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978-0-521-47463-4 - The Diversity of Human Relationships

Edited by Ann Elisabeth Auhagen and Maria Von Salisch

Excerpt

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Introduction

*Ann Elisabeth Auhagen and
Maria von Salisch*

People interweave in a multitude of relationships. Adults are addressed daily as a romantic partner, as a child or a parent, as a colleague or a friend, as a neighbor or a housewife, or in their occupational role. This list could easily be extended. It indicates that people's everyday lives are not only shaped by "major" relationships, such as romantic or parent-child relationships, but that they are often filled with a variety of actions and expectations from other relationships. Changes in the traditional "normal biography," increasing employment among women, high divorce rates, and the many different forms of communal living arrangements (phenomena described as "pluralization in the forms of living") have led to the development of relationships other than "classic" relationships with partners, children, and parents, and these have gained significance in the lives of a great many people. Consequently, one major aim of this book is to broaden vision beyond the types of relationship generally favored by research so far, and to encompass the whole range of relationships experienced in everyday life. In so doing, this book complements in-depth examinations of particular relationship types or studies that classify human relationships according to perspectives, dimensions, or particular variables.

This volume is also designed to give insights into current theories, empirical findings, and new ideas on the diverse interpersonal relationships in everyday life. Each contribution focuses on a particular type of relationship and presents its essential characteristics. Of course, opinions may be divided on the specific characteristics of certain types of relationship. We have invited a number of experts to write about the various relationship types. The authors united to form an interdisciplinary and international

2 *A. E. Auhagen and M. von Salisch*

team offering a wide range of theories and results. At the same time the individual chapters have numerous topics and points of interest in common so that wherever possible we have provided readers with brief cross-references.

The third aim of this book is to consider changes in interpersonal relationships during the life span. It is plausible that social relationships change depending on the stage of development of the participants, and that relationships become more differentiated during childhood and adolescence. It should also be considered that during adulthood shifts take place in the significance of certain relationships depending on varying needs and obligations. No matter whether the tasks that confront people at different stages of their lives are sought intentionally or whether they occur independent of the will or wishes of those involved, they certainly contribute toward the framework of their interpersonal relationships. Changing developmental impulses and demands may well be reflected in the structures and topics of interpersonal relationships. As experiences accumulate in life, it can be assumed that the quality of interpersonal relationships also changes. Or do people repeatedly engage in the “same” way in relationships? These thoughts on the interconnection of individual biography, developmental tasks, and interpersonal relationships have so far led a Cinderella existence in empirical research. In this respect our book also has its limitations but it attempts to point out these gaps and encourages their examination.

Our book tries to throw more light on the characteristics of relationship types. With this in mind, Part I covers the foundations of interpersonal relationships while Parts II–V are each dedicated to a different relationship category. Within these parts the individual chapters focus on particular types of relationship. What is a relationship type? Can relationship types be differentiated further or regrouped? There is no simple answer to these questions and, as Gerold Mikula points out in his concluding summary, there is no general scientific taxonomy of interpersonal relationships. While choosing the different types of relationship discussed in this book, we were guided by a variety of considerations: our everyday understanding of social relationships, the categorization of relationships in everyday language, and of course the scientific discussions and studies on the topics. Despite these many sources of information and inspiration, this volume still defied rigorous structuring, and it was not always possible to solve the connected problems to our satisfaction. Take, for example, private relationships: there is no general term that covers friendships and relationships between neighbors and acquaintances. “Private nonkin relationships” may cover the content in question, but it is not particularly elegant. In the case of partnerships it is difficult to make fine differentiations among partnership, courtship, romantic (love) relationship, marital relationship, companionship, and

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similar terms. Unfortunately, these are often confounded in international research, although, for example, a partnership does not necessarily imply love. Other relationships such as extramarital love relationships, which are often officially denied by society but unofficially practiced by millions, are almost completely ignored by current research into love relationships. Yet these relationships exist and are often experienced as “very loving” by those involved. In cases such as this, relationship research should reflect to what extent insights into reality are being obscured by the unquestioned acceptance of widespread thought. As this book cannot offer solutions to these complex problems, nor present the great variety of relationship forms, we have decided to restrict our differentiation to cross-sex and same-sex romantic partnerships.

