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Affect and the Regulation of Interdependence in Personal Relationships

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In recent years, models of affect and emotion have increasingly emphasized the functional role that affect plays in helping people adapt to their environments. Theories of affect in close relationships have made similar assumptions, depicting relational affect as a guidance system that regulates people's interdependence with a significant other. In this chapter, we will first review the most prominent theories of affect and emotion, with an eye to pointing out their common themes regarding the regulation of risk in relationships. This will be followed by a discussion of recent work on the "dependence regulation model" (Murray & Holmes, 2000). This model suggests that a particular set of emotions are functionally related in a regulatory system that modulates risk-taking behavior in close relationships. Specifically, feelings such as anxiety and social pain ("hurt feelings,"), which signal perceived risk, are theorized to elicit feelings of social distance and anger, affect that controls the degree of relational interdependence a person is willing to risk.

The Emotions-in-Relationships Model

The most prominent theory in the field has been Berscheid's (1983/2002) emotions-in-relationships model (ERM). Berscheid adapted Mandler's (1975) discrepancy detection theory to the relational context. Mandler argued that detecting change in our environments is critical to survival. The discrepancy between the world as currently perceived and the world as we have known it in the past serves to signal that new ways of behaving are necessary to protect ourselves or to enhance our welfare. Unexpected disruption of routines or goal pursuits results in autonomic nervous system (ANS) arousal that has priority status in consciousness. Unexplained arousal results in scanning of a situation to locate its cause (eg., Schachter, 1964) so that relevant adjustments may be made. These ideas are similar to Gray and McNaughton's (2000) notion of a "comparator" monitoring system, which he links primarily to a behavioral inhibition system (BIS).

Berscheid sees violated expectancies as the basis for both negative and positive emotions, linking them to the BIS and BAS (the behavioral activation system), respectively. She argues that the infrastructure of a close relationship serves to produce conditions conducive to people experiencing their most intense emotions. Individuals in close relationships are very dependent on each other for the attainment of many important plans and goals, so that violated expectancies have potent consequences for the individual's welfare. Further, individuals in close relationships hold clearer and more numerous expectations for each other than do individuals in more superficial relationships, resulting in increased opportunities for expectancy violation.

Berscheid's ERM predicts that negative emotion will result when a partner unexpectedly interferes with the attainment of an important personal or couple goal. Berscheid notes that goals and plans have a hierarchical structure, and that the disruption of even everyday behavioral routines can result in upset if they are nested in a series of higher-order plans. Thus, the negative affective reaction spurred by the disruption of a goal sequence serves as a signal warning individuals to make behavioral adjustments to protect their interests and reduce their exposure to interpersonal risk. Consequently, couples whose concrete goals and preferences do not correspond well experience more upset, anger and conflict, even if they have no explicit awareness of their lack of goal complementarity (Holmes & Dal Cin, 2005).

On the other hand, Berscheid notes that people will often have no awareness of the extent to which their routines and goal pursuits are "meshed" with those of a partner. This enmeshment of goals within a couple can create a situation in which individuals rarely experience goal disruptions, resulting in low levels of emotion. In such a situation, individuals may not realize the extent of their dependence on their partner (a "stagnant relationship"). Sometimes it is only an intense negative reaction to separation or relationship dissolution that leads a person to understand the degree to which he or she depended on the other for the attainment of significant goals.

According to the ERM, positive emotion will result when the consequences of a violated expectation are perceived to enhance an individual's welfare, as when a partner facilitates the achievement of an important goal. Holmes and Dal Cin (2005) found that couples whose goals are largely compatible experience a sense of "well-being" when goals are facilitated unexpectedly. Of course, the ultimate emotion, passionate love, will be facilitated by a variety of factors, among them an unexpectedly quick realization that "someone so wonderful actually cares for me."

