Chapter 13

Intimate Relationships

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How do people know they are in good relationships? Why do some people have problems with intimacy? What is the nature and origin of love? Does good communication really produce successful relationships? These are just some of the intriguing questions that social psychologists attempt to answer. Indeed, the study of intimate relationships has become one of the most important domains in social psychology over the past three decades or so.

But what are intimate relationships? Answering this question is not as easy as it seems. One key concept developed by Kelley and colleagues (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Kelley et al., 1983) describes relationships in terms of interdependence. In close, intimate relationships the well-being and psychological processes of one individual are intertwined with the same processes in another person. Not surprisingly, therefore, successful intimate relationships are characterized by relatively high levels of trust, knowledge, commitment, and intimacy.

However, intimate relationships themselves can be divided into two categories: platonic friendships and romantic relationships (this chapter focuses on nonfamilial intimate relationship). Romantic relationships differ from intimate platonic friendships in two major ways. First, romantic relationships contain elements of sexual attraction and passion, and second, individuals are typically involved in just one romantic attachment at a time. Friendships can be intense and are of great psychological importance in people's lives, but most research in social psychology has been devoted to understanding romantic relationships. Accordingly, we will focus on this domain in this chapter.
First, we present a brief historical synopsis to help understand the scientific work in relationships in the proper context. Then we cover five key areas that have dominated social psychological research in intimate relationships for the past 20 years: interdependence theory, social cognition, love, attachment, and communication.

A Brief History

A social psychological approach to intimate relationships focuses on the interaction between two individuals, paying close attention to both behavior and what goes on in people's minds (emotions and cognitions). Up to the late 1970s, social psychological research into relationships concentrated on interpersonal attraction, namely, the factors that lead people to be attracted to one another at the initial stages of relationship development. This research was largely atheoretical and the results read like a laundry list of variables that influence attraction including similarity, proximity, and physical attractiveness (for an overview of research on initial attraction see Finkel & Baumeister, Chapter 12, this volume).

In the 1980s the psychological zeitgeist shifted toward the greater complexity inherent in the development, maintenance, and dissolution phases of dyadic romantic relationships. This shift was prompted by several key developments in the 1970s. First, Gottman and other clinical psychologists began research that, for the first time, observed and carefully measured the dyadic interchanges of married couples in an attempt to predict divorce (Gottman, 1979). Second, Rubin (1973) and others became interested in love, and devised reliable scales that could measure the concept. Third, Kelley et al. (1983) led a team of social psychologists in producing a seminal book published in 1983 titled Close Relationships, which presented the first full-blooded treatment of intimate relationships from an interactional, social psychological perspective.

The explosion of social psychological research in intimate relationships over the past two decades has been marked by five major developments. First, there has been a continuing stream of research inspired by the early work by Kelley and others on the nature and process of interdependence in romantic relationships. Second, considerable attention has been given to understanding the inner workings of the intimate relationship mind via the role that social cognition (beliefs, cognitive processes, etc.) and emotions play in intimate relationships. Third, the topic of love has attracted considerable attention. Fourth, there has been a burgeoning interest in how attachment and bonding processes contribute to adult romantic relationships. Finally, prompted in part by the
development of new statistical and methodological tools, the study of commu-
nication has provided an increasingly illuminating analysis of interaction in
intimate relationships. We discuss each area in turn before discussing new
developments. Finally we pull the threads together to provide a brief synthesis
of this work.

Interdependence Theory

The genesis of interdependence theory can be traced to the books produced by
Kelley and Thibaut, published from 1959 to 1979 (Kelley, 1979; Kelley &
Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This approach has various interlocking
components. Overall, the theory is framed in terms of costs versus rewards.
However, the subsequent relationship evaluations and decisions (e.g., “should I
go or should I stay”) are not based on the objective nature of such benefits, but
rather on the perceived consistency between perceptions of the benefits and
two different kinds of standards—expectations about what benefits are deserved
(comparison level or CL) and the available alternatives (comparison level alter-
natives or CLalt). If the perceived benefits are higher than CL and CLalt, then
this should produce higher levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment,
respectively. Keeping the benefits constant, however, but moving CL or CLalt
higher than the perceived benefits should reduce relationship satisfaction or
relationship commitment.

