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PART I

INTRODUCTION

1

Maintaining the Literature on Relationship Maintenance

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Researchers use the term “relationship maintenance” to encompass the wide range of activities that partners use to preserve their romantic partnerships. Thus, relationship maintenance is distinct from attraction, relationship initiation, and relationship dissolution – topics that are beyond the scope of this volume. Ironically, considerably more research has been devoted to relationship initiation and dissolution than relationship maintenance, despite the fact that partners spend more of their time maintaining relationships than beginning or ending them. That said, the literature on relationship maintenance has rapidly expanded across many disciplines to incorporate an incredible diversity of strategies that take place in the context of relationships. Despite these advances in the study of relationship maintenance, there is limited consensus on the bounds of this construct. That is, the definition, process, context, and correlates of relationship maintenance vary considerably across disciplines. This book serves as a contemporary attempt to bring together the vast literature on relationship maintenance with contributions from scholars across different fields who study diverse facets of relationship maintenance.

We open the book with a brief chapter that is organized around the six most basic, yet critical questions that cut across all research: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. In the first section (“who”), we discuss the types of people who perform relationship maintenance as well as differences among individuals. The “what” section identifies the central definitional issues that continue to plague the field. The third section (“when”) highlights the conditions under which people perform maintenance as well as the relationship challenges that prompt it. The “where” section identifies the small body of literature on geographic differences in relationship maintenance. The “why” section covers the principal theories that explain

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engagement in relationship maintenance activities. The final section comments on “how” maintenance activities sustain or enhance relationships. That is, it outlines the correlates, mediators, and moderators that explain the mechanisms by which maintenance operates. We conclude our chapter with a brief overview of the organization of the book.

WHO?

Relationship maintenance is considered a universal relationship process because it cuts across all types of relationships. Although this book focuses on the maintenance of romantic relationships, the broader literature on relationship maintenance has demonstrated its importance in the context of friendship (Labelle & Myers, 2016), family relationships (Harach & Kuczynski, 2004), employment (Xesha, Iwu, Slabbert, & Nduna, 2017), and even human–pet interactions (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011). Simply put, relationship maintenance is a necessary feature of every interpersonal (and sometimes interspecies) relationship.

Although relationship maintenance appears to be a universal relationship process, past research has shown that it is not identical for all people. One of the most frequently studied individual-difference variables is attachment. Relationship maintenance has been shown to vary as a function of both attachment anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Adams & Baptist, 2012; Lee, Karantzas, Gillath, & Fraley, Chapter 4). Although such associations vary across maintenance type, they are consistently in the negative direction, which indicates that anxiety and avoidance appear to be barriers to relationship maintenance. In addition to attachment, relationship maintenance also differs as a function of gender, and to a lesser degree, sex. In general, femininity demonstrates a stronger correlation with relationship maintenance than masculinity (e.g., Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). Sex differences also show that women perceive and report higher levels of relationship maintenance than men, although these differences are small in magnitude (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013). In addition to sex and gender differences in maintenance, there is also variability in the motives, expression, function, and consequences of maintenance based on a number of other factors, including race (see Fiori & Rauer, Chapter 14) and age (see Rauer & Proulx, Chapter 17).

WHAT?

Over the past several decades, relationship maintenance scholars have attempted to define and explain key maintenance processes that serve to initiate and preserve romantic relationships. As we have observed in much of our past work (e.g., Ogolsky, Monk, Rice, Theisen, & Maniotes, 2017; Ogolsky & Monk, 2018), the definition of maintenance varies greatly across

disciplines. For example, some scholars liken maintenance to a relationship state, falling between initiation and dissolution (see Perlman, Chapter 19), which characterizes maintenance as a discrete event or period rather than a dynamic process. Conversely, other scholars characterize maintenance as cognitive or behavioral efforts focused on continuing a relationship. Nearly 25 years ago, Dindia and Canary (1993) put forth four main definitions of relationship maintenance: (1) whether the relationship continues to exist, (2) keeping a relationship in a given form or state, (3) keeping the relationship satisfying, and (4) efforts to repair the relationship. Even still, relationship maintenance has also been considered a response to an interdependence dilemma (Agnew & VanderDrift, 2015) or the driving force behind threat mitigation aimed at sustaining the relationship (Ogolsky et al., 2017).

