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 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 communication 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 alternatives 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 influence 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 recipient 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 recipient 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 relations and behaviors

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, 2007), 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
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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
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associated with bonding and affiliation behavior and dopamine associated with rewards and pleasure. Moreover, both these neurotransmitters tend to be focused on the same part of the brain (the nucleus accumbens), and thus are implicated in the development of mate attraction and bonding (Insel, 2000; Aragona et al., 2006).

Monogamy is rare among mammalian species, with only 3% to 5% forming long-term pair bonds. In species that do so, such as humans, there is evidence that both males and females have extensive receptors for oxytocin (or a closely related neuropeptide called vasopressin). In contrast, in species in which the males are promiscuous, only the females possess such extensive receptors in the brain for this neuropeptide (which is thought to be associated with the need for females to bond with immature, defenseless offspring) (Insel, 2000).

Romantic love also has characteristic behavioral displays and interactions that have their precursors in adult–infant interactions. Interactions between infants and doting parents reveal that parents seem fascinated with the infant's appearance, maintain much eye contact, express considerable affection, indulge in horse-play, and are exquisitely attuned to the needs of the infant. The same behavioral interactions are equally descriptive of couples head over heels in love (Shaver, Morgan, & Wu, 1996). In a series of studies Gonzaga and colleagues have shown that couples display distinctive affiliation behaviors toward each other when, for example, discussing their first date—head nods, smiles, positive hand movements, and leaning toward the partner (see Gonzaga & Haselton, 2008, for a review). Moreover, this pattern of behaviors is distinct from the way in which other closely related emotions, such as happiness, desire, or arousal, are expressed.

There also exists a plausible evolutionary account that specifies the functions that love has evolved to meet (Gonzaga & Haselton, 2008). Compared to other primates, humans have exceptionally large brains and thus heads; to achieve egress though the birth canal they must be born at an unusually undeveloped stage (for a mammal). As a result, humans are dependent on their parents and other relatives for exceptionally long periods of time before attaining adulthood (compared to other animals including primates) and also require a tremendous amount of informal and formal education from their parents to acquire the social, cultural, and practical knowledge necessary for survival and reproductive success. Accordingly, as brain size and childhood length steadily increased over the last million or so years of Homo evolution, there were probably strong selection pressures toward the development of (relatively) monogamous pair bonding (Fisher, 2004; also see Maner & Kenrick, Chapter 17, this volume).

Thus, love is an evolutionary device designed to encourage couples to stay together long enough to enable their children to reach adulthood. Reproductive
success counts only if the progeny make it to adulthood and pass their parents’ genes (in turn) to their offspring. The existence of a stable monogamous couple in a hunter–gatherer lifestyle also allows for a potentially valuable division of labor, with the man being the dominant provider and the woman being the dominant caregiver (although in hunter–gatherer cultures both genders typically perform both functions). In brief, in the human ancestral environment, two parents were better than one (Gonzaga & Haselton, 2008).

This sort of evolutionary account is consistent with evidence that the most important standards across cultures (for both men and women) for mates in long-term relationships consistently concern a partner’s warmth and trustworthiness (Buss, 1989). However, recent research suggests that romantic love is not one thing, but is based around two or three distinct psychological (and biological) components. Shaver, Hazan, and Bradshaw (1988) conceptualized adult romantic love in terms of Bowlby’s (evolutionary) treatment of attachment systems in humans. Bowlby argued for the existence of three basic behavioral systems that bond dyads together: attachment, caregiving, and sex. Thus, Shaver et al. (p. 93) wrote that saying “I love you” can mean any or all of the following (note the role of emotions in the descriptions).

- **Love as attachment**: “I am emotionally dependent on you for happiness, safety, and security; I feel anxious and lonely when you’re gone, relieved and stronger when you’re near. I want to be comforted, supported emotionally, and taken care of by you. Part of my identity is based on my attachment to you.”

- **Love as caregiving**: “I get great pleasure from supporting, caring for, and taking care of you; from facilitating your progress, health, growth, and happiness. Part of my identity is based on caring for you, and if you were to disappear I would feel sad, empty, less worthwhile, and perhaps guilty.”

- **Love as sexual attraction**: “I am sexually attracted to you and can’t get you out of my mind. You excite me, ‘turn me on,’ make me feel alive, complete my sense of wholeness. I want to see you, devour you, touch you, merge with you, lose myself in you, ‘get off on you.’”

