An Interdependence Theory Analysis of Close Relationships

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Chapter 3

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Abstract

This chapter provides a contemporary interdependence theory account of the causes and consequences of relationship interactions. The chapter (1) describes how interdependence theory provides a functional analysis of interaction, (2) reviews basic concepts of interdependence theory, (3) proposes a novel model integrating original interdependence concepts with more recent research, and (4) suggests how this model can be useful in future research. The proposed model indicates how situational characteristics and each partner’s personal characteristics combine to influence perceptions of a situation (a person by situation interaction), which in turn affect each person’s interaction behavior. The model also indicates how person characteristics filter perceptions of a partner’s behavior and these perceptions of the partner’s behavior predict whether the interaction continues, how the situation changes, and whether broader inferences are made on the basis of an interaction. Broader inferences about an interaction influence adaptive processes, such as recalibrating one’s own characteristics that are relevant to the relationship, deciding whether to reevaluate the relationship, and managing future situations with a partner. The model is useful as a roadmap for future research because it integrates various research programs and indicates how distinct interaction processes and different levels of analysis fit together.

Key Words: interdependence, interaction, person-by-situation interactions, transformation of motivation, inferences about partner, functional analysis

Interdependence is a core characteristic of relationships. Daily experiences are replete
with interactions of mutual dependence, in which one person has a direct impact on the other’s experience and vice versa. In intimate relationships, the extent to which partners affect each other is profound and pervasive. The very idea of there being an ongoing relationship between two individuals means they are connected by frequent interactions that involve mutual influence. Interdependence theory was proposed more than fifty years ago to account for dyadic behavior among individuals who influence each other in a variety of interactions (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This chapter focuses an interdependence analysis on intimate relationships in particular (Kelley, 1979; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

Interdependence theory provides concepts that are useful for understanding how couple members affect each other and how what couples do in specific interactions influences the general course of their relationship (Holmes, 2002; Kelley, 1979; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). The theory, however, does more than explain couple behavior in interactions. It also provides a formal taxonomy of interpersonal situations that is practical as a guide for understanding how interpersonal situations affect people (Holmes, 2002; Reis, 2008). This chapter focuses on situations and interactions and on linking interactions to general characteristics of a relationship and of individual partners.

The chapter is organized around several aims. One aim is to situate interdependence theory relative to other accounts of close relationships; this is addressed in a section on how interdependence theory provides a functional analysis of interaction. A second aim is to review basic concepts of interdependence theory. A third aim is to integrate original interdependence concepts with more recent research and thus provide novel ways of modeling interaction from an interdependence perspective, as elaborated in sections of the chapter that describe Figure 3.1. This chapter devotes considerable attention to transformation of motivation, a concept that was
central in original accounts of interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and that is relevant to understanding more recent research on relationships. Interdependence concepts as originally conceived were not developed for the sole purpose of being applied to intimate relationships (see Thibaut & Kelley, 1959); they have been applied to explain other interpersonal processes, such as negotiations, procedural justice, group behavior, and family dynamics. The overarching aim of this chapter is to describe how interdependence theory provides a useful approach for understanding intimate relationships (cf. Kelley, 1979).

A Functional Analysis of Interaction

Ultimately, what drives interpersonal behavior? There are several prevailing answers to this question based on specific theoretical frameworks. Some frameworks examine general social processes, suggesting that interpersonal behavior is driven by largely automatic and habitual responses to social situations (Bargh, 1996), personality and temperamental characteristics (see Chapter 24), the need to feel connected to others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the need for security and safety (see Chapter 4), a desire to progress toward one’s ideal and positive sense of self (Aron & Aron, 1986; Higgins, 1997), or broader evolutionary forces (see Chapter 2).

Interdependence theory departs from a primary focus on each individual dyad member or on trends over time within a population of individuals, focusing instead on dyadic interaction. As Rusbult and Van Lange (2008, p. 2050) stated, “Analogous to contemporary physics—where the relations between particles are as meaningful as the particles themselves—in interdependence theory, between-person relations are as meaningful as the individuals themselves.” The theory is relevant to intimate relationships, in that a defining characteristic of intimate relationships is that two partners are interdependent by having frequent interactions over an extended time—they are connected in ways that involve each affecting the other and being affected by the other
Interdependence theory is also a functional theory. It assumes that interpersonal behavior, ultimately, is driven by securing interpersonal ties that are personally adaptive, ties that function to maximize the odds of having fulfilling experiences and minimize the odds of having harmful or aversive experiences.

How is the functional value of interaction assessed or even described? Interactions with others can be experienced in a multitude of ways, but most meaningfully they are evaluated along an affective dimension of positivity versus negativity (Asch, 1946; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968). Central to the functional analysis of interaction is the idea that one can define operationally how much personal benefit (versus cost) would be incurred from interacting with another person in a given situation—that is, the positives or negatives each interaction partner experiences as a result of their joint action. This affective dimension—how positive, neutral, or negative an interaction feels—has assumed different names, such as payoffs, rewards or benefits versus costs, and gains versus losses. Interdependence theory uses the concept of “outcomes” to refer to how the interaction is experienced subjectively, namely the valence associated with an interaction (positive, neutral, or negative). As such, outcomes are units scaled to reflect how an interaction feels subjectively rather than tangible or objective rewards and costs per se.

Interactions that are immediately bad or costly can have benefits in the future. For example, appeasing a partner at one’s own expense on a few occasions may provide the long-term security of having a trusting partner (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Van Lange et al., 1997). Giving up one’s own immediate gains to act altruistically toward others provides a long-term benefit, namely including “being charitable” in one’s self-concept (Cialdini et al., 1987). What
seems like a serious marital conflict in the immediate moment may fade over time in negativity (McNulty, O’Mara, & Karney, 2008) and inoculate a couple against similar conflicts in the future. Functionality and benefit must be measured over a broad time frame. Actions that are costly in the short-term but increase the odds of a relationship lasting, ultimately are beneficial if the relationship yields longer term benefits (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996).

The concept of interaction “outcomes” may strike some readers as being dated. The notion of outcomes figured prominently in the 1950s when prevailing methods of studying dyadic interaction assumed that individuals were driven by immediate self-interest and efforts to maximize immediate benefits to the self. As such, the concept of outcomes in analyzing interaction brings to mind economic models of rational behavior (e.g., game theory, social exchange theories; Homans, 1958; Luce & Raiffa, 1957). In contrast, psychological accounts of intimate relationships include major concepts such as felt security, satisfaction, acceptance versus rejection, goal promotion, emotion regulation, and mate value. The analysis below, however, reveals that the concept of outcomes is relevant to studying relationships. Outcomes and these others concepts all share the idea that intimate relationships are not merely random interactions; they serve important functions (personal, evolutionary, or otherwise).

Suggesting that interpersonal interactions have functional value does not mean that the people interacting are consciously seeking benefits to be gained in a given interaction. For example, research on the evolutionary bases of attraction (see Chapter 2) has shown that the particular traits that heterosexual women favor in men vary as a function of their ovulatory stage, yet women are not necessarily aware of these variations in their preferences. Similarly, highly committed individuals may not be aware that they ignore negative partner information more than less committed individuals do (Arriaga, Slaughterbeck, Capezza, & Hmurovic, 2007).
Interpersonal tendencies that guide interactions with a partner may do so in ways that are relatively automatic (Murray, Holmes, & Pinkus, 2010). Interdependence theory provides an analysis that argues for the functional role of behavior and does not necessarily assume that people are explicitly or consciously aware of the benefits their behavior has on their relationship (Holmes, 2004).

The signature of an interdependence analysis of interpersonal behavior is the focus on adaptive interaction in its various forms—real-time interaction, anticipating a future interaction, or making sense of a past interaction. Figure 3.1 summarizes a model of real-time interaction, specifying interaction origins, processes, and links to personal and relational adaptations. This figure will guide much of what is presented in this chapter.

Basic Components of Analyzing Interaction

Interdependence theory fundamentally is about predicting how interactions between partners affect each person individually and the relationship more generally. As Holmes (2002, p. 3) wrote, “Each ‘situation’ specifies the ways in which two persons are dependent on and influence each other with respect to their outcomes (hence the term ‘interdependence’).” When two people interact, it is possible to identify the specific situation (S) that triggers in each individual (A, B) specific expectations and knowledge structures, abilities and behavior tendencies, and motives (motives that are tailored for that interaction partner or that permeate an individual’s interaction with others more generally; Holmes, 2002). The SABI model specifically states that interaction (I) is a function of two individuals (A, B) acting in a situation (S) and influencing each other’s outcomes (Kelley et al., 2003): I = f(S, A, B). Each individual brings to bear on the interaction individual or person factors (e.g., expectations), which are described in more detail below.
This chapter integrates classic interdependence concepts with more recent research on how intimate relationships function. Figure 3.1 summarizes how interactions unfold in intimate relationships. One can imagine Figure 3.1 depicting the interaction of a heterosexual married couple, Annie (Person A) and Bob (Person B). Figure 3.1 summarizes the interaction from Annie’s vantage point. Annie and Bob interact a lot with each other; Figure 3.1 depicts one such interaction in the broader context of their relationship.