Berscheid and Walster (1974), inspired by Schachter (1964), proposed a two-component theory of love. They suggested that passionate love develops when an individual is very aroused physically and contextual cues suggest that 'passion' is the appropriate label for that arousal. Interestingly, they suggest that a variety of emotional experiences associated with physiological arousal (e.g. anxiety, frustration, rejection, sexual excitement) are instrumental in producing and enhancing passionate feelings through misattribution processes. This literature is too extensive to review in detail here (see Berscheid and Regan, 2005). Instead, we want to focus on the functional aspects of love and its relation to the general attachment system.

The Attachment System and Emotions

Shaver, Hazan and their colleagues conceptualize passionate love as a biological process that has been designed by evolution to facilitate attachment between two adult sexual partner (Hazan & Diamond, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). They have noted that key features of infant-caregiver attachment are remarkably similar to those of adult romantic love, including idealization, absorption and physical proximity seeking. However, two key differences are the more reciprocal, equal-power, caregiving that occurs between adults and the fact that sexual desire is normally part of the experience. The authors suggest that prototypical adult romantic love involves the integration of three independent, biologically-based behavioral systems: attachment, caregiving and sexuality. Sternberg (1986) had earlier made a similar point, suggesting that

“love” involves a weighted contribution of three components that can be viewed as a triangle: intimacy, commitment, and passion.

In recent years considerable progress has been made in studying the possible biological bases of passionate or romantic love and the psychological and biochemical differences between it and its neighbor, companionate love (ie., an attachment bond without passion). For instance, passionate love is associated with elevated levels of androgens such as testosterone, as well as high levels of the neurotransmitters dopamine and norepinephrine (and low levels of serotonin) (Fisher, 1998). Meyers and Berscheid (1997) found that people have a relatively clear prototype of passionate love that included strong sexual desire, exclusivity and obsession with the partner. Indeed, serotonin levels of those feeling passionately in love were not different from those diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, while both differed from controls (Marazziti et al, 1999).

Meyers and Berscheid also report that people code themselves as being “in love” in the passionate stage, compared to simply experiencing feelings of “love” in companionate relationships. Similarly, Shaver, Morgan and Wu (1996) suggest that the statement “I love you” could refer to the type of love experienced in attachment, caregiving, or sexual attraction relationships. They conclude that passionate love, being “in love,” actually involves a mix of all three of these behavioral/emotional systems. Companionate love, on the other hand, is seen as an attachment bond characterized by feelings of affection and tenderness, as well as an emotional dependence on the other for feelings of security and happiness (Shaver et al., 1996). Recent research indeed suggests that attachment is associated with a different set of biological processes than passionate love, including elevated levels of neuropeptides, oxytocin, and vasopressin. The working assumption of this research is that the attachment emotion system evolved to motivate individuals to engage in positive social behaviors and to sustain their affiliative connections long enough to complete species-specific parental duties (Fisher, 1998).

In their seminal paper, Shaver et al (1996) marshal arguments for considering love as a basic emotion. In accord with Izard’s (1991) views, they note that at first blush love appears to be complex, to be more than a single emotion. Izard notes that “the one we love can make us very angry. Some people think that their greatest frustrations and their most intense anger are elicited by people they love.the intense involvement between two people who love each other makes possible the arousal of strong emotions of various kinds.” (p.394). Shaver et al concur with Lazarus (1991) that this definition of love refers to “a social relationship rather than an emotional process or state, a relationship that could involve the emotion of love at some times and not others, as well anger, guilt and jealousy” (p.274).

Shaver et al. argue that it is only the momentary feelings of “surge love” that meets the criteria that emotion theorists such as Izard have used to determine the “basic emotions.” Thus they believe it is important to distinguish, as Lazarus does, between this state-like, momentary reaction that comes and goes, and the “dispositional” kind of love that instead describes the quality of an ongoing relationship, which the authors term “relational love” (p.81). The latter is a bond that develops between romantic partner and, as Izard suggests in the quote above, it can be associated with a variety of emotions, not just “surge love.” This is because, in the ordinary course of its operation, the attachment behavioral system generates a variety of emotions.