A second key feature of this theory concerns the way in which two partners
coordinate their interaction to sustain cooperation and concern for the other,
rather than selfishly pursuing benefits for the self. Using concepts drawn from
game theory, this aspect of the theory deals with the type of power and influ-
ence individuals have over each other and how couples respond to each other
when their interests conflict or overlap. The two most basic mutual forms of
control are termed fate control and behavior control. Fate control is a function
of what each partner decides to do for the other (regardless of what the recipi-
ent says or does). An example of this category is arranging a surprise party for
our partner—the partner does not exert any control over this event. Relationships
in which such forms of control are pervasive are problematic because the recipi-
ent will be deprived of control and is likely to feel dissatisfied. An example of
mutual behavior control might be negotiating who will do what in organizing a
joint party in a situation in which the individuals have equal power and the
outcome (organizing a successful party) is equally desirable for both parties. Of
course, situations in real life are often blends of the two processes (Kelley, 1979),
but this approach posits that there is a set number of prototypical situations in
social life that encourages competition or cooperation and that poses different problems and opportunities (see Kelley, et al. 2003).

The third feature of the theory concerns the central role played by interpersonal attributions, such as trust, commitment, and attitudes to the other. These facilitate and render automatic the shift from a selfish frame of mind (termed the given matrix in the theory) to a relationship or partner-serving orientation (termed the effective matrix) and are thought to be important in maintaining successful relationships (see Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

It is hard to exaggerate the importance that this general theory has had in the study of intimate relationships in social psychology. This is not because the specific details of the theory have all been accepted as they were originally formulated, but rather because the three main planks of the approach—interdependence, mutual responsiveness, and interpersonal attributions—have continued to guide the questions, theories, and research generated to study intimate relationships. We document this claim in the remainder of this chapter.

The Intimate Relationship Mind

Figure 13.1 shows a general model that more or less encompasses the existing work in the area. As can be seen, the causal processes can go in both directions. Moreover, although the model is drawn with the causal processes proceeding in a linear fashion, in reality they may often occur simultaneously. We will start with the goals (shown on the left side of Fig. 13.1) and proceed to each component in turn.

Relationship Goals

If an alien anthropologist appeared on earth, listened to pop music for a day or two, and browsed through a random assortment of self-help books, movies, and novels, it would quickly conclude that humans are obsessed with love, sex, and intimate relationships. Indeed, research has confirmed that finding a mate and forming a warm, intimate relationship (to love and be loved) are recognized by most people as key goals in their lives (see Reis & Downey, 1999). Other kinds of life goals, that at first glance seem not to be about intimate relationships, are also linked to this search for a satisfying sexual relationship including the drive for status, attractiveness, fitness, and good health. The reason is that these qualities are highly valued in mates in sexual relationships (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). And, of course, raising children
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and enjoying family life are also often (but not always) linked to the goal of finding and retaining a mate.

The five general goals listed in Figure 13.1 (explanation, evaluation, prediction, regulation, and achieving relationship satisfaction) are activated the moment a potential partner is met, and they remain potent throughout the course of the relationship. As already noted, one of the main goals in life is to have a satisfying sexual relationship. However, even a cursory analysis of this goal reveals its complexity. First, such goals vary from a one-night stand to a life-long commitment. Second, as relationships change over time so does the nature of the goals (Stephen might simply be after a good time initially, but this goal will change after his love and commitment for Mary deepens over time). Third, the way in which people achieve satisfying intimate relationships varies as a function of how they cope with a conundrum posed by developing a close sexual relationship, namely, the potential of relationships to provide succor and support versus pain and rejection. To put it another way, intimate relationships pose an approach–avoidance problem.