The initiation of a specific interaction is shown in the top left arrow of Figure 3.1. The arrow points to a box representing the interaction situation (S) that Annie and Bob confront; the situation will have specific properties or “structure.” Annie (A) will interpret the situation with Bob, as indicated by the arrow going to Person A perceiving (interpreting, evaluating) the situation, and then act accordingly (A’s behavior). Bob, too, will interpret the situation with Annie as well as Annie’s overt behavior, and will act accordingly (B’s behavior, below A’s behavior). If the figure were bigger and extend farther to the right, it would have included the full representation of Bob’s parallel process resulting in his overt behavior. The bottom part of Figure 3.1 summarizes how Bob’s behavior is registered and understood by Annie (perceptions of partner’s behavior) and how this may cause her to engage in more general processes of adaptation (adaptation processes). Adaptations (or lack thereof), in turn, affect which situations develop in the future and how each partner interprets and evaluates a given situation.

Interaction Situation (Situation Structure)

What kinds of interactions would occur in the interaction situation box of Figure 3.1? Interaction situations vary in how they might affect a relationship. Some situations threaten relationships more than others because they pose insurmountable challenges or erode passionate feelings (such as situations that cause feelings of love to wane), trigger insecurities about a
partner’s love, lead to being attracted to someone else, or fail to provide intimate interaction (e.g., being too busy for quality time together, being in a long-distance relationship; Aron & Aron, 1986; Lydon, Menzies-Toman, & Burton, 2008; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Other situations make it easy to love a partner and afford opportunities to deepen a sense of connection, as when a partner acts selflessly and for the other’s benefit, or does something endearing or engaging (Aron & Aron, 1986; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Some situations favor deepening a bond in the absence of salient positive emotions, such as supporting each other against opponents or adversity, going through daily routines that deepen connections with each other (Berscheid, 1983), or overcoming a potential conflict with the partner or other strain tests situations (Simpson, 2007).

Interaction situations could be described in myriad ways. Early writing on interdependence theory emphasized four situational features or properties based on the pattern of outcomes between two partners (i.e., the “structure of outcome interdependence” or “outcome dependence”; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). These four abstract features can be described using an outcome matrix to represent an interaction between two people (A, B). An interaction matrix typically has two response options available to each person, with entries referring to the outcomes expected to occur for each person.¹

Varying the abstract pattern of outcomes across entries In Figure 2 conveys actor control

¹ Since the early writing on interdependence theory, interaction situations typically have been defined operationally using (1) a $2 \times 2$ outcome matrix that summarizes each person’s two response options and the outcomes corresponding to each option, and (2) transition lists to show how one social situation morphs into another. Actual daily interactions typically involve situations in which each person has more than two response options. To use a matrix to model more than one option, the two options involve enacting a particular behavior or not enacting it, where not enacting the behavior would capture other possible interaction behaviors.
(how much each person affects his or her own outcomes), partner control (how much each person affects the partner’s outcomes), joint control (how much each is affected by coordinating joint responses), and covariation of interests (how much the two partners’ outcomes are correlated; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008).

Figure 3.2 depicts a matrix to represent an interaction between Annie and Bob, who live together. Neither Bob nor Annie has done any housecleaning for weeks. Neither likes to clean, but both prefer a clean house to a messy one. If both clean the house, both obtain the moderate benefits of exerting effort and having a clean house (4 and 4). Of course, both prefer to have the partner clean the house (8), but each is irritated by the prospect of cleaning the house while the partner takes a free ride (–4). The cooperative choice would be to commence cleaning together. At the same time, both Bob and Annie dislike housecleaning, so each feels tempted to take a free ride by letting the partner do the cleaning. If both Bob and Annie “defect” and pursue their immediate self-interest by failing to clean the house, both suffer poor outcomes (0 and 0).

Properties of Interaction Situations

One property concerns the correlation of two partners’ outcomes when they enact one behavior versus another (correspondence of outcomes). In everyday life, situations vary in whether they yield possible “win–win” scenarios, or instead involve a conflict of interest (i.e., what is good for one partner is bad for the other across all four combinations of responses in a matrix). This property is also termed covariation of interests, or whether the couple’s outcomes covary based on what each partner does. The situation shown in Figure 3.2 reveals only moderately correspondent outcomes. Outcomes are highly correlated if Bob and Annie do the same thing (both clean, or neither cleans), but also highly uncorrelated if they do different things (one cleans, and the other does not).
Correspondence of outcomes often is confused with having similar preferences. Similarity reflects high correspondence in that partners with similar preferences both benefit from doing the same thing. However, outcomes also can be highly correspondent in ways that favor having partners do different things, leading to better outcomes for each partner than if they both did the same thing; partners’ outcomes correlate highly, but they do so by combining different actions. For example, partners who share the same hobby will exhibit similarity (high similarity and high correspondent outcomes). But partners just as easily might have different hobbies and prefer an arrangement in which they each pursue their own hobby independently (low similarity and high correspondent outcomes); pursuing their independent hobbies yields better outcomes for each than would be obtained if they both pursued the same hobby.

A second property—basis/type of dependence—concerns whether getting desired outcomes is solely under the partner’s control or instead depends on acting together and coordinating behavior. Some situations involve being at the complete mercy of the partner, such as having an abusive partner who controls access to cash. Situations in which a person has complete control over his or her own outcomes reflect that person’s independence from the partner (i.e., the partner has no control over the person’s outcomes).

The third and fourth properties, respectively, concern how much each partner affects the other (amount of dependence) and whether partners affect each other equally. Situations in which the stakes are high involve more dependence (as modeled in an outcome matrix with high values), whereas those that are trivial involve less dependence. Not all interactions have equal impact, however. For one couple, allocating time each will spend on hobbies may be trivial relative to allocating time on work-related activities; interactions that involve negotiating time at work may be more contentious and elicit a greater impact on each person’s outcomes. For
another couple, time devoted to hobbies may be more important. Also, some situations matter much more to one partner than the other (as modeled in an outcome matrix with outcome values that differ in magnitude for the two partners). Coordinating time devoted to work, for example, may be more important for one partner than the other and thus provide a situation of unilateral dependence. Figure 3.2 displays equal amounts of dependence for Bob and Annie; in both cases, Bob’s average outcome is the same as Annie’s average outcome.

More recent accounts of situation structure (Kelley et al., 2003) have emphasized two additional properties of situations that are not evident in an outcome matrix but nonetheless capture additional variation in interaction behavior. The fifth property is the amount of information each partner has about her or his own and the other’s outcomes. Interaction partners may be unaware or mistaken in their understanding of how a current interaction affects their own and each other’s outcomes. Situations that inherently involve uncertainty or inherently obscure each person’s behavior options elicit more caution and trepidation than those that are familiar or well defined.²

Situations also vary in a sixth property, namely the timeframe over which outcomes are experienced (Kelley et al, 2003). Some outcomes may be experienced in the immediate moment, whereas others may be realized after a series of responses or at a future time. Individuals who do not expect to interact again may have more interactions in which outcomes are delivered immediately, whereas having a future allows for rewards to be reciprocated later (Clark & Grote, 2003).²

² A later section describes how people differ from each other in their approach to interactions. People differ in how much uncertainty they experience in general or in a specific relationship, as well as in how distracted or inept they are at figuring the situation at hand.

Amount of information as a situation property, in contrast, concerns characteristics of a situation that any reasonable person would find uncertain, unfamiliar, or unknowable.
Couple members who expect to be together in the long-term should be more at ease with situations in which benefits may not be realized until late in the interaction or even at a future time, as is the case when partners invest in plans together and know that benefits will not be realized until some time in the future (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008).

Situation Structure Constrains What Is at Stake in an Interaction

Situation structure narrows down or constrains how each person experiences an interaction. The wide universe of possible interaction thoughts, feelings, and action tendencies becomes reduced to a few that are possible or relevant in the situation at hand. The situation in Figure 3.2 does not afford all possible experiences for either Annie or Bob; it is constrained to experiences that vary from happiness at not having to clean when the other cleans, moderate unhappiness at having to clean when the other takes a free ride, moderate happiness if both clean, or neutral outcomes if neither cleans. As described further below, people do not merely experience an immediate outcome; they go beyond the immediate outcome and interpret broader meaning in interactions. The situation in Figure 3.2, therefore, allows for a narrow list of inferences about a partner, ranging from renewed appreciation for a partner who cleans alone, resentment for a partner who takes a free ride, confidence and satisfaction in a relationship when both partners clean, or uncertainty about a relationship when neither partner is willing to exert effort (by cleaning) to benefit the relationship.

The notion that situations allow for certain interpersonal tendencies to be expressed and for certain attributions to be made about a partner is captured by the concept of situation “affordance” (Kelley et al., 2003; Reis, 2008). The strong version of this argument is that situation structure directs the interpersonal tendencies or “dispositions” that will be expressed, which often occurs in a precise, deductive manner (certain dispositions will be relevant and
others will not). The weaker version of this argument is more probabilistic, stating that the expression of certain dispositions become more or less likely.

Identifying Situation Structure in Everyday Interaction

Beyond being useful for theoretical predictions, can these abstract properties of situations suggested by interdependence theory be identified in typical “real-life” interactions? Without knowledge of interdependence concepts, lay people frequently differentiate situations on the basis of these properties. As described by Arriaga and her colleagues (Arriaga, Agnew, Capezza, & Lehmiller, 2008), even people who are unlikely to use the interdependence term unilateral dependence are familiar with situations in which one person “has the upper hand”; partners can recognize when they both benefit from coordinated behavior versus when they seem to be competing for desired outcomes, without describing such situations as varying in “correspondence of outcomes”; people implicitly know which interactions strongly versus weakly affect them, without making references to specific “levels of dependence.” Lay people intuitively detect these theoretical variations because failing to detect them—for example, by not noticing that one is more affected by the partner’s behavior than the partner is affected by one’s behavior—is likely to be maladaptive, missing opportunities for positive moments and falling prey to costly interactions (Kelley et al., 2003).