The attachment system, according to Shaver et al (1996), was “co-opted” into the adult romantic realm from an infant attachment system, which was designed to maintain optimal proximity to a caregiver. According to Bowlby (1979, p.69), the attachment system consists of a number of different functional processes that facilitate achievement of this overall goal. First, it is a monitoring system for whether the attachment figure is sufficiently available and responsive (similar to the Leary and Baumeister, 2000, notion of a “sociometer”, which monitors social inclusion). If this monitoring results in a negative or uncertain conclusion about caregiver availability, anxiety results. If the anxiety cannot be reduced by efforts to re-establish proximity and closeness, the situation is likely to arouse anger. On the other hand, if monitoring typically results in reassurance of the strength of the bond, “the unchallenged maintenance of the bond is experienced as a source of security.” Interestingly, Bowlby also suggests that “the renewal of a bond is experienced as joy.”

Shaver et al. (1996) suggest another possible cascade of emotions that can result from the attachment system. In their view, if anxiety about caregiver responsiveness is resolved by the appraisal that, at a particular moment, a significant other is available, responsive and caring, a momentary surge of love will result. It is this form of “surge love” that they consider to be a basic, universal emotion. These ideas are quite consistent with Berscheid’s ERM, considering that love surges are hypothesized to depend on positive partner behavior that resolves uncertainty about possible responsiveness and caring.

This theoretical model developed by Shaver et al. (1996) is quite impressive in its ability to distinguish longer-term, more “dispositional” feelings (as they label them) from momentary, state emotions, and to link negative emotions such as anxiety and anger to the complex issue of “love.” However, there have been almost no efforts by attachment theorists to test the “state” model empirically (for a review of the influence of mood and emotional states on social cognition, see Forgas, this volume). Further, the “relational love” aspect of the model has largely been explored by focusing on the personality side of the “disposition” notion. That is, investigators have found that individuals with a secure personality “style” report stronger feelings of love and security, whereas those with insecure styles report either more anxiety or reduced closeness to partner.

These results are of course important, but they do not directly capture the notion of “relational love” or security that Bowlby proposed, where the focus would be on the quality of feelings of attachment and security in a specific relationship, and how those feelings would relate to momentary emotions. These are the issues central to a related theoretical perspective, the dependence-regulation model proposed by Murray and Holmes (2000).

The Dependence Regulation Model

Our earlier research had shown that intimates in close relationships typically have positive illusions about their partner, seeing them even more positively than their partner see themselves. This work resulted in the serendipitous observation that people with low self-esteem were far less likely to see their partner in such generous, idealistic ways than people with high self-esteem (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). In fact, we noticed that there was extensive evidence in the literature that low self-esteem was associated with less satisfying close relationships, though the exact mechanisms responsible for the link remained a mystery. We speculated that part of the

answer might have to do with low self-esteem (LSE) people (needlessly) doubting their partner's positive regard and love.

To explore this idea, we asked both members of dating and married couples to describe how they saw themselves on a set of interpersonally-oriented qualities, then how they saw their partner, and finally how they believed their partner saw them (our measure of perceived regard) (Murray, Holmes & Griffin, 2000). Acting like naïve realists (and self-verification theorists), people with low self-esteem incorrectly assumed that their partner saw them in the same relatively negative light as they saw themselves. Ironically, this effect emerged even though LSE people reported wanting their partner to see them much more positively than they saw themselves (and even though their partner actually did see them as positively as they had hoped). Perhaps most crucially, dating and married intimates who believed that they were less well regarded by their partner in turn found less to value in the partner. Insecurities about a partner's regard thus appeared to constrain the idealization process, leading people to maintain a cautious distance in their relationships by defensively seeing their partner in a less generous light.

