murray & Holmes, 1994; Sternberg, 1996). While these concepts differ somewhat in their underlying assumptions about the nature of the representation (for reviews, see Baldwin, 1992, 1995; Singer & Salovey, 1991), they are similar in two respects. First, relationship representations are thought to consist of well-organized, elaborated abstract knowledge about the self, others, and the interaction between the two that is derived from direct experiences. Second, relationship representations are assumed to be organized in some hierarchical fashion, including superordinate, abstract generalizations (e.g., "My mother is loving") at the higher levels and specific information (e.g., "She takes care of me when I'm sick") at the lower levels (e.g., Baldwin, 1992; Planalp, 1987).

Although theorists (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1979; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988) often assume that relationship representations, like

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other kinds of representations (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991), tend to be stable over time and resistant to change, they leave open the possibility that revision and change can occur under some conditions. Few relationship theorists have delineated the process of change in relationship knowledge, but most would agree that the ability to change contributes to the quality and longevity of a relationship. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the processes that might underlie change in representations of relationship knowledge. To some extent, this task proved to be a creative one. Despite the richness of theory about relationship knowledge, little empirical evidence exists about the precise nature and organization of such representations (e.g., see Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 2000), and even less is known about how relationship representations change over time.

As a consequence, we drew from various literatures to develop a series of proposals for how relationship representations might shift and change over time. The social-cognitive literature provided information about change in other kinds of knowledge representations (e.g., the self, attitudes, stereotypes), whereas the literatures on close relationships and marital intervention approaches provided information about change specifically in relationship knowledge. In particular, theory and research on marital interventions (e.g., cognitive-behavioral) that explicitly seek to change couples' beliefs, expectations, and goals about their relationship provided clues to the process of change. Taken together, the core idea is that change in relationship knowledge is a dynamic process that is closely tied to immediate and enduring life contexts.

## RELATIONSHIP KNOWLEDGE REPRESENTATIONS

Before we discuss how relationship representations change, it is important to consider exactly what is known about the nature of the representations themselves. Researchers are far from specifying precisely how relationship knowledge is represented (see Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Although little direct evidence exists about the structure of relationship knowledge, we can extrapolate from social-cognitive work on mental representations. Theory and research on the representation of self-knowledge is especially relevant for understanding relationship representations. Relationship representations often are defined in terms of representations of self and significant others (e.g., see Markus & Cross, 1990), and they are thought to include distinct models of self and

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models of other (e.g., Baldwin, 1992; Bowlby, 1973) or representations of the self in relation to others (e.g., Andersen, Reznik, & Chen, 1997; Hinkley & Andersen, 1996; Ogilvie & Ashmore, 1991). Because representations of the self are considered to be an important component of relationship representations, research on the structure and stability of representations of the self can inform our understanding of relationship representations.

Relationship theorists (e.g., Baldwin, 1992; Bowlby, 1973; Collins & Read, 1994; Planalp, 1987), like self theorists (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987), have relied primarily on schema models, which include the related construct of “scripts” or event schemas. Schema models assume that representations have an internal structure (often hierarchical) and that they include abstract, generalized knowledge about a particular domain (e.g., about the self, another person, or an event). Schemas are thought to operate in a top-down manner, thereby shaping the construal of new information. Consistent with this view, attachment theorists (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1985; Collins & Read, 1994; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) have suggested that mental representations of attachment relationships are organized within a hierarchical structure, including abstract rules about attachment relationships at higher levels and knowledge about specific relationships and events at lower levels; these representations are assumed to guide how people perceive, interpret, and remember attachment-related information. Other theorists (Baldwin, 1992; Safran, 1990; Stern, 1985) have proposed that these representations include interaction scripts for a sequence of behaviors along with “if-then” contingencies (e.g., “If my partner demands attention, then I will withdraw”) that guide such interaction patterns. Over all, relationship knowledge representations, like knowledge representations in general, typically are assumed to be well-organized structures in memory that guide the perception and interpretation of new information.

Although representations often are characterized as abstract structures that reside in memory, recent views (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Wilson & Hodges, 1992; for a review, see Smith, 1998) suggest that they also are flexible and dynamic, fluctuating in response to the situational context. Work on representations of self, for example, assumes that people hold a large array of knowledge about the self but, in any given situational context, only a subset of characteristics of the self, “the working self-concept,” may be activated (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Similarly, relationship representations are likely to incorporate many

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different constructions of relationship knowledge, only some of which will be active in a given context (Baldwin, 1992; Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996). The precise form of mental representations, including those for relationships, is not yet clear (see Smith, 1998), but it seems likely that relationship representations, like those for the self, will be complex, flexible, and dynamic.