This conundrum, inherent in intimate relationships, has been recognized repeatedly in social psychology. It can be found, for example, as a central component in three theories we discuss later in the chapter: attachment theory, regulatory focus theory, and risk regulation theory. We simply note here that these three theories share a common proposition that individuals vary in the way they set their relationship goals along a dimension that ranges from the confident desire to promote closeness and commitment to the defensive need
to protect the self from potential rejection and thus to restrict intimacy and dependence to manageable levels.

The five goals listed will often interact with one another instead of acting independently. For example, Gable and Poore (2008) had people in long-term dating relationships beeped randomly for 10 days to report their positive and negative thoughts about the relationship; participants also reported how satisfied they were with the relationship at the end of each day. Their results suggested that people tend to evaluate their relationship satisfaction in different ways depending on whether they are dominated by goals that involve approaching positive outcomes in intimate relationships or avoiding negative outcomes. For those adopting an approach orientation, daily judgments of relationship satisfaction were a function of the frequency of positive thoughts. In contrast, relationship satisfaction for those participants dominated by the need to avoid unpleasant outcomes was a function of the incidence of negative thoughts.

Lay Relationship Theories

We move next to the stored knowledge structures (see Fig. 13.1) that exist in the service of the goals. Regardless of the way in which such knowledge structures are conceptualized, scientists agree that people do not store and retrieve exact replicas of every interpersonal experience. Instead, experiences are organized into generalized representations that summarize regularities encountered over time, including beliefs, expectations, interpersonal goals, and behavioral strategies. Whenever a relationship-relevant event occurs (from simply thinking of a close other to receiving a compliment from your partner), such lay theories are activated automatically, guiding how the event is mentally processed and influencing both accompanying emotions and resultant behavior.

We distinguish between two levels of lay intimate theories: general relationship theories that summarize knowledge specifically relevant to close relationships and local theories that represent models of specific intimate relationships such as our husband or ex-girlfriend. We briefly describe each in turn, and analyze how they help drive the ABCs (Affect, Behavior, and Cognition) of psychological phenomena in intimate relationships.

General relationship theories contain beliefs, expectations, and concepts that are concerned with intimate, sexual relationships. These theories can be idiosyncratic, to some extent, depending on individual experiences. Nevertheless, relationship theories are derived from both culturally shared sources of information (e.g., media) and from hard-wired evolutionary adaptations (see Maner & Kenrick, Chapter 17, this volume). Thus, many core features of general relationship theories are similar across individuals. For example, people hold
similar theories regarding the nature and roles of emotions in relationships, such as love, anger, and jealousy (Fitness, 1996), and have similar conceptualizations of concepts such as commitment (Fehr, 1999) and mate selection criteria (Fletcher et al., 1999). A key point here is that people bring these expectations and beliefs with them from the beginning of specific relationships.

Other types of general lay relationship theories have the same structure across individuals, although the actual content may differ. We have already noted that there are stable individual differences in relationship goals. In addition, there is good evidence that the same is true for attachment models, ideal standards, and what Knee, Patrick, and Lonsbary (2003) terms “growth and destiny beliefs.” That is, individuals differ in the extent to which they believe and trust others will be available and responsive in times of need (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), the importance they place on such standards as physical attractiveness in evaluating a potential or existent mate (Fletcher et al., 1999), and the extent to which they believe relationship success is determined by destiny or through overcoming challenges (Knee et al., 2003). Individual differences in the content of these lay theories (partly) determine how the same relationship events are perceived and responded to. For example, individuals who ascribe to destiny beliefs are less satisfied with their relationships in the face of negative partner behavior or relationship experiences. In contrast, individuals who view relationship problems as challenges to be overcome remain relatively satisfied and committed when their partners do not live up to their ideals or when they experience conflict within their relationships (Knee et al., 2003).