Interdependence theorists proposed these six properties with the aim of advancing a practical theory, rather than embarking on a purely theoretical exercise. The theoretical exercise of mapping all possible combinations of these properties would be daunting and would result in a very large number of situations that are unlikely to occur (Kelley et al., 2003). Thus, interdependence theorists have identified interpersonal situations that are particularly common or meaningful, as described in The Atlas of Interpersonal Situations (Kelley et al., 2003).
Summary

To summarize, the theoretical properties of situations that involve interdependent interaction are the pattern of outcomes for different response options and the ways in which partners affect each other’s outcomes (see Kelley et al., 2003, section 2.3 through section 2.5), whether both persons are aware of (and can communicate about) the outcome patterns at hand (see “information conditions” in Kelley et al., 2003), and the temporal and sequential order of two persons’ actions (whether either partner can respond at any time, both must respond immediately, or they must take turns responding; see “response conditions” in Kelley et al., 2003). These properties are useful for characterizing situations that are typical or that matter for the people involved. Just as changing the price of a product from cheap to free causes a transformational shift in the value attached to that product (Ariely, 2008), so too does changing specific properties of a dyadic situation cause a transformational shift in the interpersonal significance of that situation, as described in the next section.

Perceiving (Interpreting, Evaluating) the Situation (or, Person-by-Situation Interactions)

How much of what occurs in an interaction can be causally attributed to the specific situation structure? A radical “situationist” would argue that the situation structure determines interaction behavior and experience. In contrast, a radical “individualist” might point exclusively to stable and chronic individual tendencies that people have across most of their interactions, suggesting that individual tendencies alone account for most variation in interaction behavior. True to its Lewinian roots, interdependence theory suggests that interaction behavior depends on a situation-by-both-persons interaction (Kelley, 1983; 1991). Situation structure certainly matters. But there are also psychological and social factors residing within each partner, as well
as emerging from the specific pairing of the two partners, that matter just as much as situation structure.

How, precisely, do each partner’s characteristics interface with situation structure? Early writing on interdependence theory described this process with the concept of transformation of motivation: Each interaction partner assesses the situation and then invokes a specific interaction rule or motive that, in turn, governs behavior. Some individuals apply particular interaction rules that capture a general motive they possess. Interpersonal tendencies are referred to as individual “dispositions” (i.e., tendencies to invoke a particular interaction motive). They include (1) personal dispositions, or tendencies that a specific person applies to several interpersonal situations (e.g., self-esteem, attachment, other individual difference variables that have an interpersonal basis); (2) relationship-specific dispositions, or tendencies that reflect a motive applied to a specific relationship (e.g., being committed to a specific relationship, trusting a specific partner, seeking novel life experiences with a specific partner); and (3) social norms, or societal rules about appropriate behavior, which can be applied to others in general, specific types of relationships, or a specific partner (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997). Transformation of motivation thus is useful in explaining interaction motives that drive interpersonal behavior.

In close relationships, however, there is more to understanding a transformation process than simply modeling a shift in an underlying motive. Later sections of the chapter will describe what is unique about close relationships as opposed to stranger or other social interactions. Specifically, individuals in close relationships have an interaction history (preexisting ideas about what might or will occur), some parts of which they share and other parts unique to each person. It becomes crucial, therefore, to examine the expectations and theories people invoke in close relationships based on their shared history or on previous relationships; the types of
motives that are most relevant to close relationships; and the mental events that combine expectations, motives, and other person characteristics with the situation structure—that is, the psychological processes that underlie a person-by-situation interaction. These cognitive (psychological) events are much better understood today than they were four decades ago when transformation of motivation was first described as a concept. Later this concept will be placed in the context of more recent information on person-by-situation interactions and the workings of an “interpersonal mind” (Fletcher & Overall, 2010; Murray & Holmes, 2009).

Transformation of Motivation, as Originally Described

In their 1978 book, *Interpersonal Relations: A Theory of Interdependence*, Kelley and Thibaut proposed three concepts to provide a theoretical language for analyzing interactions: (1) the given situation—the benefits and costs that objectively exist, as determined by basic structural characteristics, which reflect a person’s preferences without any concerns for the interaction partner; (2) the effective situation—the benefits and costs that direct behavior, which are revised from outcomes in a given situation, and reflect preferences based on broader social considerations (e.g., the partner’s interests, long-term relational goals, social norms, strategic considerations); and (3) the psychological shift responsible for revising given outcomes to effective outcomes, which are akin to applying an interaction rule that conveys relevant person factors and broader social considerations (cf. Holmes, 2002, on the application of “valuation rules”; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). Kelley and Thibaut used the term “transformation of motivation” to describe the shift in the way a person understands and interprets the situation. They considered this motivational shift to be similar to Kurt Lewin’s “restructuring of the field,” with a similar emphasis on applying personal motives and characteristics to the situation and partner at hand.
Transformation of motivation, as originally conceived, occurs with each interaction behavior when each person appraises the situation, quickly judges what is afforded or possible, and then reacts in a way that serves a personal, relational, social, or cultural function (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Kelley et al., 2003). In intimate relationships, interactions unfold—behavior by behavior—in ways that reflect an effort (or lack thereof) to balance one’s own and one’s partner’s needs. Individuals appraise interactions in light of what they know about that particular type of situation and what they believe their partner will think and do (i.e., expectations elicited by the specific pattern of interdependence, as well as expectations about the partner’s person characteristics and about the rules or motives the partner is likely to apply; Holmes, 2002; Kelley, 1979).

If human beings were “programmed” to apply a single interaction rule regardless of the situation or interaction partner, predicting responses to interpersonal situations would be simple. People, however, are not driven by a single-minded goal. Just as computers are programmed to adopt sophisticated and nuanced decision rules, so, too, do human beings adopt interaction rules over time that serve a broader function and thus are adaptive. Some situations elicit pure self-interest and the pursuit of immediate personal benefit, whereas others elicit selfless acts that are immediately costly but serve another functional purpose (e.g., going out of one’s way to hold the door open for a physically disabled individual because failing to do so undermines one’s sense of being a decent person). Individuals learn to apply interaction rules on a contingent basis (Kelley et al., 2003; Reis, 2008); when a specific rule is invoked, this rule reflects an underlying motive that has been activated specifically based who the interaction partner is and what the appropriate behavior is for that interaction partner and situation (McClintock, 1972).

What kinds of rules and motives operate in interdependent situations? Original writing on
interdependence theory described specific transformations according to the resulting outcome
distribution in a self/other matrix—whether the most outcomes would go to the self, slightly
more to the self than the partner, evenly to both, and so forth. For example, when confronted
with a competitive situation (i.e., situation structure defined by noncorrespondent outcomes,
mutual and high dependence, high informational certainty), a person should respond to such a
situation differently depending on who the interaction partner is. Interacting with a stranger may
lead to wanting better outcomes for oneself than the stranger, which results in minimizing the
relative difference in outcomes to “save face” and avoid looking greedy (minimize difference in
outcomes, or “min diff” transformation); interacting with one’s child may lead to pursuing the
best possible outcomes for the child, regardless of one’s own outcomes (maximizing other’s
outcomes, or “max other” transformation); and interacting with a selfish acquaintance or
someone known to be competitive may invoke wanting much better outcomes for the self than
the other, regardless of the absolute value of outcomes (maximizing relative outcome for self, or
“max rel”). Thus, the same situation structure can elicit different transformations depending on
what a person wants to achieve in interactions with a particular partner.

Transformation of motivation has been useful not only in modeling interaction rules that
guide behavior but also in understanding the origins of personality and individual differences
(Kelley, 1983). Interaction rules that are applied successfully time and time again become
habitual transformation tendencies (“dispositions”) and reveal an individual’s personality against
the backdrop of situation. As Holmes eloquently stated, “. . . personality is revealed by the ways
a situation is transformed . . . by how the field is restructured in a way that reflects the values and
motives of the person. One can only identify the person as a figure against the ground of the
However, the original writings on transformation of motivation did not specify how transformations occur—that is, the exact psychological processes. The original concept focused on an objective account of how people apply decision rules in interactions, invoking technical language such as “min-diff” and “max-other.” But people typically do not approach interactions by adopting a formal theoretical analysis of transformation of motivation. When faced with the situation depicted in Figure 3.2, a person might contemplate, “Cleaning together is the right thing to do,” rather than “We are operating under a situation of noncorrespondent outcomes and mutual dependence, therefore I will max-both rather than max-own.” Typically, people interact in intuitive ways, bypassing formal theoretical analysis; they sense that a particular type of situation is about to occur by recognizing certain signals or cues (e.g., an immediate feeling that is familiar, an expression on the partner’s face that harks back to past situations, an exchange that takes on a familiar tone or direction); and they recognize when things seem imbalanced in a relationship. Even those who systematically analyze relevant characteristics of a situation or partner may not achieve an “objective” analysis because they must contend with their own personal characteristics that are instantly activated and that filter their appraisal of the situation, as described below (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002; Murray et al., 2009).

