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978-1-107-02936-1 - Social Influences on Romantic Relationships: Beyond the Dyad

Christopher R. Agnew

Excerpt

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Introduction: external influences beyond the dyad

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Think about some decisions that you have made in your life, both small and big: what you tend to eat, what clothes you choose to wear, what car you drive, what schools you attended, what career you pursue. Would it surprise you to learn that these decisions were influenced by others around you, that you regularly take input from your broader social world in charting what to do? My strong suspicion is that it would not – you recognize that what people decide to do, in lots of different domains of life, is impacted at some level by those around them. Whether acting on advice from your mother or reacting to a targeted marketing campaign by Google, many of the decisions you make reflect, at least in part, external influences. In this sense, you are recognizing that people are social beings, ones whose thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors are subject to influence from the world outside.

Now think about decisions you have made with respect to your closest relationships: who you choose to date, to whom you tell your most intimate secrets, who you marry, with whom you have sex. Would these decisions be ones you would acknowledge as just as influenced by others as the ones listed in the above paragraph? I would guess that the answer to this would be no – you would think that decisions regarding with whom you are going to engage in particularly close relations is subject to little (or at least significantly less) external or “outside” influence. While acknowledging that forces beyond you may impact what cereal you eat, what labels you wear, and what model of car you drive, you might reasonably think that areas central to your interpersonal well-being would be particularly under your own control. That choosing a life partner, for example, would be a decision for you alone. One goal of this book is to convince you that you would be mistaken.

We live in a world saturated with external influences on our behavior. Even in what might be considered our most intimate decision-making realms, elements beyond us impact what we value and what we do. This volume focuses on social influences on those involved in intimate interpersonal relationships. Social influences are pervasive in the world, including on our most intimate decisions.

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This book features work from an internationally renowned set of scholars and is divided into two broad and interrelated sections. The first section considers global and societal influences on romantic relationships. Social influence can be facilitated by technology and technological developments. When we consider external influences on close relationships, the focus tends to be on the impact of specific individuals or of small groups close to us. However, influences beyond the dyad abound, well beyond one's immediate social network. The past twenty-five years have witnessed truly remarkable advances in technology that have opened up new channels of connections between people.

As Çağla Sanrı and Robin Goodwin point out in Chapter 1, globalization and technological developments, particularly the advent and now ubiquity of the internet, have influenced how interpersonal relationships are formed and maintained across cultures. Individuals can now quite easily form both short-term and long-term relationships with others without regard to geographic boundaries, something unheard of prior to the internet age. Facebook, for example, now keeps people connected with others across both time (e.g., facilitates maintaining friendships from one's distant past) and space (e.g., keeps family members close when circumstances keep them physically distant – such as during parental work trips that keep them from being at home with their children). It also can place people from very different cultures in very direct and immediate contact, with multifarious implications for relationship development. Sanrı and Goodwin also consider how some of the attendant negative consequences of globalization, specifically the rise of terrorism and of pandemics, influence interpersonal relationships (Goodwin, 2008). As they put it: “In a world where risk is ‘global’, relationships (particularly with intimates) can potentially become closer during times of stress, while relationships with many others, particularly those from another group, can become more distant, with negative stereotyping of others increasing. This suggests that external stressors can act as amplifiers of relationship processes, both acting to cement relationships with close others but also, due to fear of infection or other negative outcomes, making us quicker to categorize potential threatening others” (p. 24 below). Despite rapid changes in technological development and related global ramifications, they also point to the important continuities in relationship processes that have transcended such changes.

Individuals can derive significant benefits from relationships with others. Of course, not everyone has the same quantity and quality of relationships with others, nor are people's relationships uniformly similar in what they may provide. In Chapter 2, Robert Milardo, Heather Helms, Eric Widmer, and Stephen Marks describe the role of social capitalization in understanding family relationships. They discuss how individuals invest in their family members, engage in numerous interactions with them, and work to capitalize on their investments (Milardo and Helms-Erikson, 2000). Viewing social capitalization as a process, these authors work to provide clarity to a concept

that is often misunderstood, focusing on five core components of the concept, including “(1) an investment on the part of an individual, a dyad, a group, or some other social entity; (2) an available relationship or network of relationships to which the investment is directed or targeted; (3) a social interaction or set of interactions through which one or more of the alters in these relationships is mobilized, or pressed into service; (4) an intended recipient of that benefit, whether that beneficiary be oneself, someone else, several people, or some social entity such as an extended family; and (5) an anticipated, expected or actual return, profit, or benefit” (p. 34 below). One premise of this approach to social capitalization is that people who invest in close personal relationships expect returns in various forms, including with respect to the organization of relationships relative to one another. Such organization, often referred to as social network structure, can have significant implications for relationship maintenance and functioning.