Regardless of their particular content, lay relationship theories pervasively influence affect, behavior, and cognition within relationships. Consider the following short account of Mary and Stephen, in the course of their first date.

Mary notices that Stephen dresses well and has a good job. This fits nicely with Susan’s theory about the ideal man. However, caring and sensitivity are also critical for Mary; she seeks a long-term relationship, and her last boyfriend was so concerned about his career she felt he didn’t have enough time for her. Similar feelings have plagued Mary’s previous relationships, and deep down she fears that no one will ever really love her. As the discussion turns to their interests, Mary finds they have a lot of in common—“that’s good,” she thinks, “similarity is important in relationships.” Maybe there is hope after all.

As this tale suggests, people enter social situations with preexistent mental dispositions (theories about relationships) that help to produce interpretations and explanations of behavior, evaluations of the partner and the relationship, and finally decisions about the course of the relationship. If Mary and Stephen’s
relationship continues they will both develop elaborate local relationship theories including accounts of the other's personality, attributes, and attitudes, and mental models of their relationship, including the how and the why of their levels of closeness, their communication, and developing problems.

Another type of general theory that predates, but influences, local relationship theories concerns the self. Indeed, as local relationship theories develop over time they steadily become entwined with representations and evaluations of the self (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001). That is, people start thinking in terms of “we” rather than “I” and “you.” Another way in which the self is linked to relationship outcomes is via self-esteem. Self-esteem can be thought of as an attitude toward the self (a local theory of the self) and is sensitive to how other people view and react to the self. In an influential theory, Leary and colleagues (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Leary, 2001) posited that self-esteem is essentially like a gauge (or sociometer) that monitors the extent to which the individual is well regarded by others. Evidence has steadily accumulated supporting this theory in intimate relationship contexts. For example, self-esteem is positively correlated with self-perceived mate value, such as attractiveness (Anthony, Holmes, & Wood, 2001), and with secure attachment representations (Bylsma, Cozzarelli, & Sumer, 1997).

Murray and her colleagues have shown that lower self-esteem is associated with underplaying the amounts of love and satisfaction actually reported by the partner (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Recent diary studies by Murray and others also document the subtle and dynamic nature of associated processes over short periods of time (typically 3 weeks) in romantic relationships (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002; Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003; 2006; Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2003). These studies suggest that when the partner is perceived to be insensitive or transgressing in some way, low self-esteem motivates withdrawal from the relationship, the production of uncharitable attributions, and a decline in relationship satisfaction.

The take-home message is that local relationship theories are generated according to the way in which they overlap with preexistent general relationship theories. Thus, relationship evaluations are produced (in part) as a function of the extent to which perceptions and experiences match prior expectations and beliefs. This insight is taken directly from interdependence theory. However, recent research and theorizing has extended this idea and showed that greater discrepancies between ideal standards and perceptions of the partner in existing relationships on specific dimensions (such as warmth, attractiveness, and status) are linked with lower relationship satisfaction (Fletcher et al., 1999), higher rates of relationship dissolution (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000), and more strenuous attempts to change the partner (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006).
At the center of lay local relationship theories is a set of relationship evaluative judgments that are continuously updated on the basis of relevant information. The most studied evaluative categories include overall satisfaction, passion, commitment, trust, closeness or intimacy, and love. Social psychologists and others have carried out huge amounts of research on such constructs, and there are many self-report scales designed to measure relationship quality judgments. Just one of the most popular scales developed in 1976 by Spanier (the Dyadic Adjustment Scale) had been cited 2529 times in research articles (at present). These kinds of judgments play a critical role in generating relationship behavior, cognition, and emotion.

As romantic relationships develop, intimacy and closeness change. Reis and colleagues (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Reis & Patrick, 1996), taking a leaf out of interdependence theory, argue that a key element in developing intimacy is the way in which the partner responds; specifically, to what extent does the partner communicate that he or she understands, validates, and cares for the other? The associated types of attributions (what you think your partner thinks and feels about you), sometimes termed “reflected appraisals,” are important in intimate relationships, consistent with Reis’ ideas (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004).

