

GROUP DYNAMICS

9. Interpersonal Relationships

9.1. Introduction

An interpersonal relationship is a strong, deep, or close association or acquaintance between two or more people that may range in duration from brief to enduring. This association may be based on inference, love, solidarity, regular business interactions, or some other type of social commitment. Interpersonal relationships are formed in the context of social, cultural and other influences. The context can vary from family or kinship relations, friendship, marriage, relations with associates, work, clubs, neighborhoods, and places of worship. They may be regulated by law, custom, or mutual agreement, and are the basis of social groups and society as a whole. The study of interpersonal relationships involves several branches of the social sciences, including such disciplines as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and social work. Interpersonal skills are vital when trying to develop a relationship with another person. The scientific study of relationships evolved during the 1990s and came to be referred to as 'relationship science', which distinguishes itself from anecdotal evidence or pseudo-experts by basing conclusions on data and objective analysis. Interpersonal ties are also a subject in mathematical sociology.

Human beings are innately social and are shaped by their experiences with others. There are multiple perspectives to understand this inherent motivation to interact with others. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, humans need to feel love (sexual/nonsexual) and acceptance from social groups (family, peer groups). In fact, the need to belong is so innately ingrained that it may be strong enough to overcome physiological and safety needs, such as children's attachment to abusive parents or staying in abusive romantic relationships. Such examples illustrate the extent to which the psychobiological drive to belong is entrenched. Another way to appreciate the importance of relationships is in terms of a reward framework. This perspective suggests that individuals engage in relations that are rewarding in both tangible and intangible ways. The concept fits into a larger theory of social exchange. This theory is based on the idea that relationships develop as a result of cost-benefit analyses. Individuals seek out rewards in interactions with others and are willing to pay a cost for said rewards. In the best-case scenario, rewards will

exceed costs, producing a net gain. This can lead to shopping around or constantly comparing alternatives to maximize the benefits (rewards) while minimizing costs.

Relationships are also important for their ability to help individuals develop a sense of self. The relational self is the part of an individual's self-concept that consists of the feelings and beliefs that one has regarding oneself that develops based on interactions with others. In other words, one's emotions and behaviors are shaped by prior relationships. Thus, relational self-theory posits that prior and existing relationships influence one's emotions and behaviors in interactions with new individuals, particularly those individuals that remind him or her of others in his or her life. Studies have shown that exposure to someone who resembles a significant other activates specific self-beliefs, changing how one thinks about oneself in the moment more so than exposure to someone who does not resemble a significant other.

9.2. Stages

Interpersonal relationships are dynamic systems that change continuously during their existence. Like living organisms, relationships have a beginning, a lifespan, and an end. They tend to grow and improve gradually, as people get to know each other and become closer emotionally, or they gradually deteriorate as people drift apart, move on with their lives and form new relationships with others. One of the most influential models of relationship development was proposed by psychologist George Levinger. This model was formulated to describe heterosexual, adult romantic relationships, but it has been applied to other kinds of interpersonal relations as well. According to the model, the natural development of a relationship follows five stages:

1. ***Acquaintance and Acquaintanceship*** – Becoming acquainted depends on previous relationships, physical proximity, first impressions, and a variety of other factors. If two people begin to like each other, continued interactions may lead to the next stage, but acquaintance can continue indefinitely.
2. ***Buildup*** – During this stage, people begin to trust and care about each other. The need for intimacy, compatibility and such filtering agents as common background and goals will influence whether or not interaction continues.
3. ***Continuation*** – This stage follows a mutual commitment to quite a strong and close long-term friendships, romantic relationship, or even marriage. It is generally a long, relative stable period. Nevertheless, continued growth

and development will occur during this time. Mutual trust is important for sustaining the relationship.

4. ***Deterioration*** – Not all relationships deteriorate, but those that do tend to show signs of trouble. Boredom, resentment, and dissatisfaction may occur, and individuals may communicate less and avoid self-disclosure. Loss of trust and betrayals may take place as the downward spiral continues, eventually ending the relationship.
5. ***Termination*** – The final stage marks the end of the relationship, either by breakups, death, or by spatial separation for quite some time and severing all existing ties of either friendship or romantic love.