External influences on close relationships also come in the form of societal structures that serve specific purposes at national and global levels and that have developed their own unique cultures. The United States military is one such structure. In Chapter 3, Leanne Knobloch and Erin Wehrman consider how family relationships among those who work for (or have close relatives who work for) the military are influenced by military culture. Military culture emerges and evolves over time and is multifaceted (Ulmer, Collins, and Jacobs, 2000). The authors consider in detail specific aspects of military culture that envelop the interpersonal relationships of service members and their families, and how their influence can be understood within extant theoretical frameworks of personal relationships. These cultural aspects include (a) warrior identity, (b) authoritarian structure, (c) overriding commitment to mission, (d) geographic mobility and periodic separations, and (e) perpetual risk of disaster, injury, and death. Attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1982), family stress theory (e.g., McCubbin and Patterson, 1983), ambiguous loss frameworks (e.g., Boss, 2006), and the relational turbulence model (e.g., Knobloch and Theiss, 2012) are drawn upon to help explain how these aspects of military culture influence close relationships within a family. The authors conclude by discussing how these particular theories can be more responsive to features of military culture.

Not every relationship receives support from others. Indeed, whole categories of relational pairing have been and continue to be the target of significant negativity from others. Being on the receiving end of such sentiment presents a host of challenges and has in recent years been the focus of increasing research. Past research on prejudice and discrimination has focused on aspects of individuals that generate such biased attitudes and actions from others. For example, people in particular racial groups or in particular age groups have served as the target of social disdain. In contrast, prejudice toward particular types of relationships offers a new kind of situation (Lehmiller and Agnew, 2006). As Justin Lehmiller and Michael Ioerger note in Chapter 4

regarding different types of socially marginalized relationships, “[a]ll of these relationship variations share a common bias that stems from some aspect of the relationship itself. Outside of their relationship, these individuals may not be subject to other forms of bias in their everyday life (e.g., someone involved in an interracial relationship may only feel stigmatized when their partner is known to others). In this respect, relationship status can be viewed as a distinct social identity that is independent of other personal identities an individual might possess (Brewer, 2008)” (p. 83 below). Being in a marginalized relationship has implications for relationship stability, as one of the significant predictors of commitment is perceived social approval (Lehmiller and Agnew, 2007). Lack of perceived approval from others undermines feelings of commitment toward a partner. Moreover, if there is a reduction in the amount of support received from one’s social network during inevitable periods of relationship stress, a person’s stress level may remain chronically high, resulting in health problems. Furthermore, being in a marginalized relationship is often associated with keeping the relationship from others, and maintaining secrets has been shown to have attendant costs to physical health.

Part II of this volume focuses on social network and communicative influences on romantic relationships. Perceptions figure prominently in understanding the psychological processes underlying the initiation and maintenance of dyadic relationships and, beyond the dyad, members of one’s social network have their own perceptions regarding others’ closest relationships. In Chapter 5, Paul Etcheverry and Benjamin Le discuss the influence of subjective norms on close relationships. The concept of subjective norms comes from the social psychology literature on attitudes and their association with behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Subjective norms refer to one’s beliefs regarding what one thinks important others want one to do. The concept is composed of two separate constructs: normative beliefs (what one believes others think about one performing an action) and motivation to comply (degree to which one wants to follow a given social referent’s perceived beliefs). With respect to close relationship involvement, subjective norms have been shown to be a significant predictor of an individual’s relationship commitment, above and beyond other potent predictors such as perceived satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size (Etcheverry and Agnew, 2004). These authors review past findings involving the subjective norms construct and outline future avenues for research in this burgeoning area (e.g., predictors of normative beliefs and of motivation to comply).