On-Line Processing

The relationship mind not only stores knowledge and theories but also thinks, daydreams, perceives, and feels in episodic bursts. We have labeled this component “on-line processing” in Figure 13.1. Although the examples used may leave the impression that people always consciously draw on their theories, relationship theories are also routinely accessed unconsciously (Fletcher, Rosanowski, & Fitness, 1994). In addition, the on-line cognitive processing itself may be unconscious and automatic. This level of efficiency is necessary. A single interpersonal interaction requires many streams of cognitive processing to occur simultaneously. Partners must encode the verbal and nonverbal behavior (including facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures), while controlling their own behavior, making rapid judgments, and blending their thoughts, emotions, and behavior into a smoothly coordinated interaction. This is achievable only if considerable processing is conducted automatically and unconsciously.

There is considerable direct evidence for this thesis based on studies that use techniques that require individuals to carry out two tasks at the same time, thus loading their cognitive resources (e.g., Fletcher et al., 1994), or studies that assess the power of subliminal perception (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). Murray and Holmes (2009) review research showing that people automatically respond to the goal of enhancing intimacy. For example, subliminal priming of
the name of an accepting other increases the willingness to disclose (Gillath et al., 2006) and forgive transgressions (Karremans & Aarts, 2007). Exposing people to stress also seems to automatically trigger the goal of seeking support from a current romantic partner (Mikulincer, Gillath & Shaver, 2002).

The extent to which relationship events are subject to in-depth conscious analysis will vary considerably depending on the stage of the relationship, individual differences, and the situational context. In long-term, stable relationships a great deal of communication becomes routine, resulting in over learned and stereotypical sequences of behavior. Two types of events have been shown to cause people to return to conscious, controlled cognition (often accompanied by emotion)—negative events and unexpected events (Berscheid, 1983; Fletcher & Thomas, 1996).

**Emotions**

The study of social cognition in intimate relationships can ill afford to ignore the role of emotions, given that relationship cognition is often “hot cognition,” shot through with affect and evaluations (see Fig. 13.1). The functions of emotions in relationships are no different from their role generally (Fitness, Fletcher, & Overall, 2003). First, emotions (such as fear, anger, or love) both attract attention and provide the motivation to attain a goal. Second, they provide information that helps people decide how to attain goals. Thus, in relationship settings feelings of love are associated with the desire to be physically close to the partner and to express such urges, and feelings of anger are associated with the desire to confront the partner and seek redress (Fitness & Fletcher, 1993).

However, negative emotions provide a problem in relationships, given that their expression is likely to accelerate the demise of relationships. Thus, individuals actively control and manage the expression of emotions such as jealousy or anger (Fletcher, Thomas, & Durrant, 1999). Indeed, the expression of emotions serves a range of communication goals that are important in intimate relationships. Drawing on Darwin’s (1872) pioneering account, Clark and her colleagues have argued, for example, that the expression of emotions such as anxiety and sadness signals the need for comfort and support from the partner, whereas the expression of anger sets the scene for the partner to seek forgiveness (Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001). Emotions are, thus, tied to both social cognition and the way that couples interact and negotiate issues within their relationships.

At the general level individuals hold theories about the nature of emotions as they play out in intimate relationships, such as anger and love. These are often referred to as scripts, because they involve interactional sequences that
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unfold predictably over time (Fitness, 1996). For example, the prototypical script for anger (as revealed in participants’ reports of anger episodes in their relationships) involves the partner triggering the emotion by treating the target unfairly, the target feeling muscle tension and a strong urge to express the emotion, the partner responding in kind (angrily), the target feeling tense or depressed afterward, the target perceiving reasonable control over the self, and the target believing it was mainly the partner’s fault. Finally, the partner should eventually respond by asking for forgiveness (Fitness & Fletcher, 1993). Use of these scripts allows individuals to read and interpret the emotions not only of their partners but also of themselves.

