Dating and Romantic Partners

Romance is often considered to be an essential part of hope of a lifelong partnership, or at least the "magic" described in popular movies such as *Sleepless in Seattle* or the fantasy depicted in children's movies such as *Cinderella*. For others, dating is a "challenge," or a "game," as depicted in the fictionalized trials of the characters in *Sex and the City* and *Nip/Tuck* or in "reality" shows such as *The Bachelor* and *The Flavor of Love*. The highs and lows of romance are prominently featured in songs from yesterday and today, and bookstores are overflowing with self-help manuals about how to attract yourself to others or how to find "the love you really want." In these and other examples, dating and romance are often idealized as the intimate pairing for people who are "more" than just friends.

The dynamics of dating and romantic relationships are complex, diffuse, and multifaceted. While a full review of the nuances of such pairings is beyond the scope of this chapter, our purpose here is to highlight some of the basic processes and communication behaviors relevant to dating and romantic relationships and to sketch how these dynamics play out in the modern age.

Defining Romantic Relationships and Dating: Yesterday and Today

Historical Views on Dating

While few discount the importance of dating as a relational process, the idea of what it means to be dating in the United States has varied throughout time. In the 1800s, dating was referred to as "courtship" and involved an act—bland by today's standards—whereby a male paid a female a visit in her home, at a church social, or at a local dance. A woman's parents supervised their daughter's visits with a potential suitor and even exerted control over when courtship turned to marriage by determining when land would be turned over to the couple or when the male would be allowed to work for his new family (see Cate & Lloyd, 1992). Courtships were intended to determine whether a man could support his wife and whether the man and woman were of similar social standing. Love was assumed to blossom after marriage. But "love" was not tied to passion or romance; it reflected an openness, sincerity, and connection that would stand the test of time (Rothman, 1984).

The loosening of kinship ties and the migration to new homesteads soon weakened parental influences on courtship. While such changes led to a growing norm of unchaperoned interactions between males and females, as the 19th century evolved, women were encouraged to remain "pure" and to fend off the "wild" desires of men. Courtship served as a time to "tame" a man and to prepare a woman for household management. Into the early 20th century, the forces of romantic love were recognized to act like a magnet that pushed a couple together, making it difficult to pull them apart (Rothman, 1984). Nonetheless, it was expected that "proper" women avoided sexual contact, which could have social or biological consequences.

The rise in urban environments also brought dating out of the home and into unchaperoned spaces. The need to entertain a potential partner outside of the home introduced economic considerations into the process of courtship, with the male expected to provide the necessary funds (Bailey, 1988). Herein emerged a dynamic to dating that was not defined by "love" or "compatibility" but rather by the degree to which a partner could "provide." A woman's conception of romance was now confounded with a male's ability to pay for fancy dinners, flowers, chocolate, entertainment, and all other luxuries. Furthermore, the rise of the automobile allowed for

those men with their own transportation to facilitate private dating behaviors, such as petting and more intimate behaviors.

During the early 1960s, dating was defined by a combined concern of finding a mate who was financially viable, attractive, and would commit to a relationship. To be dating was to be going "steady." Yet by the 1970s, the counterculture message of defying traditional expectations resulted in a dominant cultural message that men and women were equal (Coontz, 1988). It was recognized that women had an equal voice in the selection of a dating partner and the behaviors by which a dating relationship is defined. Furthermore, a growing awareness of sex as an important part of relationships for both men and women emerged and became part of the process of dating. However, as reflective of a rather oscillatory pattern that we have depicted in our discussion of past years, the later part of the 20th century was marked by a decrease in sexual intimacy. A growing awareness of the implications of unprotected sex, the rise of AIDS, and a higher rate of divorce seemed to dampen the ideal of unbridled sensuality as part of dating. Individuals were more cautious and pessimistic about the idea of—and the risks associated with—dating and romantic relationships.