Although expansive definitions help capture relational processes that promote relationship persistence, conceptual inconsistencies create confusion and redundancies across studies. In a recent review of the literature, Ogolsky and colleagues (2017) identified more than 1,000 articles on the topic of relationship maintenance. Despite this pervasive coverage of the topic, the range of definitions (see Table 1.1 for example definitions) and the specific maintenance activities explored (see Perlman, Chapter 19; see also Ogolsky et al., 2017;

TABLE 1.1 *Exemplar definitions of relationship maintenance*

Key citation	Relationship maintenance definition
Acitelli (2001)	“to keep a relationship in a satisfying condition” (p. 153)
Agnew & VanderDrift (2015)	“processes that help to keep involved actors relatively interdependent with one another” (p. 581)
Alberts, Yoshimura, Rabby, & Loschiavo (2005)	“the preserving or sustaining of a desired relationship state or definition” (p. 304)
Ayers (1983)	Strategies used to keep a relationship in a stable state (i.e., “the basic patterns of exchange in the relationship are established and accepted” [p. 62] and “a given level of intimacy” [p. 62] is maintained)
Baxter & Dindia (1990)	“[Preventative and remedial] efforts to sustain a dynamic equilibrium in their relationship definition and satisfaction levels as they cope with the ebb and flow of everyday relating” (p. 188)
Baxter & Simon (1993)	“the process of sustaining a relationship’s quality, particularly the satisfaction levels of the partners, in the presence of ongoing dialectical flux” (p. 226)
Bell, Daly, & Gonzalez (1987)	“enact lines of behavior . . . to maintain and even enhance the affinity in their marriage” (p. 446)
Braiker & Kelley (1979)	“behaviors [primarily communication] engaged in by members of the couple to reduce costs and maximize

TABLE 1.1 (cont.)

Key citation	Relationship maintenance definition
	rewards from the relationship” (p. 151). . . “the close communication of feelings and needs, and discussions directed at improving the relationship” (p. 156)
Burleson, Metts, & Kirch (2000)	“[Actions and tasks] associated with the maintenance, management, or repair of a relationship. These tasks focus on defining the relationship, establishing its parameters, managing its tensions, and dealing with threats to its integrity and endurance.” (p. 248)
Canary & Stafford (1994)	“actions and activities used to sustain desired relational definitions” (p. 5)
Canary, Stafford, & Semic (2002)	“activities to repair, sustain, and thereby continue relationships in ways they want them to be” (p. 395)
Dainton & Aylor (2001) (see also Dindia & Canary, 1993)	“efforts to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition” (p. 176)
Dindia & Baxter (1987)	“strategies that are employed to stabilize the continuation of a relationship” (p. 145)
Duck (1994)	“area where relationships continue to exist between the point of their initial development. . . and their possible decline” (p. 45) “relational maintenance contains two elements, not one: the first is strategic planning for the continuance of the relationship; and the second is the breezy allowance of the relationship to continue by means of the everyday interactions and conversations that make the relationship what it is” (p. 46)
Gagné, Khan, Lydon, & To (2008)	“engage in various strategies to defend against the threat of meeting attractive alternatives to their dating partners” (p. 59)
Goldberg, Smith, & Kashy (2010)	“the practice of engaging in behaviors aimed at sustaining the quality and stability of the relationship” (p. 223)
Lambert & Fincham (2011)	“One way to maintain a relationship is to voice concerns to the partner so that appropriate adjustments can be made” (p. 53)
Ledbetter et al. (2010)	“communicative acts that foster perception of shared resources, identities, and perspectives” (p. 22)
McNulty, O’Mara, & Karney (2008)	“interpreting negative events in ways that allow each partner to maintain positive views of the relationship and of each other” (p. 631)
Roloff & Cloven (1994)	“individual or joint approaches intimates take to limit the relational harm that may result from prior or future conflicts and transgression” (p. 27) “maintenance approaches focus on preserving relationships, and may not otherwise benefit the individuals involved” (p. 29)
Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon (2001)	“the specific means by which partners manage to sustain long-term, well-functioning relationships” (p. 96)

TABLE 1.1 (cont.)

Key citation	Relationship maintenance definition
Schoebi, Pagani, Luginbuehl, & Bradbury (2015)	“requires behavioral capacities that enable individuals to resolve conflicts and cope with stress in difficult times” . . . “motivational basis to preserve and sustain one’s relationship throughout the challenges of daily life” (p. 160) . . . “behaviors that maintain positive relationship qualities such as satisfaction, intimacy, and love [preventative aim], and. . . attempts to repair and strengthen a vulnerable relationship [intervention aim]” (p. 161)
Sigman (1991)	“relationship continuity constructional units, [or] pieces of behavior that precede, occur during, and succeed moments of relationship members’ interactional nonengagement and serve to define the relationship as a continuous one despite the absence of face-to-face engagement” (p. 109)
Stafford & Canary (1991)	“communication strategies and routines that function to maintain relationships” (p. 218) “efforts expended to maintain the nature of the relationship to the actor’s satisfaction” (p. 220)
Stafford, Dainton, & Haas (2000), p. 307	“[strategic behaviors] which individuals enact with the conscious intent of preserving or improving the relationship . . . [and routine behaviors] that people perform that foster relational maintenance”

Note: For full references for articles cited in the table, see Ogolsky et al. (2017).