Berscheid and Walster (1978) provided an influential attempt to conceptualize (sexual) love in terms of two basic factors: companionate love and passionate love. Companionate love captures the former two categories (attachment and caregiving), whereas passionate love is akin to sexual attraction. Research using a prototype approach (Fehr, 1994), or the use of factor analysis to identify latent factors (Aron & Westbay, 1996), suggests that laypeople think about love based on the same kinds of distinctions, namely, in terms of intimacy (or attachment),
commitment (or caregiving), and passion (or sexual attraction) (also see Sternberg, 1986).

If love is a commitment device, as an evolutionary approach suggests, then it should function to end the search for alternative mates. Indeed, there is good evidence this is just what happens. For example, Johnson and Rusbult (1989) showed that higher levels of commitment in romantic relationships are associated with the tendency to derogate attractive alternatives. Moreover, these processes appear to operate in an unconscious, automatic fashion. In one study (Maner, Gailliot, & Miller, 2009), participants were primed with mate selection goals. For those who were single this increased their attention to attractive pictures of the opposite sex, whereas for those in existing romantic relationships the opposite was the case.

There is also considerable evidence that when people are in love, they idealize their partners and put a rose-colored spin on judgments of them and their relationships. For example, people routinely rate the chances that their own marriages will fail as considerably lower than their perceptions of the population base rates (Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001), and keep doubts about their relationship at bay by restructuring judgments or rewriting their relationship stories (see Murray, 2001). And as love-prospers and grows more intense, individuals increasingly exaggerate their similarity with their partners (Murray et al., 2002), the extent to which their relationships have improved over time (Karney & Frye, 2002), and the extent to which their real-life partners resemble archetypal ideals (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996).

However, there are also strong arguments and evidence suggesting that love may not be so blind. The fact that many long-term romantic relationships dissolve suggests that the motivating power of love to promote positive bias has its limitations. Moreover, a broad array of empirical evidence suggests that lay judgments of partners and relationships are firmly tied to reality. For example, relationship evaluations strongly predict both interactive behavior (e.g., Fletcher & Thomas, 2000) and relationship dissolution (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995), and are shared across partners (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001). And studies using a range of external criteria or benchmarks (including self-reports of the partner, observer ratings of interactive behavior, and the predicted future or recalled past states of the relationship) reveal quite good levels of accuracy in relationship and partner judgments (for a recent review see Fletcher & Boyes, 2008).

One way of resolving this apparent contradiction is that there may be two independent ways of measuring the accuracy of judgments in intimate relationships: mean-level bias and tracking accuracy. Consider the following example (adapted from Fletcher, 2002). Mary rates her partner Stephen (using 1–7 Likert scales) as being extremely sensitive (7), very warm (6), very sexy (6), and
moderately ambitious (5). Now imagine that we have gold standard criteria that show, in reality, that Stephen is two units less positive than Mary's ratings (5, 4, 4, and 3, respectively). This pattern shows that Mary is positively biased (she is on average two units more positive than Stephen is on each trait). However, it is also apparent that Mary is accurately tracking Stephen's traits for this example; as Mary's traits become more or less positive so do Stephen's judgments (if you put this simple data set into a statistics program you will see that the correlation between the two sets of scores is a perfect 1.0). It is also possible for Mary to be biased and tracking inaccurately, or, be unbiased and tracking accurately, or, finally, to be unbiased and tracking inaccurately (you could try manipulating the scores in a data file to achieve each of these results).

Thus, it is possible for people to have the best of both worlds in romantic relationships and to be both positively biased and accurate at the same time. To illustrate, consider some recent research on the so-called “affective forecasting error” in relationship contexts (Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008). Prior evidence has indicated a robust tendency in nonrelationship contexts for people to predict greater levels of negative or positive affect, following negative or positive events, than actually happen (an example of mean-level bias). The research by Eastwick et al. found the same effect when individuals first predicted and then experienced the affective outcomes associated with a dating relationship break up; people experienced significantly less distress than they predicted (effect size \( r = 0.66 \)). However, they also evinced significant tracking accuracy of their emotional reactions (\( r = 0.44 \)). And the forecasting (mean-level) error disappeared for those who were not in love with their partners when making the forecasts, or indicated a week prior to the break up that it was likely they would start a new romantic relationship, or who initiated the break up. In short, only those who were significantly invested in the relationship predicted more distress than they experienced when the relationship actually dissolved. It is hard to resist the conclusion that this bias has a functional basis, given that it should motivate individuals who have much at stake to maintain and improve their romantic relationship, and perhaps retain their mates.