Since transformation of motivation was originally proposed, there have been several important developments in relationships research, and in social cognition more generally, that inform the mental events that transpire during transformation processes (Arriaga, 2012). These recent developments include the following (each addressed below): (1) providing evidence that a transformation process actually occurs; (2) describing how a relationship history matters (i.e., the impact of having well-developed expectations relevant to a given interaction); (3) identifying the expectations, theories, and motives that become triggered in interactions with a relationship
partner; and (4) specifying different types of mental events that combine person characteristics with situation structure and that reflect transformational processes—that is, specifying the psychological process involved in a person-by-situation interaction.

Evidence that Transformation of Motivation Actually Occurs

The hallmark of transformational activity is that a shift occurs from a response that is asocial to a response that honors broader social considerations (Rusbult et al., 1991; Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). This shift cannot be directly observed. Without direct observation, it might be simpler to assume that behavior is directly caused by the objective (given) situation or by person characteristics, without an intermediary process of transformation of motivation. Is there evidence that such a process actually occurs?

Research has shown that partners engage in a thoughtful process to move beyond immediate self-focused responses and take into account broader considerations. Yovetich and Rusbult (1994) reasoned that responses based on the immediate (given) situation do not require consideration and, therefore, should be faster than those that involve greater elaboration and more cognitive processing time. To test this hypothesis, Yovetich and Rusbult had participants in a lab experiment read a hypothetical situation in which a dating partner behaved constructively or destructively. A partner’s destructive behavior should elicit retaliation, unless a person is able to engage in transformation of motivation. They also varied how much time participants were given to indicate how they would respond. As predicted, participants who were given a limited response time had more destructive reactions than those with more time to respond (Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994, Study 2), and this was true only when participants were responding to destructive partner behavior.

Finkel and Campbell (2001) took another approach, varying the amount of cognitive
resources available to a person in a situation that calls for transformation of motivation. They reasoned that transformation of motivation is a more elaborate, cognitively demanding process than simple self-focused reactions. In their research, when participants were depleted of cognitive resources by doing a demanding cognitive task (suppressing emotional expression), they reacted more destructively than participants who were not depleted (Finkel & Campbell, 2001, Study 2). This suggests that depleted participants have fewer resources to engage in transformation of motivation.

These studies provide evidence that couples stand to benefit from a reasoned response, and if they have the requisite opportunity/resources to reason (i.e., to apply interaction rules that fit with their broader relationship goals), they do just that. When faced with a potential conflict with the partner, their responses are more benign than the responses of those unable to engage in transformation of motivation, who instead enact an immediate self-focused response. These studies show that behavior is not simply caused by the immediate (given) situation, nor is behavior invariant across situations and directed solely by person characteristics; when given the opportunity, behavior “bends” away from the given situation to follow broader social and interpersonal considerations. These studies were designed to examine transformation of motivation as a mental process. Other research, although not directly focused on transformation of motivation, provides a similar conclusion that person factors interact with situation characteristics (Mikulincer et al., 2002; Murray et al., 2009; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992).

Relationships Have a History

Is it conceivable that relationship interactions unfold without any social considerations? Even novel relationships do not begin with a blank slate. Each person has knowledge structures
(i.e., expectations and lay theories about relationships) and established interpersonal tendencies (inferences and behavior) that become activated in specific situations. These “person factors” filter how a situation (S) is interpreted and understood. In this way, when Annie (Person A) confronts the objective situation in which either she or Bob (or both of them) must decide whether to clean the house, she will interpret the interaction situation through the filter of her own person factors—her own expectations, lay theories, and established interpersonal tendencies. This is depicted in Figure 3.1 with the box at the top labeled “perceiving the situation.”

In addition to preexisting knowledge structures and interpersonal tendencies, people who are interacting with a relationship partner have their own shared relationship history. Having a shared history also influences how a situation is interpreted and evaluated, beyond the effect of a person’s individual characteristics. For example, a person may be only slightly annoyed when a stranger is late to an appointment but extremely annoyed when the partner is late. Annie may decide to clean the house because Bob has a personal project that he really wants to do. But if Annie and Bob repeatedly compete for time to do their own personal projects, her offer to do household tasks takes on new meaning: She is foregoing time she would have spent on her own project. Annie would do this only if she felt doing this for Bob might promote a broader social or relational goal—that is, Annie would do this only if it matched her motives for the relationship. The added meaning becomes relevant only because of their shared history, which highlights how relationship interactions differ from stranger interactions (or other relationships with less frequent interaction and lower levels of interdependence).

The fact that relationships have a history has several important implications. One implication is that all relationship interactions either activate social motives (e.g., relationship or
partner-focused motives, self-focused motives relevant to interacting with a partner) or reflect habitual responses that at a previous time activated social motives. It would be exceedingly rare to identify a social behavior that has no trace of activating a social motive in the past. Therefore, the idea of a purely asocial interaction behavior becomes tenuous, as represented in Figure 3.1 by a dotted line (rather than a solid line) above the box reflecting the evaluation of a situation. Even routine and mundane interactions are guided by immediate or past transformational processes.

A second implication is that components in the I = f(S, A, B) model will vary in influence; person factors (A, B) may matter more than situation factors (S) when people have a long or deep relationship history. People who interact frequently and are highly interdependent fall into routine ways of interacting. Their interactions, however, may not be identical to others’ routine ways of interacting; each couple’s history shapes behaviors that become routine. This means that different couples may react to the same situation in different ways, partly because of their own unique history and routine interactions. What guides a couple’s idiosyncratic responses to a standard situation is each person’s knowledge structures, interpersonal tendencies, and expectations toward the specific partner. In contrast, stranger interactions may be guided more heavily by situational factors; the absence of a history together means that they have not had as many opportunities for specific person factors to be activated and to guide interaction.

A third implication of recognizing that relationships have a history is that some person factors become more relevant than others. The more two people interact with each other, the more they tailor the person factors—their expectations, theories, and tendencies—they bring to bear with each other. If, instead, a person were to use the exact same expectations and motives with everyone, too often the person’s approach would be inappropriate, in the same way that stereotyping others based on their group membership (i.e., using generalized expectations about
others) will eventually yield errors in perceptions and judgments of others. In short, past interactions with a particular person help predict future interactions with that person, as indicated in Figure 3.1 by an arrow connecting adaptation processes to perceiving the situation. Person factors that are particularly relevant to relationships are described in the next section.

Person Factors in Close Relationships

Knowledge structures reflect lay theories and expectations about others in general or the specific partner, and about relationships in general or the specific situation (see also Fletcher & Overall, 2010; Holmes, 2002). Knowledge structures influence how one interprets a social situation, what one is likely to feel and infer about the situation, and the motives that tend to be activated in that situation. Interaction tendencies, by comparison, involve ways of behaving with others that have become habitual.

There is a long list of general perceptual and behavior tendencies and knowledge structures that influence interpersonal interactions in general, such as attachment orientations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), self-esteem (Holmes, 2004), rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996), generalized negative affect (Huston, 2009), and specific personality traits (e.g., agreeableness, Graziano & Tobin, 2009; narcissism, Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; conscientiousness, Baker & McNulty, 2011). This volume contains several chapters that elaborate on these person factors (e.g., see Chapters 24 and 4 on personality and attachment, respectively). Other tendencies and knowledge structures are also relevant to close relationships, such as beliefs about whether knowing the ultimate fate of a relationship occurs early on or evolves as the relationship progresses (i.e., implicit theories of relationships; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001) and whether people use communal rather than exchange rules (see Chapter 12).
Two person factors that have been studied extensively because of the pervasive effects they have on relationships are commitment and trust. Commitment is a subjective sense that one will continue a relationship (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), even when confronted with challenges. Psychologically, committed individuals are motivated to continue the relationship, feel attached or tied to their partner, and foresee their future as being in the relationship (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). People who are highly dependent on their partner come to feel committed; they rely on their partner for good outcomes and, thus, want the relationship to continue (Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2011). This occurs even in abusive relationships, in which dependence on a partner and subsequent feelings of commitment predict downplaying the partner’s aggression (Arriaga & Capezza, 2010) and staying in the relationship (Rusbult & Martz, 1995).

Trust reflects an individual’s expectation that the partner will be caring and responsive to the individual’s needs (Holmes & Rempel, 1989) and is closely tied with feeling intimacy (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Trust and commitment are closely related (Murray & Holmes, 2009); one person’s trust toward a partner increases when the partner conveys high commitment (Wieselquist et al., 1999) or passes a strain test (Simpson, 2007). When partners synchronize their goals for high closeness and intimacy, they both enjoy high commitment and high trust (Murray & Holmes, 2009). But commitment and trust are not always linearly related, as is the case for people who remain committed but do not feel their partner is responsive to their needs, or for people who infer high commitment in their partner and thus trust the partner but do not themselves feel highly committed.

This section has described knowledge structures and interpersonal tendencies that are particularly relevant to relationship interactions. There are other person factors that are less
stable and more specific to a person’s immediate psychological state, such as mood or affective states, level of physical or psychological exhaustion (e.g., level of ego depletion; Finkel & Campbell, 2001), and other physical or psychological factors residing within a person that might influence the interaction (e.g., experiencing chronic pain, feeling stressed because of work; Iida, Seidman, Shrout, Fujita, & Bolger, 2008). More generally, the person factors described above affect the motives that become activated in interactions—that is, they shape what each person wants to have happen in an interaction.