We draw two main conclusions. First, emotions and cognitions are thoroughly intertwined, and work together in normal social cognition. Thus, if Stephen buys Mary a rose, she is likely to feel love or gratitude, but if Mary realizes that Stephen knows she is allergic to roses, than she may feel contempt or anger. Second, studies of rare forms of brain damage that incapacitate emotions, but leave other abilities and functions intact, have shown that people develop crippling deficits in social intelligence and managing interpersonal relationships (Damasio, 1994). Damasio’s explanation is that without emotions individuals are deprived of critical information. Thus, emotions are indispensable rather than inimical to rationality and good decision-making.

Damasio’s explanation has the ring of truth when applied to intimate relationships. Imagine, for example, making decisions and judgments in relationship contexts while experiencing no emotions or feelings. If you go on a date with someone, how do you decide whether to go out on another date? How do you respond when your partner tells you he or she loves you? If you do decide that your partner can be trusted or not trusted, is warm or cold, is patient or bad tempered, how do you act on those judgments? Without emotions or affective tone, individuals would become rudderless ships, similar to the patients described by Damasio who suffered from specific damage to regions of the brain centrally involved in emotions and affect.

Self-Regulation

And so we come to the final step in the model—behavior and the self-regulation of behavior (see Fig. 13.1). If everyone openly expressed every passing cognition and emotion honestly, many relationships would implode. Consider revelations such as “I wish your penis was bigger,” “I always liked your sister more than you,” “I stole some money from you years ago,” or even “Actually, you do look fat in those trousers”. Fortunately, as shown in our model (Fig. 13.1), the expression of thoughts and feelings are routinely controlled and censored in relationships.
This censoring process is revealed in many ways. For example, studies investigating the private thoughts and feelings that partners report while having discussions about relationship problems reveal that the behavior exhibited during these problem-solving discussions is relatively positive compared to the underlying set of reported cognitions and emotions, which presents a bleaker picture (Fletcher & Fitness, 1990; Fletcher & Thomas, 2000). The same research shows that the two spheres (thoughts/emotions and behavior) are correlated, but that the negativity of the thoughts and feelings are typically softened and packaged for public consumption, although it may translate in subtle ways into nonverbal behavior (see, for example, Fletcher & Fitness, 1990).

Moreover, people often lie in relationships. DePaula and Kashy (1998) asked people to keep a diary of the lies they told to others over 1 week. In that period those in nonmarital romantic relationships told on average close to one lie in every three interactions, whereas for married individuals this rate dropped to just under one lie for every 10 interactions. Many of these lies were white lies designed to protect the feelings of the other person (e.g., “you look great in those trousers”), but many were also classified as protecting the self in some way (e.g., “I said I did not know why the computer crashed because I didn’t want to admit I caused the problem”).

We noted previously that intimate relationships pose an approach–avoidance problem. There is increasing evidence that the way in which people regulate the self emphasizes goals of approaching positive outcomes and of avoiding negative outcomes in relationship contexts (see Finkel, Molden, Johnson, & Eastwick, 2009, for a review). These authors review research suggesting, for example, that promotion-focused individuals (who are oriented toward approaching gains and avoiding nongains) are more likely than prevention-focused individuals (who are oriented toward approaching nonlosses and avoiding losses) to perceive more romantic alternatives and to pursue them more vigorously.

We have more to say about self-regulation in intimate relationships in the later section dealing with communication. However, with this brief sketch of the intimate relationship mind as background, we move to discussing the work on attachment, love, and communication.

**Attachment**

Human infants and their caretakers are born to bond. The first psychologist to grasp and exploit this point—John Bowlby—produced a detailed version of what has come to be known as “attachment theory,” which he detailed in three volumes from 1969 to 1980 (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Based on observations
of both human infants and other mammalian species, Bowlby discovered a standard sequence of responses produced by infants when separated from their caregiver—protest, despair, and detachment.