### STABILITY IN RELATIONSHIP REPRESENTATIONS

The social-cognitive literature (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Kunda, 1999), and especially work on the self, provides a starting point for understanding stability and change in relationship representations. Most of the social-cognitive literature emphasizes the stability of knowledge representations. People tend to confirm their expectations and beliefs by focusing on expectancy-consistent information, especially when they hold a long-standing expectation (Stangor & McMillan, 1992). People seek out and create environments that allow them to behave in a way that will confirm their beliefs about themselves (Swann, 1987), and they resist information that contradicts their self-views (Markus, 1977) or their prior expectations (Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975). People also bias their memory of events in a direction that is consistent with their current beliefs and expectations (Ross, 1989) and thereby create a sense of consistency over time. Stability in knowledge representations may serve the function of helping people to believe that the world is predictable and controllable (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Relationship representations, like other kinds of knowledge representations, show considerable stability (e.g., Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1992; Rothbard & Shaver, 1994). For example, longitudinal work examining attachment behavior, which serves as an indicator of underlying internal working models of attachment, demonstrates high levels of stability. The attachment classifications of young children show a high correspondence (73–96%) between behavior in the Strange Situation over several months (Main & Weston, 1981; Waters, 1978). Furthermore, attachment classifications in early childhood (12–18 months of age) predict other cognitive and behavioral indicators of internal working models in the same children at older ages (e.g., Grossman & Grossmann, 1991; Main et al., 1985; Waters, Wippman, & Sroufe, 1979; for a detailed review, see Rothbard & Shaver, 1994). Recent work (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000) suggests that infants' attachment classifications (based on the Strange Situation)



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correspond highly with their attachment classification (based on the Adult Attachment Interview) in early adulthood. Indeed, 64% of the adults received the same attachment classification (i.e., secure, avoidant, or preoccupied) in infancy and 20 years later. Similarly, attachment in adulthood shows some stability (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Klohnen & Bera, 1998; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). For example, women's reports of attachment-related characteristics (e.g., interpersonal closeness, social confidence, emotional distance), which can be considered indicators of internal working models, were similar at ages 27, 43, and 52 years (Klohnen & Bera, 1998).

As with other knowledge, cognitive processes are likely to promote the stability of relationship knowledge. Information consistent with relationship beliefs is processed quickly and automatically (Fletcher, Rosanowski, & Fitness, 1994), facilitating the stability of relationship knowledge. Also, people reinterpret specific negative information that is inconsistent with their global positive views of the relationship (Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994) in a way that leads them to maintain the stability of their positive views. Thus, relationship knowledge representations, like other knowledge representations, generally will show stability.

The literature on the self suggests that two fundamental motives underlie representational stability (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Linville & Carlston, 1994). First, people strive for consistency in their self-views, even if it means confirming a negative view of themselves (Swann, 1983, 1987). Second, most people desire positive, self-enhancing information (Taylor & Brown, 1988), which usually is consistent with their overall positive view of self. Goals toward consistency and self-enhancement create a push toward stability in self-views. Perceptions of relationships also appear to be guided by similar goals of consistency and relationship enhancement. People strive to maintain consistent views of their relationships, and they appear motivated to hold positive illusions about their relationships (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a,b), although this is likely to be true primarily for relationships characterized by more positive than negative interactions. These goals, like those for self, will promote stability in relationship views. Yet, people also are guided by a fundamental goal to seek accurate information about themselves and their social environment (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Kunda, 1999), including their relationships. When accurate information conflicts with consistent or self-enhancing information, it may set the stage for change.

## CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIP REPRESENTATIONS

Most theorists, while acknowledging the tendency toward representational stability, allow for the possibility that representations can change in response to new experiences, particularly when reality conflicts with prior expectations. In a similar vein, Bowlby (1969) argued that if working models of attachment relationships are to provide accurate predictions of the world, they must be revised when life circumstances change. Indeed, Bowlby (1969) chose the term “internal working models” to reflect the dynamic nature of knowledge about attachment relationships, and he proposed that such models can be updated, elaborated, or replaced in response to situational demands. Thus, although several processes operate to maintain stable relationship representations, some circumstances may initiate representational change.

### Characteristics of Change

Change in relationship knowledge can be characterized along at least four dimensions: speed (slow or rapid), momentum (short-lived or enduring), breadth (local or global), and direction (positive or negative).<sup>\*</sup> Furthermore, change can reflect both shifts in the accessibility of existing knowledge and the addition of new knowledge.

#### *Speed of Change*

Early work on schema change (Crocker, Fiske, & Taylor, 1984; Rothbart, 1981) focused, in part, on the speed at which changes in the abstract level of a schema occur. First, people might modify their knowledge gradually and incrementally, as if they were accumulating knowledge in a *bookkeeping* system. Second, they might experience sudden and dramatic change, or *conversion*, in the face of a traumatic or powerful event. Change in relationship knowledge could happen in either of these ways. Incremental change, or bookkeeping, might best describe changes that occur over a long period of time, from repeated exposure to similar events, or in response to gradual changes in life circumstances. For example, a woman may believe that romantic partners are unreliable and untrustworthy, but this view may change

\* This chapter does not focus on representational changes that occur with age, but relationship representations are thought to become more abstract and elaborated as children develop cognitive abilities (e.g., see Main et al., 1985; Stern, 1985).