There is also evidence that bias in people's judgments will depend on their goals. A study by Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yevetich, and Verette (2000) showed that people who were instructed to be as accurate as possible had less positive bias when describing their relationships. Moreover, the correlations between relationship commitment and positive bias were strongest in a relationship threat condition (0.61), moderate in the control condition (0.37), and weakest when an accuracy goal was primed (0.17).
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Communication

As noted previously, the defining feature of intimate relationships is interdependence; one partner's desires, goals, and happiness depend on the desires, goals and behavior of the other partner (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Inevitably, however, situations will arise in which partners' goals clash (e.g., negotiating household chores or amount of time spent together) and one partner behaves negatively (e.g., is critical or withdraws from affection) or disregards the others' needs (e.g., fails to provide necessary support or refuses to accept an apology). Thus, one key question is how couples maintain satisfying relationships in the face of conflict. Motivated by the assumption that marital distress is caused by destructive reactions to conflict, researchers in the 1970s studied the communication behaviors partners exchange when discussing relationship problems. This approach has yielded hundreds of studies that employ arguably the most time-consuming and sophisticated methodological and analytic techniques within the field.

The standard paradigm involves recording couples discussing an unresolved relationship issue and then measuring communication behavior using extensive coding systems (see Heyman, 2001). For example, the Marital Interaction Coding System (MICS; Weiss & Summers, 1983) involves assigning each person's comments and behavior each time they speak or within every 10-second block to one of 28 categories, such as whether the individual criticizes, puts down, or interrupts his or her partner, proposes solutions and compromises, or displays humor and physical affection. Single codes are then counted across the interaction and combined to measure broad dimensions of behavior, such as overall levels of hostility. Comparisons between distressed and nondistressed couples have revealed that couples who are less satisfied tend to be more likely to criticize, express more hostility, interrupt, defensively withdraw, propose fewer positive solutions, and express less positive affect such as humor, smiling, and affection (for reviews of this vast literature see Gottman, 1998; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Weiss & Heyman, 1997).

This initial work was expanded by employing longitudinal designs to test whether destructive communication predicted important relationship outcomes, such as declines in relationship satisfaction or divorce. In 1995, Karney and Bradbury conducted a meta-analytic review of these studies and found that the presence of negative interaction behavior was linked to a greater probability of divorce and reduced satisfaction of both partners over time. In contrast, positive interaction behavior was associated with more happiness and a lower likelihood of divorce. The message from this massive literature supports the
intuitions of the pioneers—engaging in hostile, critical, or demanding communication behavior produces relationship dysfunction, whereas expressing positive affect to soften conflict interactions promotes relationship quality.

But why is negative communication so toxic for intimate relationships? Two interaction patterns seem to play a central role in this process. First, Gottman (1994, 1998) reported that a particularly unhealthy dyadic exchange is negative reciprocity—when negative behavior by one partner is met with intensified negative behavior by the other (Gottman, 1998). Second, Christensen and his colleagues found that critical, blaming, and demanding communication from the person who wants change (more often the woman) often elicits defensive withdrawal from the targeted partner (more often the man) and this demand-withdraw pattern predicts poorer problem resolution and reduced relationship satisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Klinetob & Smith, 1996). In short, hostile and blaming communications, as a response to conflict or relationship problems, tend to drive negative interactions that can all too readily spiral downward over time.

This pattern highlights a key point: The consequences for the relationship of a given communication attempt will be partly determined by how the other partner responds (a point we return to later). In the 1990s there were two shifts from the (clinical) focus on overt behaviors. First, as previously noted, there was increasing emphasis on the role that beliefs and perceptions play in understanding communication and relationship maintenance (Fletcher & Fincham, 1991). For example, reflecting a theme from interdependence theory, the explanations that individuals generate for relationship events are linked to relationship satisfaction. The standard finding, across many studies, shows that unhappy intimates attribute negative partner behavior to undesirable personality traits and intentions (e.g., “he is uncaring and selfish”), but attribute positive partner behavior to external factors, such as a having a rare good day (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). Happy partners, in contrast, attribute negative behaviors to external attributions (having a hard day at work) but attribute positive behaviors to stable, internal traits (caring and unselfish). Moreover, the former, uncharitable attributional pattern is associated with destructive communication during problem-solving discussions, such as less support and agreement and more criticism, withdrawal, and negative reciprocity (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996; Miller & Bradbury, 1995).