Dating in the Here and Now

In the 21st century, the definition of dating has broadened again; yet such definitions are arguably confounded with research interests and practical desires. For example, couples have been considered to be dating after they have had a first date (Jobe & Williams White, 2007), when they become short-term partners (Garcia & Markey, 2007), when they have redefined their "buddy" relationship to something more intense (Raley, Crissey, & Muller, 2007), when they are involved in a long-term romantic relationship, or when they designate each other as "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" (Quintero Gonzalez & Koestner, 2006). The changes in the concept of dating reflect a broader trend of changes in the conception of intimacy. For example, cohabitation is no longer confined to marriage. It is now often treated as a stage in a relationship where two people are "dating," "committed," or "invested" in one another (Surra, Boettcher-Burke, Cottle, West, & Gray, 2007). Sexual behavior now figures as a part of even casual dating (Mongeau, Seriwicz, & Therrien, 2004). However, sex is sometimes *not* an indicator of dating or romance, as seen in cases where couples have sex as a "hookup" (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000) or in cases of "friends with benefits" (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005). While the trend toward casual sex might indicate a more liberal sexual climate, there is also a small countertrend toward reclaiming premarital abstinence. Sprecher and Regan (1996) discuss how some adults and adolescents are going through a "retrorevolution" that rejects a casual conception of sexual intimacy in favor of practicing abstinence until marriage. These decisions are made for a number of reasons, including ideology, fear of pregnancy or disease, and more traditional notions of what it means to be in love.

As definitions of dating have evolved, it is important to note that these changes are focused primarily on norms for heterosexual relationships. The limited amount of research devoted to the romantic relationships of same-sex partners generally finds that there are few differences between the relationships of same-sex and opposite-sex couples. The similarities, noted by Lannutti and Cameron (2002), span a breadth of dating concerns, including closeness, commitment, jealousy, love levels, maintenance, sexuality, and satisfaction. However, gays, lesbians, and transgendered individuals face the additional strain of not always having support from institutional agents, such as governments or religious bodies, and sometimes not even from their own social networks, offering few references for these couples in terms of relational role models and relational normalcy (Kurdek, 2007). Lannutti and Cameron (2002) suggested, however, that this lack of an institutionalized network may enable same-sex partners to become less dependent on outside sources of support and depend more on the interactions that occur within the dyad.

Initiating and Developing Relationships

Dating and romantic relationships typically initiate when one person is attracted to another based on one of three needs: (1) *physical,* as reflective of a desire to be with an attractive other; (2) *social,* as defined by the

need to be in a relationship; or (3) *instrumental,* or the degree to which the other will help accomplish a task (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). While attraction may result from each or from a combination of these three needs, physical appearance is a dominant predictor of attraction in the early stages of a potential relationship. For example, features such as height are noticed quickly by a woman meeting a man for the first time and dramatically influence whether a potential romantic relationship is explored. Studies generally find that women find very short men unattractive (Pierce, 1996). Women across cultures are attracted to men with a strong jaw line, broad shoulders, and a narrowing of the waist. These indicators of male attractiveness also hold for judgments made by gay men (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994). While height is not as much of a defining feature of attractiveness judgments for women, men consider a soft jaw line and an hourglass figure more attractive than the contrary (Buss, 1994). And across gender and sexuality, body symmetry and body proportionality are considered to be attractive (Langlois et al., 2000). Research has found that people associate physical attractiveness with a host of other positive qualities, including intelligence, success, and competence, such that more attractive individuals are assumed to be generally more positive and capable than their less attractive counterparts.

While initial forces of attraction may be sparked by physical attributes, how a person communicates during an interaction also plays a substantial role in attraction. For example, tests of interaction appearance theory indicate that individuals rate people more physically attractive when they have warm, positive interactions with them, compared with interactions with more distant others (Albada, Knapp, & Theune, 2002). Warmth is typically communicated verbally through expressions of a positive attitude and a concern for others (Folkes & Sears, 1977) and nonverbally through smiling, eye contact, and showing interest (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). In addition, the perceived ease with which a person engages in conversation is tied to attractiveness ratings: People appearing more composed and less nervous rate as more attractive (Vangelisti, Knapp, & Daly, 1990).