In view of the many different kinds of interpersonal relationships present in everyday life in our culture alone, it would be presumptuous to imagine they could all be portrayed between the two covers of a single book. We gave the book the title *The Diversity of Human Relationships* because its central concern is the great variety of interpersonal relationships, not because it tells us everything about such relationships. On the contrary, because of the particular focus we chose, many important aspects of human relationships are only touched on marginally or briefly discussed. This means that the contributions can at most claim validity in Western cultures. Unfortunately, it was not possible to include cultural comparisons of interpersonal relationships and, despite their undoubted significance, too little space was available for the investigation of societal and historical backgrounds or connections and processes underlying the development and maintenance of relationships. Similarly, very little is mentioned about interdependencies and influences of individual relationships and relationship types on other relationships and relationship types. Although not completely excluded, aspects of interpersonal relationships associated with such keywords as networks, groups, and (family) systems also receive relatively little attention. Finally, the reader will not find any contributions representing purely clinical-psychological or methodological perspectives.

Briefly, the considerations underlying the structure of the book can be summarized as follows: the main focus centers on the dyad, the relationship between two people. Relationship types are ordered more or less in keeping with the life course progressing from childhood through adulthood. In addition, various types of relationship are collected in thematically related groups. We decided not to sketch the contents of each chapter in this short introduction as this would hardly have done justice to their contents. Each chapter is an independent unit presented within one of the following thematic groups: foundations, relationships within the family, partnerships, private nonkin relationships, and relationships at work. An epilogue on relationship research concludes the book.

4 *A. E. Auhagen and M. von Salisch*

With this work we wish to present an overview of current research into particular types of relationship and the foundations of relationships. Its level of success is of course relative because science is by nature a function of processes. The same applies to the topic of this book: relationships are by no means static but are involved in a permanent process of change. In this sense, we hope that our readers will consume its contents with critical interest and feel inspired to contribute their own new ideas and insights to the area of interpersonal relationships – both in theory and in practice.

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PART I

Foundations

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1

Describing relationships

Robert A. Hinde

Introduction

Can there be a science of relationships?

For nearly all of us, relationships are the most important part of our lives. Early development depends on an adequate relationship with a caregiver. Subsequently, relationships with other family members, with peers, with teachers, shape the developing personality. In preadolescence, close relationships with peers, and especially with opposite-sex peers, become important, and remain so throughout life. An adequate network of personal relationships forms an important protection against psychological and physical ill health.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, we all think we know about relationships. Indeed, we have been learning about relationships since we were born, and there are reasons for thinking that we are adapted to learning about relationships quickly and to using our knowledge with skill. Furthermore, every culture has its own folk psychology about which relationships are desirable and how relationships should be managed. Such folk psychology is all very well, but its beliefs can be based on wishful thinking by those who want to rationalize their own behavior or manipulate others to their own advantage. Or it can provide contradictory conclusions – for instance that similarity and difference each provides a basis for interpersonal attraction.

What we must work toward, therefore, is a science – used here in the sense of an ordered body of knowledge – of interpersonal relationships. We

need to formulate each piece of knowledge about interpersonal relationships in a manner that will enable it to be incorporated alongside others, and thus to contribute to the edifice of knowledge. During the last 15 years remarkable progress has been made in the study of relationships, and much new knowledge about their nature and dynamics has been gained. Yet the very vigor of its growth inevitably produces obstacles to the development of a scientific discipline, or at least of a disciplined science. The creativity of those working in this exciting field demands that they should be allowed to fashion concepts to suit their problems, yet the diverse ways in which concepts like intimacy, commitment, love, and satisfaction have been defined makes comparison between studies difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, many studies seem to be aimed for a purely parochial audience – would a Chinese psychologist know what a “dating relationship” is, for instance? And even within one society, can one really generalize about love from what teenagers do?

It is going to be extremely difficult to find the right balance between the flexibility and creativity necessary in a rapidly developing field of endeavor, and the discipline that will enable it to become a science. This is even more the case since the problems just mentioned, all in principle solvable, must be seen against the background of the great complexity of human relationships. A relationship between X and Y is not the sum of X and Y but has new properties of its own; it is not just a matter of what X and Y do together, but of what X thinks of Y and what X thinks Y thinks of X and Y and so on; it is not even just a matter of X and Y, because the relationship affects and is affected by their friends and relations, their culture, their physical situation. This chapter does not set out to solve these problems, but focuses solely on a basic requirement for the building of a science: description.

A science involves systematic and formulated knowledge and requires a descriptive base. Biology became a science when the theory of evolution by natural selection provided a basis for the work of taxonomists and systematists. Chemistry became a science when Mendeleev's periodic table provided a means for systematizing knowledge. Human relationships are infinitely more diverse than the chemical elements, and the generalizations we reach are likely to be applicable to some but not to others. Only with an adequate descriptive base can we specify the limits of the generalizations we reach. But relationships are not relatively static entities, like chemical elements or the taxonomist's species, but dynamic, involving ongoing processes. We must therefore remember that any description we make refers to processes over a slice of time.