Motives Relevant to Close Relationships

When transformation of motivation was originally described in 1978 (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), a specific set of transformations was assumed to describe all interaction motives (see McClintock, 1972). Relationship interactions are distinct from other interactions, however, as described above. Therefore, the specific motives that guide relationship interactions may also differ from the typical motives guiding other interactions. Recent research has provided a renewed focus on the motives that guide relationship interactions (Fitzsimmons, 2006; Gable & Poore, 2008), partly as a result of the resurgence over the past two decades of research on the motivational underpinnings of behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Higgins, 1997). The current analysis integrates recent research to suggest broad motives that drive relationship behavior, that is, primary and general things couple members want to maintain a long-term, gratifying relationship.

One general motive is to sustain a relationship that satisfies one’s own desires and needs. This general motive is captured by the questions, “Where do things stand for me?” and “What do I want and/or need to have occur in this relationship?” Most people seek a satisfying romantic relationship. For many individuals, this requires establishing a deep and intimate connection with
another person, which can be a source of immense satisfaction (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2004; Murray & Holmes, 2009; Reis & Aron, 2008; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). But not everyone desires an intimate, close connection with another. Individuals vary in how closely intertwined with their partner they want to be, and some may prefer being aloof or relatively independent. Most people nonetheless aspire to have a connection with another that meets their ideal level of closeness (Berscheid, 1983; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 1999). The strength of this motive varies in specific relationships. Some relationships instantly fit one’s needs, whereas others may fall short of an ideal but are “good enough” for the time being.

A second general motive is to have a partner whose desired level of connection is in sync with one’s own desired level of connection. This general motive is captured by the question, “What does my partner want and/or need to occur in this relationship?” This motive is guided by a general assessment of where things stand for one’s partner, and it is directly related to not getting rejected or shunned by a partner who needs too little, nor smothered or overwhelmed by a partner who needs too much. People protect themselves from the prospect that they may need the relationship more than their partner does (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Murray & Holmes, 2009). Relationships in which the partner falls short of one’s desired level of closeness make people feel vulnerable and cause emotional pain (Baumeister, Woltman, & Stillwell, 1993; LeMay & Dudley, 2010; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002; Zadro, Williams, & Arriaga, 2008). Some individuals are prone to feeling vulnerable (e.g., anxiously attached), whereas others are prone to feeling smothered (e.g., avoidantly attached; Simpson & Rholes, 2012). In contrast, feeling accepted by a partner makes it easier to trust him or her and instills a sense of safety from relational harm (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Wieselquist et al., 1999). Murray and her colleagues describe how people synchronize their own desires with what they perceive to be their
partner’s desires. Detecting “red flags” about a partner’s commitment—for example, detecting cues of possible rejection by a partner or signals that the partner has doubts about the relationship—causes a person to respond by tempering their connection to the partner and withholding commitment (Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006; Murray & Holmes, 2009). In contrast, those who perceive the partner as providing the needed level of emotional security are quick to affirm their relationship (Murray et al., 2009).

Some scholars have argued that the motive to connect with a relationship partner and the motive to have a partner who desires a similar connection are closely intertwined (Murray et al., 2011). Others have described the motive to connect with a partner and the motive to avoid rejection as being relatively independent (Gable & Poore, 2008); even individuals who are inclined to leave their relationship—that is, those who no longer seek a connection—should suffer emotional pain if the partner preemptively ends the relationship (Berscheid, 1983), feeling the “sting” of the partner’s rejection. Seeking connection with a partner and avoiding rejection by a partner both regulate a more generalized interpersonal need to be socially connected with others, even when the connection falls short of an ideal (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 2007). When this interpersonal need is threatened, people experience a profound blow to their sense of individual self-worth and well-being.

Intimate relationships do more than satisfy relational motives and needs; they can also help or hinder more self-focused needs. Thus, a third motive is driven by the question, “How does my partner and this relationship affect my sense of self?” This motive is regulated by concerns about how relational motives interface with the self and self-characteristics outlined above under “Person Factors in Close Relationships.” When faced with personal distress—a crisis at work, the loss of a close friend or family member, a blow to self-esteem—feeling that a
partner is supportive and “in tune” with one’s distress can satisfy a more basic and innate need to feel that, with the help of another person, one will survive personally challenging moments (Bowlby, 1973; Davila & Sargent, 2003; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Partners who satisfy that need by providing a “safe haven” in times of crisis also instill a sense of security in times of calm; they provide a “secure base” for others not only to survive but also to thrive (Bowlby, 1988). When a partner provides emotional security, people are able to take on new personal challenges (Feeney, 2004; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009) and pursue personal growth and aspirations (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000; Feeney, 2004; Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2009). Such confidence-infusing interactions are hindered when partners do not fully or accurately understand each other (Swann, DeLaRonde, & Hixon, 1994); they cannot be responsive to each other’s needs if they do not understand those needs. More generally, in keeping with Cooley’s metaphor of the looking-glass self (a sense of self as seen by others; Cooley, 1902), interactions with relationship partners strongly affect each partner’s sense of self (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2003; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 2002). There is no reflected sense of “self” without close interpersonal connections.

Are motives “person factors”? They are insofar as people differ from each other in the motives they invoke, sometimes even in the same given situation (S). The idea that the same situation can activate different motives is eloquently described in Murray and Holmes’ (2009) theory of interdependent minds. For example, a given situation may be that Annie is more dependent on Bob than Bob is dependent on Annie. Annie feels highly committed to Bob, but she wants to protect herself because he does not seem equally committed (see also Chapter 6). Annie must pursue the close connection she desires with Bob, but she also must balance that
motive with the motive to avoid pain and vulnerability. Assume Annie declares her deep love to Bob. Assume further that without any sarcasm, he replies, “I know . . .” and then changes the subject. She is likely to reduce her commitment, which underscores the difficulty of balancing between feeling committed and having to trust a partner to be sufficiently concerned with one’s emotional well-being. In similar future interactions, Annie must decide which motive will rule her behavior. Will she convey lower commitment, even if she implicitly desires a continued connection with Bob? If she overrides her implicit feelings and exerts too much effort to pull back, she may see the very relationship that she desires slip away.

In summary, the major ideas of this section are that interactions with close relationship partners are more than a series of exercises in invoking specific interaction rules (i.e., specific types of transformation of motivation that alter a pattern of interaction outcomes). They are contexts in which interpersonal and personal motives play out, such wanting the “right” type of connection with a partner, trying to avoid interpersonal rejection, seeking a sense of security in times of distress, garnering confidence to make the most of personal opportunities, and deriving a sense of who one is as reflected by the way one interacts with a partner. More generally, synchronizing behavior with a partner affords a sense of predictability and control over events (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Simpson, 2007), which can be pivotal to one’s personal well-being (Bowlby, 1973; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Plaks, Grant, & Dweck, 2005; Thompson, 1981).

Situation Structure Triggers Specific Person Factors

If person characteristics predict behavior—if individuals have tendencies to respond in particular ways over time—is the interdependence concept of “situation structure” necessary to predict interaction behavior? Even individuals who operate under extreme person factors (e.g.,
they have extremely low self-esteem or extremely high anxiety) note the type of situation at hand (i.e., situation structure) and often tailor their behavior accordingly. Other accounts of interdependence theory have detailed how specific situations activate specific person factors or characteristics (see Reis, 2008; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). The important point is that situational characteristics (S) constrain and direct the person factors that become activated, and the situation-directed person factors then act as the “input” in the processes that occur when each person interprets and evaluates the situation (see the top of Figure 3.1, box labeled “perceiving the situation”).

Different person factors are relevant for different types of situations, and some person factors will be irrelevant to the situation at hand. For example, when faced with a situation of unilateral dependence, implicit theories as described above (Knee et al., 2001) might add some variance in responses, but not as much as avoidant attachment or rejection sensitivity. Being relatively more dependent than the partner should activate concerns about control and vulnerability. People may register such situations more quickly and more strongly if their person factors trigger concerns about being taken advantage of or hurt by their partner, as is the case for individuals who are avoidantly attached, who generally distrust others, or who are high in rejection sensitivity. These individuals may protect themselves against dependence by creating distance from their partners and preempting situations that may require needing another person (Simpson et al., 1992). Being relatively less dependent than the partner may activate dominance and controlling behaviors. Avoidant individuals might respond by dismissing the other’s needs or inhibiting any inklings of compassion (Mikulincer, 2006; Simpson et al., 1992). Anxiously attached individuals may become overly concerned with being caring and responsive (i.e., hyperactivation of caregiving responses), doing too much too often and thus not really
addressing a partner’s needs (Mikulincer, 2006).

Situations of noncorrespondence may be particularly anxiety provoking for those who are low in self-esteem or anxiously attached. These situations may be interpreted as indicating that one is a “mismatch” with the partner or that the relationship is doomed to repeated conflicts (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kushe, 2002). Individuals who are more secure or higher in self-esteem frequently are less reactive to relationship conflicts (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Those who are low in agreeableness also may be strongly affected by situations of noncorrespondent outcomes, not because they fear how the situation will affect their relationship, but because they lack the social skills and positive disposition to respond in a prosocial manner (Graziano, Hair, & Finch, 1997).