Exploring the links between cognition and behavior also provides a window into how personal traits influence communication within intimate relationships. For example, as previously noted, chronic expectations of rejection associated with attachment anxiety lead to perceptions that the partner’s actions, such as the failure to reciprocate a cuddle, are designed to reject and hurt the partner (Collins, et al., 2006). Furthermore, this attribution bias leads anxious
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individuals to react with greater hostility and anger during problem-solving discussions (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996) and these destructive reactions tend to escalate conflict during daily life (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). Finally, consistent with the above communication patterns, hostile and defensive behavior arising from expectations of rejection evoke anger and dissatisfaction in the partner (Downey, Frietas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). As can be seen, this work has effectively tracked down some of the key mechanisms that explain why insecure attachment undermines relationship satisfaction and stability.

The second shift, referred to previously, involved recognizing that communication is important in maintaining relationships when faced with any kind of relationship threat, not just in situations of overt conflict. For example, Caryl Rusbult and colleagues (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1995) detailed four typical responses (EVLN) people described when feeling dissatisfied in their relationship.

**Exit:** Active behaviors that are destructive for the relationship, such as ending or threatening to terminate the relationship, and abusing, criticizing, or derogating the partner.

**Voice:** Constructive active behaviors such as attempting to improve conditions by discussing problems, suggesting solutions, and altering problematic behavior.

**Loyalty:** Passively waiting and hoping for improvement, forgiving and forgetting partner offences, and maintaining faith in the partner even when faced with hurtful actions.

**Neglect:** Passive destructive responses such as allowing the relationship to deteriorate by ignoring or spending less time with the partner and avoiding discussions of problems.

This typology captures many of the overt communication behaviors examined in dyadic conflict discussions previously described. For example, exit incorporates behaviors such as hostility, anger, and criticism, and neglect encapsulates withdrawal. In addition, research using this typology to examine peoples’ responses to negative partner behavior reveals that communication within everyday interactions (not just laboratory-based ones) produces similar effects. Couples who tend to engage in exit and neglect report lower problem resolution and reduced satisfaction and commitment (Drigotas, Whitney, & Rusbult, 1995; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986a, b; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991).

Furthermore, a pattern of responding that represents the opposite of the negative reciprocity and demand-withdraw patterns identified in the laboratory
plays an important role in the maintenance of relationship well-being. Accommodation—the tendency to inhibit destructive exit and neglect responses when faced with negative partner behavior and instead react constructively with voice and loyalty—is associated with increases in relationship satisfaction (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998). This is because accommodation builds trust and commitment (Weiselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999) and eases problematic interactions by maintaining feelings of acceptance and intimacy (Overall & Sibley, 2008).

Thus far, it is beginning to look as if sweetness and accommodation are the recipes for relationship success. However, more recent work has suggested that things are not this simple. Some studies have reported that negative communication predicts relative increases in relationship satisfaction across time (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Heavey et al., 1993, 1995; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), which suggests the exact opposite of the standard finding. Such findings (often called reversal effects), at face value, seem odd if not bizarre.

However, it turns out that the distinction between active and passive communication embodied in the EVLN typology may provide the solution to this puzzle. Recall that voice and exit involve individuals actively addressing and attempting to solve the problem (voice) or directly expressing their anger and discontent (exit). In contrast, loyalty and neglect are passive responses because individuals avoid the problem by withdrawing from the relationship (neglect) or passively waiting for the problem to solve itself (loyalty).

First, these reversal effects are restricted to negative behaviors that are active and direct, such as criticism and blame. Similarly, some research has shown that constructive but passive behavior, such as using humor to minimize conflict or being loyal and waiting for things to improve, is associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997) and has a weaker effect on solving the problem compared to active voice-type responses (Drigotas et al., 1995; Overall, Sibley & Travaglia, 2010; Rusbult et al., 1986a, b). Second, expressing anger and hostility clearly communicates the nature and severity of the problem, thus perhaps motivating partners to bring about change and therefore leading to successful problem resolution. Positive loyal responses, in contrast, may reduce conflict in the short term, but leave the problem unaddressed (Holmes & Murray, 1996).