The most important elaboration of attachment theory, especially for later work dealing with adult intimate relationships, was provided by Ainsworth who developed the "strange situation" laboratory procedure in the 1960s and 1970s (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). This procedure stressed infants by separating them from their mother, leaving them in the presence of a stranger. Ainsworth found a pattern that has since been generally replicated many times; the most common response of the infants tested (categorized as secure) was to cry when the mother left, seek comfort when she returned, and then settle down and continue playing with the toys. However, approximately 20% of the infants tested (who were categorized as avoidant) did not pay much attention to their mothers, were not particularly distressed when the mother left, and more or less ignored the mother on return. The remaining 10% to 15% of the infants tested (who were categorized as anxious or ambivalent) tended to behave in a contradictory fashion when the mother returned, whining, crying, and seeking physical contact, yet resisting and hanging back at the same time.

Bowlby's theory did not just deal with infant–adult attachment, but is also a theory of personality development over the life span. Bowlby (1973) was convinced that based on early pivotal experiences with mothers or caretakers, infants develop working cognitive models of attachment (expectations, attitudes, emotional reactions, and so forth) that are carried into adulthood. These working models, he postulated, should exert profound psychological influences throughout adult life on the nature of intimate relationships forged with both adults and children.

However, it was not until 1987 that Hazan and Shaver published the first systematic research applying attachment theory to adult intimate relationships. This article proved to be the big bang of adult attachment research, initiating a massive surge of theorizing and research focused on attachment in adult romantic relationships (for a recent review, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Hazan and Shaver argued that romantic love represents a reprise of the intense intimacy bonds generated in infant–caregiver attachments, and thus should resemble the patterns found in the developmental research.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) initially developed self-report measures of the three attachment working models, which they derived from the work of Bowlby and Ainsworth. From the following paragraphs participants were instructed to choose the one that best described themselves in terms of the feelings they typically experienced in romantic adult relationships:

**Secure**: I find it relatively easy to get close to others and I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me.
I don’t often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.

**Avoidant**: I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others. I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and love partners often want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.

**Anxious**: I find that others are reluctant to get as close to me as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or won’t want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away.

They found that the proportions of participants who endorsed each working model were similar to the figures obtained with infants from the Ainsworth strange situation, and that secure people reported more positive relationships with their parents than did avoidant or anxious participants (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The barrage of research that followed this article has replicated these findings, but has, inevitably, complicated the attachment picture.

The Hazan and Shaver (1987) measurement method assumed that people fit into either one attachment working model or the other. This may seem like a reasonable assumption, but it has turned out to be wrong. Other researchers have developed multi-item scales that do not assume the categories are mutually exclusive. Factor analyses of these scales have consistently revealed the existence of two relatively independent attachment dimensions: secure versus avoidant on one dimension and the degree of attachment anxiety (high versus low) on the other dimension (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

One important question studied has been the extent to which attachment working models are stable over time. Most studies examining stability of attachment from infancy (using the Ainsworth strange situation) to adulthood have reported correlations of 0.22 to 0.27 (Simpson, Winterfield, Rholes, & Orina, 2007; Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2004). This might not seem high, but given the power of the intervening experiences and events that might influence attachment, correlations of this size are impressive. Moreover, changes over long developmental periods do not seem to be a product of random noise; for example, some studies have found that suffering long illnesses or having parents who subsequently divorce was associated with a shift to more insecure working models, whereas individuals whose parents stayed together were more likely to shift to a secure working model (Lewis, Feiring, & Rosenthal, 2000).

Other studies that have investigated the stability of adult attachment working models in intimate sexual relationships reveal reasonable levels of consistency across periods of 6 months or a year, with about 30% of participants
changing their dominant working model over time (see Baldwin & Fehr, 1995). Again, these shifts are not just a function of measurement noise. For example, Kirkpatrick and Hazan (1994) tracked 177 adults over a 4-year period, and reported that 50% of those individuals who reported they were originally secure (using the original categorical measure) and who experienced a relationship breakup switched to an avoidant working model. To summarize, the evidence indicates that across the life span attachment working models are relatively stable, but are also exquisitely attuned to external influences, especially intimate relationship experiences.