In sum, this and the previous two sections describing various person factors have provided an interdependence analysis of person-by-situation interactions. These sections have described characteristics of situations that are relevant to predicting different types of interdependent interactions (i.e., situations structure as outlined in other accounts of interdependence theory; Kelley et al., 2003) and person factors likely to be salient in interactions involving close relationship partners. People interpret and evaluate a given interaction situation (i.e., the structure of the situation) through their own expectations and inferences (“knowledge structures”), perceptual and behavioral tendencies, and relevant motives (relational motives, self motives). Stated succinctly, person factors (A, B) combine with situation structure (S) in influencing interaction behavior (I; Kelley et al., 2003). The impact of person factors relative to the situation depends on the strength of each component (S, A, B).

Different Types of Mental Events that Combine Person Characteristics with Situation Structure
What is the cognitive/mental process by which people interpret and evaluate a given interaction situation (S)? Whereas the previous sections described relevant input factors for a person to interpret and evaluate an interaction situation, this section describes the process at work in the Figure 3.1 box “perceiving the situation.” Do all couple interactions and responses undergo a reasoned, elaborated process of transformation of motivation? No. The sections that follow examine whether the process of evaluating a situation occurs in a relatively automatic or a more elaborated way (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990), including how thoughts and feelings bundle together in triggering behavior.

People may engage in an elaborated, thought-mediated process, specifically taking into account personal, relational, and social considerations (i.e., transformation of motivation as originally proposed) and enacting what seems “right” and “doable” in the given situation (“A’s behavior” in Figure 3.1). But more often, responses become habitual between couple members (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997) and people enact behavior that occurs instantaneously, with little cognitive effort, sometimes outside of awareness, and in an involuntary or uncontrollable manner (cf. Bargh, 1996; Baldwin, 1992; Murray & Holmes, 2009; Murray et al., 2006; Scinta & Gable, 2007).

Couple members often develop automated responses to issues that once required greater attention and thought. For example, more committed individuals pay less attention to pictures of others who might threaten a relationship (e.g., highly attractive others; Maner, Gailliot, & Miller, 2009), but they likely would have paid more attention before being highly committed. Even perceptions of a relationship can become automated, as when individuals whose relationship is central to their self-concept are quick to perceive partner interactions in ways that support maintaining their relationship (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). Some
responses occur with no effort and even beyond awareness. For instance, women anticipating an
electric shock show less neural activation reflecting a stress response if they are holding their
husband’s hand than if they are holding a stranger’s hand, and this difference is more
pronounced if they have higher quality marriages (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006). Beliefs
about a partner can also operate subliminally (beyond awareness) and yet influence more explicit
evaluations of a partner (Murray et al., 2011).

Couples who have been together a long time often fall into routine ways of handling
situations that at one point caused conflict (e.g., coordinating schedules, doing chores); they
follow scripts that require little cognitive effort and are minimally monitored once initiated
(Baldwin, 1992). For example, doing household chores, caring for children and others,
entertaining guests or spending time with friends, deciding what to do together, or discussing
things that matter to one or both couple members all create interactions that matter to most
couples (e.g., no one relishes doing chores), but these interactions are likely to unfold in a
relatively automatic manner even if they once involved more elaborated transformation of
motivation. Their responses may follow social norms or instead invoke other automatic
responses guided by their own unique relationship history. These are automatic responses that
“bend” away from the response of a “generic” individual who has no history of considering the
partner or relationship.

Transformational activity, therefore, may become automated, yet it nonetheless sums up
elaborated transformation of motivation that has occurred in past interactions. As such, the
process of perceiving a situation (as shown in Figure 3.1) is saturated with current or past
transformational activity—automated, immediate, and with minimal awareness; or more
thoughtful, controlled, and deliberate. Only individuals who have no expectations or information
to guide their interaction—no relevant person factors, no experience with the situation—could adopt a completely asocial response as indicated by the line in the top part of Figure 3.1 that omits the process of perceiving the situation, which would be highly unlikely among couples.

When does transformation activity occur in a relatively automatic manner, suggesting a trace of past transformation processes, and when does an elaborated transformation of motivation occur? As shown in Figure 3.1 in the box labeled “perceiving the situation,” which mediates between two other boxes (the situation and Person A’s behavior), more attention toward and scrutiny of a situation will elicit more transformational activity, depicted by going deeper into the box in which Person A interprets and evaluates the situation; less attention and scrutiny are likely to elicit less transformational activity as the situation becomes encoded as routine and mundane and thus elicits behavior in a relatively automated way.

Cognition and affect are used as cues, signaling whether the situation as encoded requires more careful interpretation and scrutiny. Situations that strongly activate thoughts and emotions alert a person that there are consequences for one’s outcomes and needs (Berscheid, 1983), which triggers a more elaborated process of transformation of motivation. Cognition and affect are tightly intertwined in shaping interpretations and evaluations of an interaction situation (Fletcher & Overall, 2010; Kelley, 1984). For example, if Bob promised to clean the house and then failed to do it, Annie may instantly feel annoyed. Her annoyance will set off a “flag” to interpret the situation further. Annie may infer that Bob was too exhausted to do the housework, and her annoyance gives way to sympathy; she may infer that Bob omitted his housework to do something fun, leading her to feel fed up and bitter; or, she may infer that Bob no longer cares to help out with housework, leading her to feel remorse. Interpreting a partner’s behavior to stable selfishness will cause negative affect and responses (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992).
Person factors and situational characteristics affect how much attention, scrutiny, and elaboration occur when interpreting and evaluating a situation. Attachment anxiety can be a person factor that exemplifies this point. Individuals who are highly anxious (1) are faster to detect situations as being consequential for their relationship that might not be “picked up” or even interpreted as an issue by others, (2) feel something that harks back to distress in past situations, and thus (3) attribute their partner’s current action as being consequential and experience fear or anxiety (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997). Avoidant individuals should perceive these situations as less consequential, bypassing hyperactivation and attributional activity, and thus experience less fear or distress.

A person’s immediate psychological state also affects level of transformational activity. For example, less attention and scrutiny will occur if a person is cognitively depleted (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). In contrast, more attention, scrutiny, and elaboration occur when something intervenes to discourage self-interest or encourage a partner-focused perspective. People may think beyond self-interest when they are snapped out of a state of “mindlessness” that characterizes most of routine interaction (cf. Langer & Newman, 1979). Similarly, people who think beyond self-interest adopt more social considerations when they forget their sense of self (i.e., hypoegoic state; Leary, Adams, & Tate, 2006). Indeed, manipulations in psychology experiments that elicit a partner’s point of view in a conflict situation elicit transformation of motivation and reduce destructive interaction tendencies (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998); in a similar vein, individuals instructed to pray for their partner are more likely to feel good about sacrificing for him or her (Lambert, Fincham, & Stanley, in press). Couple therapies and interventions similarly can cause people to “snap” out of a mindless state and scrutinize interactions that adversely affect a relationship. Individuals become particularly aware of their interaction motives
when they seek change in their relationship, by means of professional guidance, self-help resources, or self-generated efforts. Simply identifying harmful interactions may cause people to think about and monitor whether their actions are consistent with what they intend for their relationship. When one or both couple members try to redirect their relationship, both become more likely to interrupt automatic responses and engage in transformational processing.

Just as person factors affect the level of transformational activity, so, too, does the interaction situation. Situations that involve greater dependence are more consequential—that is, they stand to have a greater impact on a person (positive or negative) and thus involve higher stakes. These situations, all things being equal, elicit more attention, scrutiny, elaboration, and attributional activity. Indeed, the notion of dependence is that situations have greater impact on one’s experiences.

Situations that violate one’s expectations by definition are consequential—they produce a greater consequence than had been expected and thus elicit more scrutiny. Violating the expectations of established couples by interrupting routine ways of interacting also elicits more affect and interpretational activity (Berscheid, 1983; Kelley, 1984). Similarly, unfamiliar situations elicit transformation activity. For example, individuals in relationships that are not yet established frequently engage in increased cognitive activity (Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer, & Heron, 1987). Partners just beginning to date have not developed specific expectations about each other and may not be sure what awaits them, creating high-stake situations.

To summarize, affective and cognitive activity signal whether one is “crossing a line” into a consequential situation that needs to be understood better. Situations that elicit more attention, affect, or inferential activity also elicit more transformational activity, causing person and motivational factors to come into play. When a person confronts a situation that is more
consequential (the stakes are high or could be high), the process of interpreting and evaluating the situation will elicit greater transformation activity. In Figure 3.1, the link between the interaction situation (S) and Person A’s behavior bends lower into the box and away from a process of no social consideration (the dotted line above the box indicating a generic, asocial interpretation); transformational activity yields a response that “makes sense” with a particular partner. In contrast, situations that are less consequential will be filtered through Person A’s factors in an automated way, quickly passing through the interpretation and evaluation process without bending deeper into transformational activity.

Person A’s Behavior and Person B’s Behavior

Some situations and person factors will combine to elicit extensive transformational activity, and others will combine in ways that reveal only traces of past interaction experiences. Regardless of whether the mental process is elaborate or automated, each interaction partner (Person A and Person B) will engage in overt behavior, which is a necessary condition for interaction. The process so far has been described from the vantage point of Person A, who confronts the interaction situation and then interprets and evaluates the situation though the filter of her person factors (e.g., Annie’s: expectations about the situation, her immediate psychological state, her history in relationships in general, her personality). But Person A (Annie) is also directly influenced by Person B (Bob), as the situation activates her expectations about B, her relationship history with B, and her motives for interactions with B. Thus, simply adopting the vantage point of Person A involves taking into account A’s interdependence with B.