Ogolsky & Monk, 2018) in past research vary considerably. Some of the definitions set clear parameters on the specific criteria for maintenance activities. Others judge maintenance in terms of its correlation with known relationship outcomes (e.g., satisfaction). The remaining definitions refer to the processes that underlie maintenance (e.g., preservation of a current state). Of note, one of the chapters in this volume presents a novel and provocative definition of relationship maintenance as the process of growth (Stafford, Chapter 7). Taken together, it is clear that the research on the topic of relationship maintenance has grown considerably, yet definitional inconsistencies continue to pervade. Thus, crossing disciplinary boundaries and making implicit definitions of relationship maintenance more overt is the impetus for this volume.

WHEN?

The need for relationship maintenance comes online in the face of various relational experiences. Ogolsky and colleagues (2017) argue that there are two macromotives that undergird relationship maintenance processes: threat

mitigation and relationship enhancement. Threat-mitigation strategies occur in order to stave off conditions that threaten the health of the relationship, such as partner transgressions (McNulty & Dugas, Chapter 8), or stress (Randall & Messerschmitt-Coen, Chapter 10). Relationship-enhancement strategies, however, encourage positive relationship outcomes void of any overt threat to the relationship. Relationship-enhancement strategies include behaviors such as generosity, social support, and joint leisure activity.

These macromotives also intersect with the definitions of relationship maintenance. Threat-mitigation strategies occur in reaction to specific relational threats, which suggests that they occur with the goal of keeping the relationship in a given state. That is, strategies such as derogating alternatives (VanderDrift & Agnew, Chapter 2; Young & Simpson, Chapter 3) or managing a conflict (Leo, Leifker, Baucom, & Baucom, Chapter 11) are done with the intent of moving the relationship back to a state of homeostasis. Relationship-enhancement strategies better align with definitions that involve moving the relationship forward. For example, routinely expressing gratitude (McNulty & Dugas, Chapter 8) or exhibiting responsiveness (Sprecher, Felmlee, Stokes, & McDaniel, Chapter 9) promotes a climate that allows partners to deepen their connection and reestablish relational goals. Many maintenance processes, such as sex and physical affection (see Impett, Muise, & Rosen, Chapter 12), for example, can both mitigate threat (e.g., motivated to have sex out of concern a partner will stray) and enhance a relationship (e.g., motivated to pleasure a partner or enhance the compassionate bond with a partner), depending on the motive. In addition to these motives dictating *when* maintenance is prompted, relationship maintenance can also occur at all points in the life course, although expression, function, and consequences can vary (see Rauer & Proulx, Chapter 17).

WHERE?

Of all the “W” questions addressed in this chapter, the “where” question has the smallest body of empirical support. Much of what we know about the location of maintenance comes from the limited work on cross-cultural variation (see Gaines & Ferenczi, Chapter 15). Work in this area has consistently shown that maintenance behavior is more similar than it is different cross-culturally. The most pronounced difference exists as a function of societal values. That is, individualistic countries like the USA put a higher premium on relationship-enhancement activities. Collectivist countries like Japan and South Korea, however, assign less value to relationship maintenance efforts, and as such, report lower levels than people in individualistic countries (e.g., Yum & Canary, 2009; see also Vennum, Kanter, & Baptist, Chapter 18). Within the same country, maintenance also occurs across different social locations (e.g., race, sexual orientation, sex, and gender) despite

different stressors and barriers encountered by marginalized groups (e.g., discrimination; Fiori & Rauer, Chapter 14).

A second body of literature that shines some light on the location of relationship maintenance examines long-distance relationships. There are many situations that create a need or desire for relationship partners to live apart from each other (e.g., educational attainment, military deployment or other employment responsibilities). Research on partners in long-distance relationships routinely shows that they use a broader range of relationship maintenance strategies than do geographically proximal partners. These expanded strategies include the use of technology (e.g., Skype, text-messaging; Billedo, Kerkhof, & Finkenauer, 2015) and imagined interaction (Comfort, Grinstead, McCartney, Bourgois, & Knight, 2005; see Caughlin & Wang, Chapter 16, for a review of technology in relationships). Moreover, long-distance partners use more assurances (e.g., thinking or planning for the future) than do geographically close partners (see Ogolsky et al., 2017).

WHY?