Self-Disclosure

Beyond physical attraction, what is verbally communicated to another about typically "hidden" attitudes and beliefs affects our judgments of attractiveness and contributes to relationship formation. Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) is one of the most well-known explanations for how self-disclosure defines relationships. Altman and Taylor suggested that self-disclosure can be conceptualized along three dimensions: (1) *depth,* which reflects how personal the disclosure is; (2) *breadth,* which refers to the number of topics discussed; and (3) *frequency,* or how often the disclosure occurs. Using the metaphor of an onion, Altman and Taylor (1973) suggested that there are three layers of self-disclosure: (1) a superficial layer that is easy to penetrate; (2) a social or personal layer that is easy for most friends; and (3) a very intimate layer, or core, that is seldom revealed, and then only to people we trust completely. The individuals who reach the "core" are assumed to be few and defined as those who are "intimate." Research generally finds that the mere process of someone else disclosing to us increases our affection for the discloser (Collins & Miller, 1994). Furthermore, we are even more attracted to those who reveal that they are similar to us. According to Byrne's reinforcement theory (Byrne, 1971), we are attracted to similar others because they reinforce our own attitudes and beliefs. Burleson (1998) found that we even prefer people who communicate in a similar manner to us. However, it is important to note that in romantic pairings, similarity is not necessarily linked to relational longevity. Amodio and Showers (2005) found that similarity was particularly important for individuals who wanted to keep their romantic relationships together; those who reported being highly committed to their relationship benefited from a similarity in attitudes over time. Yet for those who reported having low relationship commitment, the longevity of their relationship was actually harmed by that similarity.

Models of Relationship Development

Several theories have sought to provide a nuanced account of how relationships are defined by distinct communication behaviors at various stages of relational development. Some perspectives assume that that we possess socially defined and cognitively embedded **schemas** and scripts about what "should happen" in a

dating or romantic relationship, as well as how we should communicate in such pairings (Planalp, 1985). **Schemas** act as functional guides that we use to navigate relationships, and are defined by our own relationship experiences as well as the relationships we observe among others. The relationships that contribute to our **schemas** can be face-to-face, mediated, or in written form. Research suggests that **schemas** can function at a broad level to inform behavior in the absence of our own experiences. For example, Klinkenberg and Rose (1994) argued that although gays and lesbians have had few experiences in their youth that speak to their desires for a same-sex relationship, examples drawn from movies, counterculture publications, and close friends have contributed to their cognitive representations concerning what their relationships should be like and inform them how to act in their own relationships. Other scholars have focused on the universal expectations about what happens at a particular event in a relationship, such as a first date. For example, Rose and Frieze (1989) analyzed the types of behaviors enacted during a first date. Participants listed every activity from preparation for the date to the date's end, ranging from "worry about or change appearance" to "kissing your date goodnight." The researchers found that traditional stereotypes for men and women were exhibited in first-date behavior choices, with women listing more behaviors, such as waiting to be asked for a date, being more concerned about physical appearance, and having to resist sexual contact. Men were more likely to exhibit date-planning behaviors as well as initiating physical contact during a date. More recently, Mongeau and colleagues (2004) observed that first-date expectations ranged from having fun and investigating romantic potential to engaging in sexual activity. Despite subtle differences, the expectations for what counts as a date are relatively stable across sexes. In addition, relationship **schemas** influence what we are inclined to remember about our relationships (Samp & Humphreys, 2007).

Other models of relationship development focus on those communicative behaviors that define particular degrees of relationship commitment and intensity. For example, Knapp (see Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005) proposed a five-stage model: (1) In the *initiating* stage, people attempt to make a positive impression on another. Communication is therefore polite, friendly, and superficial. (2) In the *experimenting* stage, impression management needs are still salient, but individuals have a growing interest in making an active effort to "feel" out another person by identifying his or her likes or dislikes, beliefs, and attitudes. (3) In the *intensifying* stage, the breadth and depth of disclosure intensifies, as do displays of affection. A tentative use of the term *we* and/or statements of affection, such as "I love you," follow in this stage. (4) In the *integrating* stage, two individuals have decided that they are a couple or a "unified team." They are able to anticipate each other's attitudes and opinions, and they engage in joint activities, such as adopting a pet together. (5) In the final stage of *bonding,* partners formally declare their relationship via a socially accepted public form of "relational commitment." In the United States, such a statement is usually made by a marriage or commitment ceremony. Whatever the particular event, a formalized effort is made to declare to all that "we are together forever."