Interdependence, however, runs even deeper than the level of perceptions, expectations, and desired motives (i.e., Person A’s vantage point): Interdependence also occurs in that each person’s behavior directly affects the other. Annie’s overt behavior will adjust the interaction
situation that Bob confronts, which will activate specific person factors in Bob and cause a
process in Bob parallel to the one described above for Annie (see Figure 3.1, the arrow
connecting Person A’s behavior to Person B’s behavior). Bob’s behavior (Person B’s behavior),
in turn, will elicit additional interpretational and evaluative processes in Annie (Person A), as
described in the next section.

Perceiving (Registering, Evaluating) the Partner’s Behavior

How does a partner’s behavior affect each person? How are interaction outcomes
experienced and evaluated? How do specific interaction experiences and evaluations shape the
broader course of a relationship? This section addresses these questions and describes the lower
half of Figure 3.1, focused on perceiving a partner’s behavior.

Interpreting and Evaluating Immediate Outcomes

Two individuals interacting with each other experience outcomes in an automated way,
involving minimal thought and effort. Immediate outcomes are what a person experiences at
“face value” as a direct and visceral result of the partner’s actions, without considering broader
implications of the partner’s behavior (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Partner actions become events
that are perceptually registered as varying in valence (positive versus negative impact) and in
strength of effect (strong versus weak impact). Interactions that are completely inconsequential
elicit weak or neutral outcomes; others cause stronger experiences. In perceiving a partner’s
behavior (see Figure 3.1), Person A instantly experiences immediate outcomes as he or she
registers Person B’s behavior,

Shortly after immediate outcomes are experienced, they undergo an evaluation stage.
Early accounts in interdependence theory implied that outcomes are evaluated in a deliberate,
thoughtful manner to register the immediate impact of outcomes as well as their broader meaning
(Kelley, 1979). It was suggested that outcomes are appraised against expectations for how a partner should behave in the interaction (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). These expectations form a standard referred to as one’s comparison level (CL), reflecting what is acceptable in the relationship. Outcomes that are judged as exceeding one’s standard of acceptability will elicit high satisfaction with the interaction, whereas outcomes that fall short of one’s comparison level elicit low satisfaction. It was also suggested that interaction outcomes are evaluated against a second standard (CLalt), namely the outcomes expected if one were not in the relationship and instead with another partner or alone (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Not all partner interactions, however, trigger a deliberate or thoughtful evaluation of outcomes. Some evaluations operate at an implicit level (Murray et al., 2010; Scinta & Gable, 2007), and yet other interactions are uneventful and yield neutral outcomes. The process of evaluating outcomes, therefore, likely unfolds in stages. A person may register a partner’s behavior and experience immediate outcomes that vary along a negative-neutral-positive affective continuum, and the affective experience indeed may be defined by one’s standards of what is considered acceptable behavior from a partner.

In addition to an immediate affective experience, however, a second process likely occurs in which outcomes are filtered and evaluated for important meaning. Uneventful interactions quickly pass through the process of perceiving the partner’s behavior, depicted in the bottom half of Figure 3.1. In this case, the outcomes experienced do not flag the need for more conscious thought or evaluation. In Figure 3.1, immediate outcomes that are registered as being inconsequential will be followed by exiting the interaction (downward arrow, labeled “A and B exit interaction”), or by continuing the interaction (arrow from perceiving the partner’s behavior that returns to the top half of the figure and connects back to the interaction situation). However,
when the automatic process of registering immediate outcomes returns a signal of “notice this” (i.e., they are consequential), a person becomes more likely to reflect on the partner’s behavior for broader meaning (i.e., in Figure 3.1, the process of perceiving the partner behavior goes deeper into the box).

Outcomes may signal the need for thought when the partner’s motives and dispositions do not align with one’s own (e.g., “We don’t seem to be on the same page here”). When a partner is perceived to exhibit too much or too little commitment relative to one’s own commitment, the partner’s actions are registered as consequential (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999; Murray & Holmes, 2009). Outcomes also signal the need for thought when people interpret a partner’s behavior as being a particularly noticeable or dramatic departure from expectations (e.g., feeling bad, “weird,” surprised, thrilled, elated), or if they suggest that better outcomes would be obtained elsewhere, as suggested by one’s CLalt standard.

In short, similar factors that activate transformational activity—the process that expresses one’s own interaction motives, as depicted along the top of Figure 3.1 in perceiving the situation—are likely to activate a more thoughtful analysis of the partner’s motives, as depicted along the bottom of Figure 3.1 in perceiving the partner’s behavior. Holmes and Rempel (1989) used the term “diagnostic situations” to describe situations that strongly affect one or both partners because the partner’s behavior in the situation conveys—or is “diagnostic of”—where things stand with the partner and where things may be headed for the relationship. People are attune to what a partner is willing and able to do, and they diagnose the state and fate of their relationships accordingly (although see Agnew et al., 2001, for the superior ability of females’ friends in diagnosing the future of a relationship).

Meaning Analysis
Inferences and affect again become bundled together to signal the need to reflect on, and make sense of, the broader meaning of a partner’s behavior (his or her motives for the relationship). This process of “meaning analysis” (see Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997) has its roots in Kelley and Thibaut’s notion that outcomes are evaluated on a dual basis: Beyond immediate pleasure and displeasure (i.e., the immediate impact, or face value, of outcomes), each person also experiences a sense of pleasure or displeasure from the broader or symbolic implications of the partner’s behavior (Holmes, 1981; Kelley, 1979). Being insulted, for instance, is aversive at an immediate level because it violates norms of civility regardless of the source, but it is more painful at a symbolic level when it comes from a relationship partner than from a stranger. When Annie offers to do household chores so that Bob can pursue a personal project, her immediate interaction outcomes of doing the household tasks are fixed. However, her broader experience of the interaction will vary depending on whether Bob acknowledges and appreciates her sacrifice.

Broader inferences about a partner’s motives and dispositions follow general attribution rules.3 For example, a woman who is nice to everyone does not convey much when she is nice to her partner, but a woman who is hostile toward everyone conveys having a relationship-enhancing motive when she is uniquely nice to her partner. People enter interactions with expectations about how the partner will act, as captured by their standards of comparison (CL and CLalt). Over time and with additional exposure to a partner, expectations about a partner become affirmed or corrected as they shape broader inferences about the partner’s relationship.

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3 Behavior that is unique to a person causes an attribution of a stable person characteristic. Similarly, when a particular person behaves differently on a particular occasion, the partner infers that something about the situation caused the person’s behavior or the person’s stable characteristics are shifting. More meaning is drawn from actions that depart more greatly from expectations (Holmes, 2002; Kelley, 1983).
motives (e.g., the partner is selfish, the partner is generous, the partner is concerned with protecting himself from feeling vulnerable). Meaning analysis is thus a process of inferring the partner’s person factors. Just as one’s own evaluation of the situation and resulting transformational activity communicate something about one’s own dispositions and motives, so, too, does inferring the partner’s transformational activity communicate something about the partner’s dispositions and motives. In this manner, generalized impressions about a partner are grounded in inferences about specific interactions.

Summary

If a partner’s behavior is relatively inconsequential, the interaction will continue, as indicated in Figure 3.1 by an arrow connecting “perceiving the partner’s behavior” along the bottom back up to box labeled “interaction situation.” Instead, if the interaction seems particularly consequential, it will undergo substantial evaluation, bending deep into the process of perceiving the partner’s behavior. As a result of deep evaluation, individuals may revise their relationship, indicated in Figure 3.1 by an arrow connecting the process of perceiving the partner’s behavior to adaptation processes.

Adaptation Processes

The process of inferring meaning in a partner’s behavior may have several consequences for a person and for the relationship; three such consequences are described below. As people form impressions about a partner’s dispositions and motives, these impressions tend to resist change (Carlston & Skrowonski, 2005) and are altered only when additional interaction information is sufficiently strong to override previous inferences. The attributions that individuals make about their partner during interactions can become directly tied to the extended quality of the relationship (Fletcher & Thomas, 2000; Miller & Bradbury, 1995).
Calibrating One’s Own Person Factors

Drawing broader meaning from a partner’s behavior can cause a person to recalibrate his or her own characteristics in adaptive ways. Individuals may reflect on the meaning of their own behavior and infer things about themselves. Individuals also infer things about themselves based on their perceptions of their partner’s behavior. For example, a person is more likely to believe he or she is not a worthy partner upon perceiving that the partner’s commitment is wavering (Murray et al., 2003). In another case, a person may feel happy and motivated to pursue desired goals upon perceiving that the partner is supportive of these goals (Rusbult et al., 2009). More generally, as proposed by attachment theory, inferring that a close other is responsive to one’s needs in times of distress will minimize future anxiety and detachment (see Chapter 4). Thus, general expectations about others and one’s self have origins in interpersonal interactions (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

Drawing broader meaning from a partner’s behavior also causes a person to calibrate his or her expectations about the partner in particular. For example, a couple may face a common diagnostic situation, one of unilateral dependence (i.e., one needs the partner to enact a particular response, or would greatly benefit from it). Assume Annie and Bob now are in a different situation, in which they run into Charlie, an acquaintance of Bob, who has been spreading rumors about Bob behind his back. If Annie understands the situation and enacts the needed response—for instance, if she is purposely aloof toward Charlie—Bob will infer that Annie was responsive when it really mattered to him. If Bob already believes that Annie is responsive to his needs, the inference from that specific interaction will be assimilated into his global expectation of her responsiveness; if Bob had doubted Annie’s responsiveness, the specific interaction may cause Bob to shift toward anticipating greater responsiveness by Annie.
If, instead, Annie is “chummy” with backstabbing Charlie, this too may cause Bob to reevaluate and adjust his global expectation about Annie and assume she does not have his interests at heart. People do indeed notice when a partner fails to stand up for or defend them in situations when it matters most (when one truly needs the partner to “back me up”); a partner’s failed responsiveness feels bad, regardless of whether the partner deliberately fails to act or does not even notice that the situation is diagnostic. The immediate negative affect (i.e., immediate negative outcome) may eventually fade, but the lesson learned will not: The partner is someone who cannot be trusted to act in one’s interests. Either way, Bob’s interpretation and evaluation of Annie’s behavior will cause him to engage in an adaptive process of calibrating his expectations (a person factor), which will affect how he interacts in future situations (as depicted in Figure 3.1). Murray and Holmes (2009) describe in detail the adaptive and flexible process by which general expectations regulate specific interaction motives.