For Bowlby (1973), working models were internal cognitive representations that summarized the child’s previous attachment experiences, both emotional and behavioral. Working models comprise beliefs about others and the self, and produce expectations and attitudes that can be used to predict consequences for future relationships. Working models, thus, provide the mechanism and the link between childhood and adult relationships. Specifically, consistent with Bowlby’s prediction, when individuals or relationships are put under stress, higher levels of avoidance in working models increase the fear of rejection, which leads to withdrawal and a reluctance to seek or offer support (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan; 1992). However, there is also evidence that working models differentiate among different categories of relationship partners in adulthood. For example, there is good evidence that different working models can apply to family, friends, and romantic relationships, although it is also true that attachment working models are positively correlated across these groups (Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996; Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003).

Attachment working models are related to the goals already described (see Fig. 13.1). For example, research has shown that when more secure individuals explain negative behaviors from their partners (e.g., failing to comfort them when they were depressed), they are more inclined to produce charitable attributions apparently designed to maintain their belief in the essential warmth and trustworthiness of their partner (e.g., the partner had a bad cold). In contrast, more anxious individuals adopt a more negative pattern and emphasize their partner’s indifference to their needs and lack of commitment (Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006). These findings by Collins et al. were not produced by differences in relationship satisfaction between secure and anxious individuals, because they found that these effects remained strong after statistically controlling for the impact of relationship satisfaction.

Finally, there is evidence that attachment working models are used to regulate behavior. In a pioneering piece of research, Simpson, Rholes, and Nelligan (1992) revisited Bowlby’s hypothesis that the attachment systems should be initiated when individuals are placed under stress (indeed, this is the basis for the
strange situation procedure developed by Ainsworth). Thus, Simpson and colleagues surreptitiously observed the behavior of couples sitting in a waiting room, after the woman in each couple had been stressed by information about an upcoming experiment, which never actually took place, but which supposedly involved painful experiences. The more stressed the women became, the more their attachment working models (assessed prior to the experiment) seemed to influence their behavior; for example, more secure women sought more support whereas more avoidant women avoided seeking support from their partner, to the extent of expressing irritation if their partners asked what was wrong or proffered support.

To summarize, attachment working models operate like highly accessible general or local relationship lay theories. When triggered, they automatically influence relationship judgments or decisions. More specifically, the activation of a relationship threat automatically calls up attachment working models. The nature of those attachment working models (which may be specific to particular targets) will then partly determine the subsequent emotions, cognitions, and behavioral responses.

Love

The nature of romantic love and its origins are all too often proclaimed as a mystery or as beyond the reach of science. In fact, scientific investigation into the phenomenon of love is rapidly demonstrating that the opposite is true, with (social) psychology in the vanguard of contemporary research (Reis & Aron, 2008).

Romantic love is not simply an invention of Western cultures. Jankowiak and Fischer (1992) found good evidence (based on folk tales, ethnographies, evidence of elopement, and so forth) that romantic love exists in 147 of 166 cultures studied. This is a conservative figure, given that in 18 of the 19 love-absent cultures the ethnographic accounts were uninformative rather than definitive, and in only one culture did an ethnographer claim that romantic love did not actually exist. Moreover, romantic love is not simply a product of modern cultures—the power and addictive nature of love have been noted in poetry and literature going back 3000 years (Fowler, 1994).

Romantic love has other features that mark it out as basic and universal. It has a specific neuropsychological signature, including the release of hormones such as oxytocin and dopamine (Fisher, 2004). Like all hormones these substances have multiple functions in the brain and in the body; when they are released in the brain, they operate as neurotransmitters with oxytocin being