Technological Influences on Relationship Initiation and Development

The process of dating has been redefined in this modern age to be much more efficient yet impersonal. Take, for example, the current trend of "speed-dating," where individuals looking to meet potential romantic partners attend an event where they go on a series of 3- to 10-minute "dates" with other attendees. After the event, participants have the opportunity to indicate whether they would like to see any of their dates again. If two speed-daters both wish to see one another again, they are given the means to contact each other for a future, presumably more traditional, date (Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2007). Although speed-dating contains elements of traditional face to face interactions, the process is mediated and presupposes a notion that romance may involve a quick, "gut" judgment, unlike many of the courtship processes of the past.

More substantially, the rise of Internet-based dating and social networking now offers users a highly selective way to find the perfect mate (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). The Internet has become an appealing option because it is an efficient and convenient means by which to meet many people. Furthermore, the Internet allows for more control of the impression management process, allowing individuals to exhibit the positive aspects of themselves that they believe will attract potential mates (Samp, Wittenberg, & Gillette, 2003;

Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Online dating sites, such as Match.com and eHarmony, have been endorsed by socially defined "experts," such as Dr. Phil, and psychologists. They have become a socially acceptable means by which to find a romantic partner. Users have the opportunity to pragmatically search for their soul mate and to limit their search based on common attraction criteria, such as religious views and sexual preference. Additionally, such sites allow the users to screen partners based on their preferred level of relational commitment— a feature often difficult to discern in traditional face-to-face interactions.

Apart from online dating sites, another popular way to meet people online and to stay in contact with "friends" is through social-networking sites, such as Facebook.com and MySpace.com. These sites allow users to set up personal profiles for which they can upload personal information and then communicate with friends and contacts via different kinds of messaging through the site. Whereas sites such as Facebook.com were originally created for college students to keep in contact with classmates, these sites have now taken on other uses and connotations. There are a wide range of reasons why people use these sites, including rekindling old friendships and relationships, starting new relationships, maintaining existing relationships (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), or finding people for sexual "hook-ups" (Stern & Taylor, 2007).

Social-networking sites have also become an important step for users in declaring their relationship status. Making a relationship "Facebook official" has become an important public declaration of one's relationship analogous to some public rituals in Knapp's bonding stage. Just as these sites serve as the messengers of good relational news, they are also the bearers of relationships gone bad. Just as one becomes "Facebook official" with a partner, taking down this status is an official signal to the public that the relationship is over. Furthermore, these sites can even create conflict within the relationship, serving as a way to break up with a partner and even a way for partners to make their mates jealous (Stern & Taylor, 2007).

While social-networking sites can be useful communication tools, the lack of physicality of the Internet requires individuals to rely purely on written text, pictures, or avatars to interpret messages from potential or existing dating partners. Stern and Taylor (2007) found that students use these sites for information about whether or not their partners are being faithful. Commonly called "Facebook stalking," curious mates have the opportunity to browse their partner's walls and pictures, as well as other users' pictures of their mates. For couples just starting to date, this information seeking aspect is also appealing as a way to monitor a potential partner's profiles to see the activities and associations in which he or she is involved.

Dating and Romantic Relationship Maintenance: The Good and the Bad

While forces of attraction bring people together, a variety of forces keep a pair in a relationship. These include *commitment,* which reflects how attached and dedicated a person is to remaining in a relationship (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986); *obligation,* which refers to the extent to which a person feels that he or she owes something to a partner (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2007); and *investments,* which are resources that have been put into the relationship that would be lost were it to end (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). Perceptions of commitment, obligation, and investments often work together to keep people in their relationships and frequently influence the way in which people communicate to keep their relationships together (Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon & Samp, 1998).