Furthermore, in seeking to establish a science of human relationships, we must move toward a very special sort of science. Most sciences aim to produce simplifying generalizations that integrate diverse phenomena – the

law of gravity or $e = mc^2$, for instance. We need generalizations, but we need them partly in order to understand individual relationships. We need a science not only to build a society in which creative relationships flourish, but one that will help us to manage our own relationships and to help and advise others. This means we must seek not, or not only, for ubiquitously applicable generalizations, but for generalizations whose limitations are precisely specified so that we know which do and which do not apply to any particular relationship. We must approach the complexity of human relationships with humility.

In this contribution, intended as background to subsequent chapters on relationships of specific types, the emphasis is on the nature of relationships and how we can describe them. Research on attraction, short-term interactions, the study of communication processes (a growing point in research), family systems, and many other issues are therefore underrepresented (see, e.g., Cook & Wilson, 1979; P. Minuchin, 1985; S. Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

The nature of relationships

In the terminology used here, an *interaction* between two individuals involves at a minimum individual A showing behavior X to individual B. B may respond with behavior Y. There may be a number of repetitions of this sequence, involving behavior that is consistent or different, but an interaction is essentially limited in time. A *relationship* involves a series of such interactions between individuals who know each other, such that each interaction is affected by preceding ones and usually by the expectation of future interactions (see also Bateson, 1979; Rogers & Millar, 1988). That the distinction between a long interaction and a relationship is a shady one is an issue that need not detain us.

Neither interactions nor relationships can occur without behavior, but of course behavior is not all: both are accompanied by emotions, hopes, regrets, wishes, and so on. These emotional and cognitive concomitants may persist between the interactions of a relationship, and play an important role in its persistence. More importantly, relationships involve communication. Communication is indeed the essence of relationships and, as Duck and Pond (1989) have so clearly emphasized, the day-to-day background of small talk may be just as important as dramatic episodes in the course of a relationship.

Interaction and relationship, it will be apparent, refer to distinguishable levels of social complexity: relationships have properties that would be simply irrelevant to individual interactions. For instance a relationship may consist of one, a few, or many types of interaction, but this dimension of

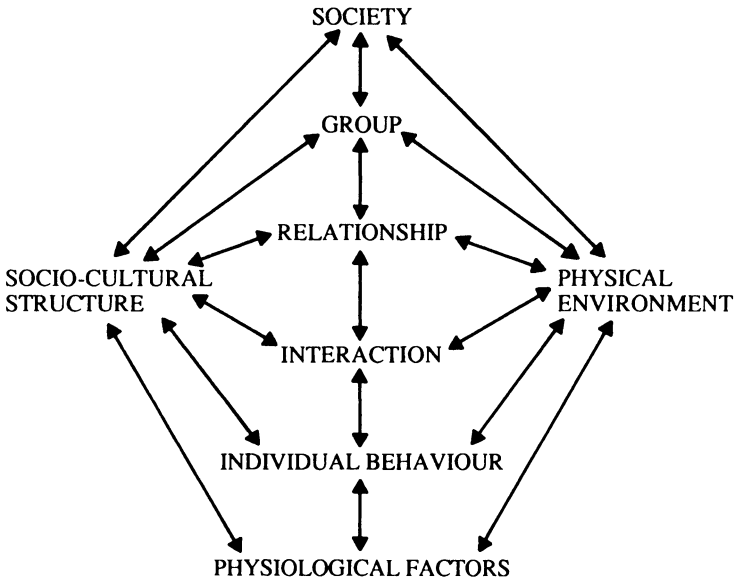


Figure 1.1. Dialectical relations among levels of social complexity.

uniplex versus multiplex would be irrelevant for interactions. Furthermore we tend to use different explanatory concepts in attempting to understand interactions and relations: thus the occurrence of an interaction might be explained in terms of the immediately eliciting factors or short-term moods, while relationships might be referred to in terms of family factors (e.g., sibling rivalry) or longer-term traits of the participants.

Although the distinction between interaction and relationship is heuristically useful, there are dialectical relations between them. Relationships are dynamic, and every interaction within a relationship may affect the future course of that relationship: conversely, the nature of every interaction is affected by that of the relationship in which it is embedded – for instance by memories of past interactions or expectations of future ones (Hinde, 1979, 1990; Park & Waters, 1988).

These two levels of social complexity can be regarded as part of the series *intraindividual systems, individual behavior, interactions, relationships, groups, and society* (see Figure 1.1). Each level has properties not relevant to the preceding level: for instance, the relationships within a group may be arranged hierarchically, centripetally, and so on, but these properties are irrelevant to a relationship. And each level has dialectical relations with those on either side. Thus the nature of a group both influences and is influenced by the relationships within it, and influences and is influenced by the society of which it forms part.