This pattern of results was reminiscent of Holmes and Rempel's (1989) speculation about how people might resolve the serious, but common, problem of how to cope with feelings of insecurity about a partner's regard and affections. The solution suggested was that people would actively regulate (inter)dependence – only letting themselves risk feeling attached and committed to their partner to the extent that they felt confident of their partners' reciprocated affections. Integrating these ideas, Murray, Holmes and Griffin (2000) proposed a dependence regulation model. This model suggests that, in the face of risk, people regulate their dependence (and thus their vulnerability) in a relationship by self-protectively “pulling away” from the partner, reducing feelings of love and closeness, devaluing the partner, and disengaging from the relationship.

Dependence-regulation dynamics across time

Murray et al. (2000) found longitudinal support for the model, with people's (often unwarranted) initial doubts about their partner's regard predicting less generosity in their view of the partner (as well as more conflict and doubt and less love) as dating relationships progressed. They also found that when intimates felt less positively regarded initially, their overall self-esteem became more negative over time. This seemed important evidence for the sociometer model of self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), as it clearly links perceptions of acceptance from a close other with changes in self-esteem over time.

These observed changes over time represent an analysis of the dynamics of close relationships that remains as a general level, and can be characterized as focusing broadly on “relational love” (Shaver et al., 1996). At this broad level, the logic of the dependence-regulation model is a good fit with the attachment system conceptualization discussed earlier. Both models can be interpreted in terms of parallel cognitive and affective processes, with the emotions presumably providing the motivational impetus for adaptive action (See Fig. 1). The perceived regard construct is a cognitive summary of people's estimation of how much they are valued and loved by a particular partner in a close relationship, and can thus be considered a relationship-specific sociometer. It is tied logically and empirically to one's expectations of responsiveness from one's partner, expectations which many writers deem central to evolutionary arguments

about evolved psychological mechanisms for regulating relationship behavior (see Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004).

The affect construct tied to appraisals of perceived regard is probably best described as simply "feelings of security or insecurity". In our research we have found that feelings of insecurity reflect a combination of the reality of the partner's actual lowered commitment and caring, as well as biased construals based on chronic personality traits. Specifically, high attachment anxiety or LSE (as previously described) result in more felt insecurity, as do high levels of attachment avoidance. The feelings of "unease" associated with felt insecurity are experienced as anxiety by people with a negative "model of self" (LSE or high attachment anxiety) and as vulnerability or discomfort with closeness by people with a negative "model of other" attachment avoidance).

The dependence regulation model assumes that felt insecurity is a warning sign that triggers defensive regulatory responses. The emotional reactions elicited by felt insecurity would be reduced feelings of closeness and love. Figure 1 indicates how this decrease in emotional closeness might spur changes in cognition to bring thoughts into line with affect. The result of this is self-protective devaluation of the partner and relationship, which serves the function of minimizing dependence and the potential magnitude of the loss expected by insecure people. If the feeling of insecurity is sufficiently strong and the person feels "devalued," the reaction to the associated "hurt feelings" is also likely to be one of anger (which we will discuss below).

A situational analysis of felt security

Our goal in more recent research is to demonstrate that dependence-regulation dynamics not only describe long-term adjustments in relationships, but also predict cognitive and affective reactions to everyday events (the momentary affective states described by Shaver et al, 1996). That is, we believe that risk regulation is an ongoing micro-process, one that can be quite revealing of the inter-relations among various affective states in relationships. Similar approaches to studying affect through self-regulation processes are described in chapters by Baumeister et al., Erber, and Haselton in this volume.

Consider the flow diagram in Figure 2. Imagine that a man named Harry finds himself in a situation of interdependence with his wife Sally and one day he notices that she is in a bad mood and is acting in a distant way (a potentially threatening event). Many people might feel a bit rejected, at least momentarily. However, under what circumstances might this fleeting feeling be taken as a sign that one's partner's affections are waning? We predicted that people with chronic concerns about their partner's regard would be quick to perceive behavior like Sally's as rejection, and then to "make mountains out of molehills" by generalizing from it to a larger meaning about their partner's feelings. The associated affective reaction to such perceived rejection would be acute "social pain" or hurt feelings, a topic we return to later.