According to the dialectics theory (Baxter, 1993), relationships are in a constant state of flux. Keeping a relationship together requires managing this instability. A dialectical tension is a push-and-pull between two seemingly contradictory needs. Baxter (1993) proposed three major dialectical tensions: (1) integration-separation, (2) stability-change, and (3) expression-privacy. Each of these dialectical tensions has an internal and external manifestation. Internal manifestations refer to the tensions experienced between relational partners, while external manifestations refer to the tensions between a couple and outsiders, such as other dyads or society. Baxter (1993) identified several means by which to manage dialectical tensions, of which the

dominant strategies are (a) *selection,* which involves favoring each side of the dialectic at different times; (b) *neutralization,* whereby couples avoid fully engaging either side of the dialectic; and (c) *reframing,* in which a couple adjusts their perceptions of a given dialectic such that it is viewed as complementary rather than contradictory.

Maintenance Through Communication

In a similar way to how objects such as cars and homes require regular maintenance to keep them in working order, so, too, do relationships. Actions that function to reinforce a certain level of intimacy, closeness, and stability between partners have been labeled examples of relational maintenance behaviors. Maintenance can involve engaging in specific behaviors that show a dating partner and others that the relationship is important. Individuals may do so verbally, through self-disclosure, comforting, or overt expressions about the relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1994), or nonverbally, by acting upbeat and positive, showing affection, and conveying warmth (Dindia, 2000).

The Internet is also a substantial resource for relationship management in the modern age. The popular press is full of articles telling the stories of soldiers who are able to keep in constant contact with their partners through e-mail, a development that has cast the most current military conflicts in a new light compared with previous military conflicts. Ramirez, Shuangyue, McGrew, and Shu-Fang (2007) suggested that instant messaging has the potential to be one of the most frequently used online maintenance tools as it not only allows for synchronous conversation with another user, but the addition of nonverbal affective cues through the use of emoticons can describe a variety of corresponding emotions. Applications such as e-mail, instant messaging, and chat rooms allow couples to spend "time" together even if not in the same room (Rabby, 2007). Even gaming can be used to substitute for a shared activity (Rabby, 2007). Whereas one couple may spend a Saturday night bowling with others in a face-to-face context, another might spend it online by playing games with a larger group of people.

Managing Relationship Problems

Within the course of a relationship, it is inevitable that there will be "dark times." Indeed, research on the "dark side" of communication suggests that people commonly experience problems such as jealousy, deception, and infidelity in their close relationships (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Such behaviors reflect actions that violate our ideas of how "happy" relationships should operate. Researchers have labeled situations where one partner violates the implicit or explicit "rules" for how to behave in their relationships as relational transgressions (Metts, 1994) or problematic events (Samp & Solomon, 1998, 1999).

Some of the most common transgressions reflect infidelity of some sort. Infidelity may be sexual, wherein someone engages in sexual activity with someone other than a dating partner, or it may be emotional, wherein one partner transfers emotional resources such as time, love, and attention to some other person (Shackleford & Buss, 1997). Infidelity has also emerged into the Internet arena in the modern age. The glamour of a culturally diverse space, the potential for less inhibition, and increased self-disclosure-related intimacy all make the Internet an appealing forum for developing extrarelational affairs (Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000). While infidelity was once carried out away from the home, the Internet allows individuals to betray their partners from the comfort of their home. As such, popular press magazines have changed their focus from advice to check a partner's pockets or to look for lipstick on shirt collars as clues to infidelity to strategies focused on a partner's computer use. For example, an article in *Ebony* magazine described the telltale signs that a partner is having an online affair, including the following: (a) the partner stops typing or turning off the computer in the presence of a relational partner, (b) the partner avoids checking e-mail in front of the partner, (c) the partner maintains multiple e-mail accounts, and (d) the partner makes credit card charges from unknown Internet merchants (Hughes, 2005).

Yet these transgressions may not be so severe as infidelity. For example, Samp and Solomon (1998) and

Vangelisti (2001) have found that saying something hurtful to a partner through criticism or by betraying a partner's confidence can damage the fabric of a relationship just as infidelity. Thus, any behavior that shows disregard for one's partner or the romantic relationship as a whole can negatively affect the status quo of a pairing.