In their chapter on network perceptions of daters’ romances (Chapter 6), Elizabeth Keneski and Tim Loving distill the extant literature on outsiders’ perceptions of couple relationships and present a new and exciting theoretical model that details how social network members’ perceptions of a given relationship can ultimately influence outcomes in those relationships. The S-NET Model, or Social Network Evaluation and Transmission Model, describes two

specific pathways by which social network members' initial relationship observations may impact outcomes. First, observations by social network members result in perceptions about a relationship. These perceptions may lead to (dis-)approval of the relationship, which, in turn, may yield (a lack of) supportive actions toward the couple members, which helps to (deflate) sustain the couple's relationship. A second pathway springs from the couple members themselves: couple members may disclose to network members about their intimate relationship, which then fuels network perceptions, (possible) approval, and (possible) supportive actions. The model includes reciprocal paths in places, consistent with evidence from past empirical studies of network support processes (e.g., Loving, 2006). The S-NET Model represents a very useful distillation of past theorizing and is likely to generate empirical efforts in line with its tenets for years to come.

Of course, not everyone in a person's social network may approve of his or her choice of intimate relationship partner. Differences in opinion as to who is "right" for someone abound and have served as the storyline in many well-known dramas, both in real life and in fiction. For example, in Shakespeare's classic story of young love *Romeo and Juliet*, readers are presented with two young people whose families are at odds and are adamantly opposed to a relationship between their offspring. However, familial efforts to interfere with the romance backfire and, instead, fuel greater love between Romeo and Juliet. Perhaps not surprisingly, this notion, that outside interference can result in the opposite of what outsiders intend, has been the subject of research. Early research efforts yielded results consistent with what some have labeled "the Romeo and Juliet effect": the more outside pressure against a given romance, the greater the commitment to that romance. Subsequent research efforts have failed to replicate these early findings, calling into question what is truth and what is fiction. In "The new story of Romeo and Juliet" presented in Chapter 7, Colleen Sinclair and Chelsea Ellithorpe provide data that highlight the nuances of the effect: "In contrast to the idea that adversity heightens relationship quality, we did not find that adversity enhanced love, satisfaction, commitment, or investment in any of our studies. Rather, consistent with vulnerability stress adaptation models (e.g., Karney and Bradbury, 1995), there were situations or individual differences that enabled couple members to be better able to weather the storm of network disapproval. We believe modern-day Romeos and Juliets exist *but* they are couples who stay together despite disapproval, not because of it" (p. 166 below).

Social influences on relationships can take a number of different forms and be studied from a number of different angles. Consider the following common interpersonal situation. Your sister has a fight with her husband over his failure to remember their wedding anniversary. She tells you about this and, eventually, forgives her husband's forgetfulness. But do you forgive him? And what might be the consequences of your (not) doing so? This is the kind of situation explored by

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Jeff Green, Jody Davis, and Chelsea Reid in Chapter 8, on what they call “third-party forgiveness.” The concept highlights how interpersonal relationships between couple members are embedded within a complex web of other interpersonal relationships (Green, Burnette, and Davis, 2008). Conflicts between individuals are often assumed to involve only the immediate conflicting parties, but a moment’s reflection reveals that this assumption is faulty. Spillover effects abound and the authors describe mediators, moderators, and consequences of such effects. Third-party processes that impact intimate dyads are acknowledged but woefully underresearched and this chapter contributes to bringing further attention to a particularly interesting twist on external influences on dyads.

The volume concludes with a thorough review of what is known in the extant research literature about the topic of relationship advice. Given the ubiquity of such advice all around us, one might expect a sizeable research literature on the topic (e.g., MacGeorge, Feng, and Thompson, 2008). However, as Erina MacGeorge and Elizabeth Hall reveal in Chapter 9, there is much room for advancement in this area: “Indeed, in our review of relevant scholarly literature, we found that research on relationship advice is both scattered and sparse, largely unconnected either to research on advice more generally, or to research on relationships and social networks. We also found very little direct attention to advice in studies of social network effects on dyads” (p. 190 below). The authors review findings from two discrete areas of relationship advice that are most prominent in the literature: (1) advice to young people about dating and sexuality, and (2) advice from experienced parents to new parents about child rearing. From their review, the authors then lay out a research agenda that would provide much-needed additional data on all aspects of relationship advice in the social influence process.

Why does a person choose to initiate a relationship with one intimate partner rather than another? Beyond initiating a relationship, why does a person stay in a given relationship over time? To date, these critical questions have most often been pursued by scholars via an emphasis on the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of individual decision-makers. That emphasis is well placed and has contributed much to our knowledge of how interpersonal relationships operate. However, the work featured in this volume highlights the importance of considering external influences on individual decision-making in close relationships. It is hoped that the collection of chapters included here will spur further efforts to elucidate the influence of external factors on the internal machinations of those involved in intimate relationships.

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PART I

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