The literature on relationship maintenance is rife with theories to explain why people engage in activities to promote their relationships. Among these theoretical explanations are models of early experiences such as attachment (Lee et al., Chapter 4) and evolution (Young & Simpson, Chapter 3), as well as models of relationship processes such as social exchange, interdependence, and equity (VanderDrift & Agnew, Chapter 2), uncertainty (Theiss, Chapter 5), and self-expansion (Xu, Lewandowski, & Aron, Chapter 6). The central difference between these two groups of theories is the relative weight of the individual versus the dyad.

Models of early experiences focus heavily on the individual nested within the broader family or evolutionary context. Attributions about relationship maintenance, therefore, stem from interactions between the individual and his or her caregiver (in the case of attachment) or from an evolutionary need to ensure successful reproduction (in the case of evolution). Models of relationship process tend to focus on the unique interaction between romantic partners as a catalyst for the promotion of relationship maintenance. Social exchange frameworks identify the relative balance of rewards and costs as a central determinant of maintenance. Uncertainty perspectives highlight the need for maintenance in response to the lack of clarity that stems from relationship transitions. Self-expansion argues that maintenance is best achieved through the use of novel activities that serve as a catalyst for physiological closeness. Despite the different explanations across a number of theories, there is consistency in the fact that people engage in relationship maintenance because it is important to the persistence of relationships (see Ogolsky et al., 2017). This fact is also why relationship maintenance is a salient

focus in educational and therapeutic relationship intervention efforts (see Vennum et al., Chapter 18).

HOW?

The answer to the “How” question stems from the expansive work exploring the correlates of maintenance as well as examining the mediators and moderators of the associations between relationship maintenance and outcomes. Among the most common correlates of relationship maintenance are satisfaction and commitment. Numerous chapters in this volume even incorporate these correlates into the very definition of relationship maintenance. Nearly all of the maintenance strategies covered in the literature correlate with relationship satisfaction and/or commitment, and a meta-analysis of this work shows that these effects are moderate to large in magnitude (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013).

In terms of mediation and moderation, the literature varies as a function of the specific maintenance strategy in question. Threat-mitigation strategies, in general, have a positive association with relationship outcomes, but this association is moderated by the severity of the threat and the frequency of the transgression. For example, the research on forgiveness has shown that it is beneficial to the relationship if the transgression is not severe (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005) and is not recurrent (McNulty, 2008). In the context of conflict, self-regulation serves a mediating role on relationship outcomes through a stress-buffering process (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). In the relationship-enhancement domain, individual dispositions appear to moderate associations with relationship outcomes. For example, partner-focused prayer is associated with relationship satisfaction among those who pray regularly (Beach, Fincham, Hurt, McNair, & Stanley, 2008). Humor is also beneficial to relationships, particularly among those who routinely use it (Hall, 2013). Across both macromotives, issues of biased perception also influence the impact of relationship maintenance activities (Lemay & Teneva, Chapter 13).

INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

Our overview chapter is meant to set the scene for the research that follows. Each chapter elaborates on the core questions and research areas that we identified earlier. The book is organized around three major sections that highlight theory, process, and context. In each chapter, the authors provide an integrative review and critique of the existing literature as it pertains to the maintenance of close relationships. The book focuses heavily on recent research (e.g., within the last 10 years). The first section features five chapters that explore theoretical explanations of relationship maintenance. Each of these chapters examines a major theoretical framework and explains how it

conceptualizes relationship maintenance. The second section contains seven chapters that focus on the various processes of relationship maintenance. Each of these chapters describe a specific maintenance activity (or set of activities) and identify the mechanisms by which those behaviors or strategies promote the development of relationships and how they impact broader relational processes. The third section of the book is dedicated to the diverse social contexts in which relationship maintenance is embedded. This section includes five chapters that explain the diversity of relationship maintenance across culture, context, race, sex, gender, and the life course. The final chapter in this section focuses on the practical implications of relationship maintenance in the lives of couples and families. The concluding chapter provides a discussion of the past, present, and future of relationship maintenance research by highlighting the critical gaps in the existing literature as well as opportunities for advancements in theoretical, empirical, and methodological work.

The book represents the most up-to-date, interdisciplinary research on relationship maintenance. This is not the first book to cover the topic of relationship maintenance, but it is unique in its attention to diverse perspectives on the definitions, processes, antecedents, and consequences of maintenance activities. The research covered in this collection of chapters comes from all facets of the behavioral sciences and advances important new ideas about the ways in which people develop their relationships. This collaboration across disciplines is a vital step in order to advance the interdisciplinary area of relationship maintenance. Given that interpersonal relationships are central to our health and well-being, a comprehensive understanding of the maintenance of these relationships is essential. We believe this collection of chapters brings us ever closer to understanding the depth and breadth of our most important resources: each other.

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