On the other side of the coin, confident expectations that the partner values the self might inoculate people against all but the most obvious signs of a partner's rejection in everyday social interactions. The result would be a discounting of the meaning of potentially offending behaviors, such as Sally's moodiness. Indeed, our past work suggested that people are strongly motivated to feel secure in their most significant relationships (eg., Murray, Holmes, MacDonald

and Ellsworth, 1998). Given this, we expected to find that people who feel chronically valued by their partner would actively compensate for potential concerns by recruiting thoughts to help them embellish their partner's love. Thus the “appraisal-sensitivity” link between a threatening event and temporarily lowered perceived regard, or hurt feelings (path 'a' in Figure 1), is moderated by a person's chronic state of perceived regard.

In a similar way, we also expected that chronic perceived regard would moderate the capacity to stay connected and attached to a partner in situations that provoke feelings of hurt and rejection (path b). Intimates with low chronic perceived regard may be most likely to react to the acute pain of rejection with anger, or by taking the defensive step of distancing from their partner, the source of the hurt. After all, devaluing one's partner, reducing feelings of closeness, and lashing out behaviorally all serve self-protective motivations by reducing investment in the relationship. In contrast, people with high chronic perceived regard are predicted to use their firm sense of felt security as a resource, allowing them to take the risk of taking constructive steps to enhance or promote the value of the relationship.

Research is quite consistent with this model. For instance, Murray and her colleagues have demonstrated such patterns of responses in the real-life behavior of married couples, as measured through daily diaries (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003). People who felt chronically less valued by their spouses (often LSE individuals) felt more hurt and rejected on days when their partner reported a bad mood, inconsiderate behavior or a conflict (See Figure 3). Such hurt feelings then led to more self-reported anger and emotional distance the next day, accompanied by behavior that was hostile and controlling, according to their partner. This bad behavior was understandably annoying to partner. Thus, the result of this dependence regulation sequence may have been a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that the bad behavior at its end may have provoked real rejection, which was only feared to exist in the beginning. In stark contrast, people who with chronically high perceived regard actually felt more accepted by their spouse the day after a threatening event, and also reacted to difficulties by drawing closer to the partner. Such constructive reactions to potential insecurity would clearly serves as a consolidating force in the relationship.

Conceptual replications of these dynamics are evident in both experimental studies and field research. People who are likely to doubt their partner's acceptance, by virtue of low global self-esteem, chronic attachment-related anxiety, or chronic rejection sensitivity, react to feeling rejected in ways that reduce and minimize dependence. Specifically, people with low self-esteem respond to experimentally induced anxieties about their partner's possible rejection by depending less on their partner for comfort (Murray et al., 1998) and by evaluating their partner's qualities more negatively (Murray et al., 1998; Murray et al., 2002). The need to downplay the value and importance of the partner (the source of the hurt) is sufficiently powerful that derogation effects emerge on the very qualities that typically reveal people's positive illusions about their partner (Murray et al., 1996b). These devaluing processes also emerge whether these acute rejection anxieties are completely imagined in response to a newly discovered fault in the self (Murray et al., 1998) or arise in response to the partner's behavior (Murray et al., 2002

For example, Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes and Kusche (2002) explored people's reactions to potential evidence that their partner had concerns about their relationship. An example of 'evidence' presented was a biased inventory that informed participants that a partner's

occasional irritation and impatience were signs of “unspoken complaints.” In all of the studies, LSE people read too much into 'problems', seeing them as a sign of a partner's waning affections; they then reacted to this risk by derogating the partner and reducing closeness. High self-esteem (HSE) people were less sensitive to potential signs of rejection. Moreover, they reacted to 'problems' by actually increasing their ratings of their partner's acceptance and their own feelings of closeness, compared to controls. Clearly, people with a chronic high positive regard are motivated to protect both their sense of felt security and their positive image of the relationship (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2005).