No matter what the behavior, relationships will only survive a rule violation when both the perpetrator and the victim communicate about the situation. Of course, a natural response to a relational transgression may be to break off the relationship or to "take a break." Yet research suggests that for perpetrators, the most explicit and relationally maintaining option is to seek a partner's *forgiveness* and to ask the victim to reframe the situation as a constructive opportunity for the relationship to be strengthened or redefined (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Additionally, perpetrators may *apologize* for their wrongdoing (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991), *justify* or *excuse* their behavior as due to some external or emotional circumstances, or refuse to acknowledge that the behavior is a problem at all. While it seems natural for a transgressor to work toward maintaining his or her relationship, Samp and Solomon (1998 & 1999) observed that transgressors may be instead concerned with self- and identity-related concerns, which reflect desires to reify their self-sufficiency and personal autonomy instead of focusing on relationship repair.

Considering the recipients of a transgression, it should not be surprising that appeals for forgiveness and apologies are the most effective means by which a victim may be encouraged to consider the transgressing partner to be a good person despite the relational wrongdoing (Kelley, 1998). Yet under some circumstances, the wronged partner may not demand a response to a transgression. For example, among a list of prorelational and highly communicative behaviors directed toward relationship maintenance, Ayres (1983) also found that individuals may decide to avoid talk of activities that might change the relationship. Furthermore, research by Solomon and Samp (see Solomon & Samp, 1998; Samp & Solomon, 2001) suggested that individuals may withhold relational complaints as a form of maintenance, particularly when the complaining partner perceives that he or she has less power than the partner under question.

Relational Dissolution: Yesterday and Today

As a common saying goes, "All good things must come to an end." So why do relationships end? Most breakups result from a decision by one partner (Baxter, 1984). Particular reasons that dating relationships end include the withering away of happiness, or atrophy (Cupach & Metts, 1986), spending less time together, physical separation (Kurdek, 1991), an increase in negative and unsupportive communication, committing a relational transgression (Cupach & Metts 1986), or death. No matter what the particular reason, research suggests that we have **schemas** for how relationships should break apart (Honeycutt, Cantrill, & Allen, 1992).

Models of Relationship Dissolution

Most models of relational breakups generally assume that dissolution does not occur in the blink of an eye. Rather, relationships are assumed to pass through several phases. Duck's (1988) model specifies four phases of relationship dissolution: (1) the *intrapsychic* phase, where relational dissatisfaction leads a partner to reflect on negative aspects of the relationship, dwell on partner irritations, and think about what would happen were the relationship to end; (2) the *dyadic* phase, whereby concerns about relationship problems are explicitly addressed through communication and spur arguments, long discussions, or the withdrawal of one partner; (3) the *social* phase, where people turn to their social networks for support and complain about the relationship to friends; and (4) the *grave dressing* phase, where the breakup occurs and former relational partners construct a story about the relationship and why it did not work. Duck considers each of the phases to be interrelated, but it is not assumed that a couple in Phase 1 will necessarily end up at Phase 4; through communication, couples may be able to stop the dissolution process.

Another popular model is Knapp's "reversal hypothesis" approach to relationship disengagement, which represents a complement to his model of relationship initiation (see Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). Knapp proposes

five stages of dissolution: (1) *differentiating,* whereby members of the couple start to behave as individuals, emphasize differences instead of similarities, and engage in activities without one another; (2) *circumscribing,* when communication between the couple returns to a more superficial and impersonal level; (3) *stagnating,* where communication becomes awkward and discussions of the relationship are taboo; (4) *avoiding,* where partners physically separate from one another and try not to encounter each other in public; and (5) *terminating,* whereby the partners end contact and decree that the relationship is over. In contrast with the phase models, researchers have argued that some relationships may end in a "sudden death" due to a critical incident, such as infidelity or violence (Cupach & Metts, 1986). Yet, for the most part, people eventually go through some if not all the stages defined by Duck and Knapp as they decide to leave a dating relationship.