In support of this explanation, recent research has found that using active exit-type communication behavior, such as being demanding and derogating the partner, generates significant partner change over time (Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009). This research also found that active constructive behavior, such as directly discussing causes and solutions, is associated with a greater change in targeted problems over time, whereas loyalty-type responses, such as using positive affect to soften conflict, fail to produce the desired change.
However, this does not mean that being obnoxious is good for relationships. Although a critical, blaming approach might prompt greater change in the partner, the well-established patterns of negative reciprocity and demand-withdraw suggest that this approach will nevertheless elicit hostility and defensive reactions in the partner. These destructive effects are unlikely to be fleeting, and the positive changes that are produced by active communication may counterbalance—but not reverse—the negative impact of these behaviors. Thus, improving problem resolution might best be accomplished by using active strategies that also communicate care and regard, such as directly discussing problems and suggesting solutions, as long as the message is not gift-wrapped to the point that it appears as if the communicator does not really care whether the situation changes or not (see Overall et al., 2009).

In summary, the examination of how couples communicate when managing dissatisfaction and conflict in their relationships has revealed a sizable list of behaviors that are likely to be damaging to the relationship. These fall within the general categories of critical hostility, reciprocating negativity, and defensive withdrawal. However, the research also suggests that the link between negative communication and poor relationship outcomes is not straightforward. Instead, highlighting the truly dyadic nature of behavior in intimate relationships, the impact of specific communications depends on how the partner responds, including whether the partner attacks, retreats, or accommodates and/or makes desired changes. Moreover, the same communication behavior might have different, and sometimes opposing, consequences. For example, hostile and demanding communication may be more likely to prompt change but at the cost of generating feelings of negativity (even hatred) in the partner.

Relationships Today: Caveats and Conclusions

One question often asked of social psychologists working in this area concerns the future of contemporary intimate relationships, given the way in which individuals are bombarded with information about relationships, along with images of beautiful people and their beautiful partners. The availability of personal computers and the Internet has also rendered this information a mouse-click away for most people, and introduced on-line Internet dating, which has rapidly become a popular way to meet potential partners (see Finkel & Baumeister, Chapter 12, this volume).

Our answer is two-fold. First, humans are cultural animals, born to live and learn within cultures (Baumeister, 2005). Thus, the kind of cultural shifts we
have (and are) witnessing since the last ice age—from about 11,000 years ago when Homo sapiens started the long march from an ancient hunter–gatherer life style to the contemporary information age—is bound to exert massive influences on personal intimate relationships. However, human nature is not just a cultural product but is forged in the evolutionary past, which is why the topics dealt with in this chapter have a universal, timeless quality about them. Evolutionary processes have left biological and psychological footprints all over the intimate relationship mind.

Intimate relationships are complex and multifaceted, as we have seen. It would be wrong to assume that social psychology can provide all the tools and means to understand how and why they work; for that we need an interdisciplinary approach that combines biology, zoology, evolutionary psychology, cross-cultural psychology, the study of culture, developmental psychology, and neuropsychology. And although social psychologists inevitably study specific topics in depth, including love or communication, such intimate relationship domains are thoroughly intertwined as this chapter makes clear.

Nevertheless, we believe that social psychology will continue to provide the cornerstone of future interdisciplinary endeavors because it combines the major elements of the proximal psychological system that powerfully predicts and explains personal experience in intimate relationships. Social psychologists build process models that combine individual differences in what people bring with them into local intimate relationships (traits, attitudes, beliefs, and resources) with subsequent cognitive and affective processes and behavioral interactions. Moreover, such models detail how these psychological systems change and function over time.

Social psychologists build theories and test hypotheses, but so do laypeople, especially about phenomena that have special significance in their lives. And intimate relationships have primary significance or centrality in people’s everyday lives. Thus, the scientist must take lay theories and beliefs about intimate relationships seriously. Even if they are wrong or muddled (as they sometimes are) they still exert powerful causal influences on everyday relationship behavior.

At the beginning of this chapter we enumerated a series of questions of the sort asked by social psychologists in the study of intimate relationships: 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? Because (social) psychology is a science, answering such fascinating questions is a work in progress. Nevertheless, we trust we have provided some idea of both the state of the play and where the science, fueled by human curiosity, is leading us.