Evidence from other laboratories is also consistent with these ideas. For instance, more anxiously attached women displayed greater anger towards their partner in a situation in which their partner may not have been as responsive as they hoped (Rholes, Simpson & Orina, 1999). After discussing a serious problem in their relationship, more anxiously attached men and women reported greater anger and hostility (as compared to anxious people discussing a minor problem), and they also downplayed their feelings of closeness and commitment (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). To the extent that expression of anger is a means of trying to control the partner's behavior, such sentiment reduces dependence.

Additionally, in a situation in which participants accurately inferred their partner's positive thoughts about available and attractive opposite-sex others, intimates high on attachment-related anxiety reactively reported feeling less close to the offending partner (Simpson et al., 1999). Women chronically high on rejection sensitivity also responded to a potential partner's disinterest by evaluating that person more negatively (Ayduk, Downey, Testa, Yen & Shoda, 1999). In day-to-day interactions with a romantic partner, rejection sensitive women were also more likely to initiate conflicts on days after they felt rejected by their partner, and simply priming rejection-related words activated hostility-related thoughts (Ayduk et al., 1999).

Interestingly, a major school of clinical intervention, emotion-focused marital therapy (Greenberg & Johnson, 1986; see Johnson & Talitman, 1997 for an outcome study), follows a logic that closely corresponds to the dependence-regulation model. The therapy is based on attachment theory and assumes that “secondary, reactive emotional responses” (italics ours) are often the result of primary goals being thwarted. Thus, for instance, anger is often a presenting problem in therapy, but one that should not become its focus. It should be bypassed in order to focus on the underlying primary emotional process that caused the anger to begin with: feeling hurt, rejected or vulnerable. The authors argue that if these underlying feelings are dealt with effectively, new interaction cycles that facilitate the growth of trust and safety can result. Essentially, it was a lack of feelings of trust and safety that were the basic problem causing conflict and lack of closeness in the first place. Indeed, in an empirically-based study of therapy outcomes, the amount of trust developed at follow-up predicted intimacy and satisfaction.

The Threat Defense System and the Social Pain Hypothesis

Recently, Geoff MacDonald, who worked on the original dependence-regulation model (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald and Ellsworth, 1998), has written a review suggesting that social exclusion or relational devaluation is experienced as painful because reactions to rejection are mediated, quite literally, by aspects of the physical pain system (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Basically, the authors suggest that in evolutionary development, the physical pain system was

“co-opted” to aid social animals in responding to threats to exclusion. Essentially, we developed learning mechanisms aimed at associating cues from a monitor of social distance (a sociometer) with response mechanisms that triggered relevant social approach/avoidance tendencies. Learning such associations serves the critical biological imperative of a “need to belong” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), a motivation that is viewed as critical for survival in our primitive past.

Because of the strong relation between pain and threat-defense response mechanisms (Gray & McNaughton, 2000; Panksepp, 1998), pain affect would provide a pathway by which exclusion cues could trigger quick defensive reactions aimed at improving one’s level of social inclusion. Panksepp’s ideas about the “panic” neural system in young animals seem close to Bowlby’s (1982) attachment system concepts, with separation linked to distress vocalizations and response options designed to restore proximity to the parent. The benefit of having a social pain system that is overlaid onto the physical one is that social exclusionary cues would be experienced as painful, resulting in physiological changes that promote timely and urgent action, such as aroused ANS and analgesia (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). Given that social exclusion would have been almost as dangerous to our ancestors as physical injury, an equally urgent warning and reaction system would have been highly beneficial.

Recent laboratory studies by Twenge, Baumeister and colleagues support the hypothesis that analgesia and action-preparedness are the body’s reactions to social pain. For instance, in one set of studies, the authors inform participants that they likely face a life of being alone, a significant threat to social inclusion. People in this situation tend to act in a less cognitively complex, intelligent way (Baumeister, Twenge & Nuss, 2002), engage in self-defeating, “dumb” behaviors (Twenge, Catanese & Baumeister, 2002), and react as if they are experiencing an inner “numbness” (Twenge, Catanese & Baumeister, 2003). That is, they surprisingly seem to be in a “deconstructed” state where they experience few emotions. Such a state seems to ward off potentially intense negative affect and defend against an awareness of the self’s deficiencies that may have led to the rejection. Thus it appears that overt anger may not mediate the aggressive responses that very typically accompany the experience of exclusion (eg., Twenge, Baumeister, Tice & Stucke, 2001).