Friendships may involve some degree of transitivity. In other words, a person may become a friend of an existing friend's friend. However, if two people have a sexual relationship with the same person, they may become competitors rather than friends. Accordingly, sexual behavior with the sexual partner of a friend may damage the friendship. Sexual activities between two friends tend to alter that relationship, either by "taking it to the next level" or by severing it.

9.3. Adult Attachment and Attachment Theory

Healthy relationships are built on a foundation of secure attachments. Adult attachment models represent an internal set of expectations and preferences regarding relationship intimacy that guide behavior. Secure adult attachment, characterized by low attachment-related avoidance and anxiety, has numerous benefits. Within the context of safe, secure attachments, people can pursue optimal human functioning and flourishing. This is because social acts that reinforce feelings of attachment also stimulate the release of neurotransmitters such as oxytocin and endorphin, which alleviate stress and create feelings of contentment. Attachment theory can also be used as a means of explaining adult relationships.

Romantic Love

The capacity for love gives depth to human relationships, brings people closer to each other physically and emotionally, and makes people think expansively about themselves and the world.

Stages of romantic interpersonal relationships can also be characterized more generally by the following: **attraction; initiation; development; sustaining vs. terminating.**

- **Attraction** - Premeditated or automatic, attraction can occur between acquaintances, coworkers, lovers, etc., be based on sexual arousal, intellectual stimulation, or respect. Studies have shown that attraction can be susceptible to influence based on context and externally induced arousal, with the caveat that participants be unaware of the source of their arousal. A study in 1975, induced arousal through physical exercise and found that participants rated erotic pictures highly 4 min post-exercise (when no longer realized aroused by exercise) than either immediately after (when arousal and awareness were greater) or 10 minutes later (when exercise-induced arousal had dissipated). As supported by a series of studies, researchers showed that a preexisting state of arousal can heighten reactions to affective stimuli.
- **Initiation** - There are several catalysts in the initiation of a new relationship. One commonly studied factor is physical proximity (also known as propinquity). Proximity facilitates chance encounters, which lead to initiation of new relationships. This is closely related to the mere exposure effect, which states that the more an individual is exposed to a person or object, the more s/he likes it. Another important factor in the initiation of new relationships is similarity. Put simply, individuals tend to be attracted to and start new relationships with those who are similar to them. These similarities can include beliefs, rules, interests, culture, education, etc. Individuals seek relationships with like others because like others are most likely to validate shared beliefs and perspectives, thus facilitating interactions that are positive, rewarding and without conflict.
- **Development** - Development of interpersonal relationships can be further split into committed versus non-committed romantic relationships, which have different behavioral characteristics. In a 2011 study, men and women were found to differ in a variety of mate-retention strategies depending on whether their romantic relationships were committed or not. More committed relationships by both genders were characterized by greater resource display, appearance enhancement, love and care, and verbal signs of possession. In contrast, less committed relationships by both genders were characterized by greater jealousy induction. In terms of gender differences, men used greater resource display than women, who used more appearance enhancement as a mate-retention strategy than men.
- **Sustaining vs. Terminating** - After a relationship has had time to develop, it enters into a phase where it will be sustained if it is not otherwise

terminated. Some important qualities of strong, enduring relationships include emotional understanding and effective communication between partners. Research has also shown that idealization of one's partner is linked to stronger interpersonal bonds. Idealization is the pattern of overestimating a romantic partner's positive virtues or underestimating a partner's negative faults in comparison to the partner's own self-evaluation. In general, individuals who idealize their romantic partners tend to report higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Other research has examined the impact of joint activity on relationship quality. In particular, studies have shown that romantic partners that engage in a novel and exciting physical activity together are more likely to report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than partners that complete a mundane activity.

In his triangular theory of love, psychologist Robert Sternberg theorizes that love is a mix of three components: some (1) passion, or physical attraction; (2) intimacy, or feelings of closeness; and (3) commitment, involving the decision to initiate and sustain a relationship. The presence of all three components characterizes consummate love, the most durable type of love. In addition, the presence of intimacy and passion in marital relationships predicts marital satisfaction. Also, commitment is the best predictor of relationship satisfaction, especially in long-term relationships. Positive consequences of being in love include increased self-esteem and self-efficacy.