Dissolving Away Online

Just as the Internet has become a source of relationship initiation in the 21st century, relationships may break apart in this medium as well. Breaking up online can include myriad behaviors, ranging from complete relational withdrawal by no longer responding to e-mail or instant messaging to a distancing of oneself from a relational partner via a Web-based "announcement" (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). Recall that a prominent feature of the social-networking sites is a relationship status category. Just as a couple announce themselves as officially together, they also report their official separation to an entire social network. While there appears to be no common norm for the appropriateness of breaking up via the Internet, the notion that online communication facilitates ease of disclosure makes the Net an easier space to start these difficult conversations. Furthermore, the lack of physicality of Internet communication allows for both a thoughtful and a deliberative breakup and the avoidance of a partner's real-time face-to-face reaction (Starks, 2007). Furthermore, the Internet might not just be a preferred channel for these discussions but also a tool in crafting dissolution rhetoric. ibreakup.com allows initiators to craft breakup letters from predetermined rationales and excuses, taking the difficulty of subtlety out of message creation and doing the rhetorical dirty work for site users.

Conclusion and Future Directions

One of the many reasons to study dating and romantic relationships is that such pairings will always exist. Due to the human condition, there will always be differences in how people think about, initiate, maintain, manage, and disengage from their romantic relationships. Therefore, the examination of dating relationships will always be an area ripe for inquiry and theoretical development and will serve as a useful lens for reflecting on social and cultural norms. Based on our review in this chapter, we see three important directions for future research on dating and romantic relationships. For one, research should develop a greater understanding of the dynamics of same-sex dating relationships. Many relationship theories are created based on assumptions about heterosexual couples and do not encompass the relationships of gay and lesbian partners. While there may be more similarities than differences among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples, some of the unique contextual constraints should be accounted for in theory and deserve further investigation.

Second, relationship research needs to continue to examine the role of the Internet in the development, maintenance, and negotiation of dating relationships. While there is still some stigma attached to online dating, sometime soon that stigma might be lifted, so that meeting someone on match.com might be equivalent to meeting one's future spouse in an anecdotal face-to-face way, such as in a bar, in church, or even on a plane. The proliferation of inexpensive Webcams and microphones, even built into computers as of 2008, has the potential to provide contact for long-distance dyads in a potential channel richer than the telephone. As more people log on each day, the nature of the intersection between face-to-face communication and computer-mediated forms is still unclear. Recent scholarship leaves uncertain whether or how these two channels will harmonize as equally viable vehicles for developing, maintaining, or ending a relationship. More mainstream sources seem to indicate that, right now, couples involved in relationships lived both on- and offline can experience a disconnect. This lapse in contextual overlap may have something to do with the tools (or lack thereof) that people have to negotiate their relationships in both spaces. As many Internet applications, such as

social-networking sites, text messaging, and instant messaging, are relatively new, individuals might not possess salient relational **schemas** for negotiating the overlap of these two channels within their relationships. Cinderella never had to deal with making her relationship "Facebook official"; similarly, "real people" may not have had computer-mediated relational **schema** modeled as they developed ideas of how relationships should operate. Without readily available **schema**, the interplay of relationships between face-to-face and Internet contexts may experience an open season of learn-as-you-go schematic development, with a potentially long learning curve. The uncertain status of **schema** for relationships entangled within the two contexts may, however, be a temporary impairment as adolescents grow up on the Internet and become accustomed to living life in both the physical and the cyber worlds.

Third, Bradbury (2002) argued that very little research on personal relationships is conducted with the goal of actually helping people change their relationships for the better. Part of this effort requires the collection of data from couples directly experiencing or likely to experience a problem. Theoretical development is certainly important as we seek to better understand the lives of those in voluntary romantic pairings. However, researchers should be encouraged to put their theories to the test in a variety of populations and a variety of contexts so that researchers, practitioners, friends, and family may help individuals build the strongest and most satisfying dating and romantic relationships. It should be evident from this chapter that there is plenty of research to be put to the test, and there will always be a multitude of dating and romantic relationships to study and enjoy in the future. After all, love will find a way.

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