MacDonald and Leary (2005) also conclude from their review that felt devaluation often leads to aggression, noting that “aggression seems like an odd response...unlikely to increase others’ acceptance” (p. 41). Aggression is a more understandable response, however, if rejection is a primal threat leading to social pain that triggers a panic reaction. Defensive aggression would often be a relatively automatic response that is functional in physical threat contexts, but less functional in social threat contexts. Further, exclusion may prime an automatic defense that may be difficult to override and control, given the limited cognitive resources available for reappraisal (Baumeister et al., 2002).

Despite the evidence that aggression and assertiveness is the dominant response to exclusion, the panic and pain systems are generally seen as triggering preparedness for all of the fight/flight/freezing threat response options. The “flight” response in humans seems more similar to withdrawal and avoidance, of the sort described in the dependence-regulation model, and it is seen as more likely when an “escape route” is available. “Freezing” seems most akin to depressive affect and helplessness when no escape is possible. The critical question for

researchers, then, is to specify the relational conditions that will determine the form that the threat response will take in close relationships where the person is generally dependent on the relationship and does not want to imperil it at a conscious level.

Specifically, research by Twenge, Baumeister and colleagues has typically used a rather dramatic manipulation of exclusion, one which has broad negative implications for the self. In contrast, in our dependence-regulation research we are normally trying to understand reactions to potential relational devaluation or lack of responsiveness. In such circumstances of milder “social pain”, the analgesic, numbing effects might be much weaker (see Williams, Case, & Govan, 2003) and, as we indicated earlier, anger may be the first response to feeling hurt in an ongoing relationship.

The dependence-regulation model generally emphasizes “flight” reactions such as emotional distancing and cognitive devaluing of the relationship as a broad response to feeling hurt. Individuals who are dispositionally prone to avoidance may be especially likely to adopt such reactions (Murray et al., 2005). Nonetheless, the evidence reviewed above suggested that hostile, bad behavior was commonly combined with such distancing responses, despite its potentially self-defeating nature. This was particularly true for individuals with low self-esteem or high attachment anxiety (This reaction seems in contrast to attachment theorists’ claims that highly anxious individuals’ natural reaction is to try to increase proximity in the face of threat.) Admittedly, some of this bad behavior may function as a “protest”, to signal one’s hurt to the partner (see Simpson et al, 1996; Williams et al., in press), or it might reflect a desire for control in the absence of trust (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). But our hunch is that some of the hostility expressed by people who fear rejection by their partner is a relatively primitive response spurred by social pain, a hypothesis that is supported by our earlier review of people’s self-reports of anger and implicit emotional reactions.

Conclusion

Theories of emotion in close relationships hinge on the notion that people’s emotions play a functional role in regulating their interdependence with significant others. There is strong evidence that anxiety reflects people’s insecure expectations about how a partner will care for them and respond to their needs. The warning systems of such individuals will show increased appraisal sensitivity for identifying potential threats. There is growing evidence that perception of a threat to acceptance results in hurt feelings that resemble “social pain.” Such experiences of felt insecurity or social pain trigger defensive reactions, motivating individuals to regulate their dependence on the person who inflicted the pain. While there is considerable evidence of such regulation, the form it will take in terms of flight or fight responses is not yet clear. Finally, the role of anger as a mediator of fight responses is ambiguous at this point and the issue may hinge on the seriousness of the signs of social rejection. Anger may result in the context of the subtle or ambiguous exclusion cues common to ongoing close relationships, whereas emotional numbness may occur in contexts where one faces full relational exclusion.

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