Inferring that a partner is responsive can trigger thoughts and motives that help a relationship survive and thrive (Reis et al., 2004; Rusbult et al., 2009; Simpson, 2007). Partner responsiveness during moments of sharing good news can be a gold mine for enhancing a relationship, as when a partner capitalizes on good news by being supportive and enthusiastic (Reis et al., 2010). Other positive inferences also benefit relationships, even after many years of marriage. For example, being dazzled or entertained by a longtime partner—and knowing this was specifically the partner’s efforts—can (1) affirm the feeling of being appropriately matched, (2) support a general expectation that a satisfying relationship remains possible, and (3) activate the motive to connect even more with the partner (Aron & Aron, 1986; Murray & Holmes, 2009).

Drawing negative inferences about the partner’s behavior in specific interactions also
leads to adjusting generalized expectations. A partner who fails to do something she or he promised will elicit dissatisfying immediate outcomes; when this happens repeatedly, the immediate negative outcomes transform into disappointment and feeling an absence of care and respect from the partner. As illustrated using Figure 3.1, the first time Person B fails to follow through on a promised behavior, Person A may interpret Person B’s behavior as an isolated incident and proceed with the interaction (the arrow returns back up to a new loop of Person A perceiving the situation). But when Person B does this time and again, Person A’s evaluation of Person B’s behavior triggers a more generalized expectation of Person B as being uncaring.

Using Discretion in Reevaluating a Relationship

A second process of adaptation concerns knowing when to adjust general expectations and motives, based on what has occurred in specific interactions (see Figure 3.1). Perceiving a partner’s behavior may activate judgment and discretion over whether it makes sense to reevaluate a relationship.

When is it reasonable to reevaluate a relationship? One approach might be to capitalize on positive partner behavior whenever it occurs and use it to bolster esteem for a partner and positive evaluations. Positive inferences and expectations can keep a relationship “afloat” during mundane or even aversive moments. Is this adaptive? Using only positive partner inferences and discarding negative inferences runs the risk of overlooking fatal flaws in a relationship. For example, people who make charitable inferences when a partner enacts abusive behavior may inadvertently sustain a relationship that eventually is doomed to fail (Arriaga & Capezza, 2010). Charitable attributions of abusive partner behavior may keep a relationship intact in the short term, but it becomes maladaptive to the person being abused.

Another approach might be to maintain real-time accuracy of where things stand by
repeatedly revising one’s evaluation of a relationship. Just as ignoring abuse may be maladaptive, so, too, is being too quick to draw general inferences about specific partner behaviors (positive or negative). A hallmark of relationship distress is to closely monitor a partner’s behavior during interactions for clues of broader meaning (Jacobson, Follette, & McDonald, 1982). Such vigilance occurs more among individuals who are anxiously attached (Campbell et al., 2005), sensitive to interpersonal rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996), highly neurotic (Bolger & Schilling, 1991), or low in self-esteem (Murray et al., 2006). These couple members are more likely to reflect on the interaction experience and infuse their immediate outcomes with broader negative implications. Relationships are more likely to last when momentary feelings, broader inferences about the partner, and general evaluations of a relationship operate in relatively independent psychological planes (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Kelley, 1983), so long as person does not ignore a partner’s repeatedly harmful behavior.

Yoking general evaluations of a relationship (i.e., adjusting one’s “person factors”) to inferences made from specific interactions should be done judiciously. The most adaptive process may be to take an active approach when capitalizing on positive moments, using them to build a strong foundation, and to take a more passive approach when drawing meaning from more negative moments. Couples may “fuel up” on positive feelings during satisfying interactions, so as to sustain them during challenging moments. Relationships may survive challenges better when couple members disconnect momentary ups and downs from broader and stable evaluations of their relationship (Arriaga, 2001; Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Jacobson et al., 1982). Yet each partner also must not lose sight of what makes relationships a source of relational and personal well-being, such as having a partner who promotes one’s positive self-concept, provides support, is caring in times of needs, and is capable of being relationship
Managing and Selecting Future Situations

A third process of adaptation occurs in interactions that have strong consequences (good or bad) for a relationship. People seek out situations that bring out the best in their relationship and avoid situations that wreak havoc of them.

Even bad situations that are unavoidable can provide opportunities to strengthen a relationship if the situation is managed appropriately (see Simpson, 2007). A previous section provided an example of a conflict of interest situation (i.e., noncorrespondent outcomes), in which Annie sacrificed time she would have had for a personal project to do one of Bob’s household tasks, allowing him to pursue his own personal project. His response will direct her meaning analysis and her efforts to seek or avoid similar situations in the future. If he appreciates her action, she becomes more likely to sacrifice for him again, especially if she is highly committed and recognizes how greatly he benefits from her help. If, on the other hand, he fails to acknowledge that she has sacrificed for him, she will likely avoid offering to help in the future and possibly even avoid discussing the topic of household tasks and personal projects. Adaptation, therefore, relies on converting costly situations into relationship successes—Annie may find ways to activate Bob’s appreciation for her offer without directly asking for his thanks. If it is not possible to convert the situation into something beneficial, adaptation involves avoiding the situation in the future. Appropriately managing conflict of interest situations can make or break a relationship (Rusbult et al., 1991; Van Lange et al., 1997).

Couples also can thrive by seeking and managing situations that yield strong positive outcomes. For example, couple members who have interactions in which each brings out the best in the other—in which a partner elicits the type of person one ideally wants to be—are likely to
seek out similar interactions to repeat these positive experiences (Murray et al., 2006; Rusbult et al., 2009). Situations in which partners do little to bring out the best in the other are missed opportunities for positive adaptation.

In Figure 3.1, situations in which the partner’s behavior is highly consequential will likely trigger efforts to select for (or against) that situation in the future. This is represented in Figure 3.1 by an arrow connecting the box labeled “adaptation processes” back up to the box labeled “interaction situation.” This means that a couple’s interaction history strongly affects the type of interaction situations they will confront together in the future. Some couples will adapt by creating situations that work for them, whereas others will flounder and fail when they cannot create favorable situations or manage threatening situations.

Summary

Experiencing and evaluating outcomes can trigger changes that work well for couples (i.e., adaptations). Person factors (relationship motives and more stable dispositions) shift and realign in adaptive ways, and the revised person factors then become applied in future interactions. Adaptation occurs when information gleaned from interactions is used judiciously in calibrating motives and managing the future situations one confronts. Adaptations may occur based on a single interaction, but they often occur from an iterative and corrective process of reflecting on interactions with a partner over time. Adaptations may take place in the moment, but they often occur through reflection after an interaction has ended (depicted in Figure 3.1 by a link between exiting the interaction and adaptation processes).

Putting It All Together

This chapter has provided a contemporary interdependence account of the causes and consequences of relationship interactions. The chapter has proposed a model of interaction
(depicted in Figure 3.1) as a guide for contextualizing different processes and levels of analysis that define relationship interactions. Interdependence theory makes several key propositions about the causes of interaction behavior. Five summary points are provided here.

1. Situation structure matters, and situations vary. Not all situations activate and allow for the expression of things that matter to people; specific situations activate specific types of goals and concerns. When presented with a situation, people process what is at stake and what is possible—that is, what the situation “affords” (Holmes, 2004; Kelley et al., 2003; Reis, 2008; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). Reis (2008) has made a strong case for the importance of social situations and, more precisely, for identifying abstract, generalizable features of interaction situations that define everyday experiences. The abstract features identified by interdependence theory are not the only features that might be defined; they focus on patterns and variations in dependence. The broader point, as argued elsewhere (Holmes, 2004; Kelley, Holmes, Kerr, Reis, Rusbult, & Van Lange, 2003; Reis, 2008; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008), is that having theories that identify abstract features of situations makes it possible to understand how certain situations are alike or distinct (e.g., their characteristics, shared causes, likely and predicted responses, and likely evaluations).

2. People vary and do not react to situations in static or uniform ways. Were reactions static, a given situation would cause the same behavior in everyone. The situation plays a causal role in interaction, but behavior is only partly attributable to the specific properties of a given situation; it is also attributable to what a person makes of the given situation. As Kelley suggested, “. . . the behavior cannot be
explained simply by the ‘psychophysical’ or given situation, but requires an attribution to a ‘social person’” (Kelley et al., 2003, p. 75). The social person brings to bear individual psychological characteristics, social and cultural characteristics, and relationship-specific characteristics referred to here as person factors.

3. A person may perceive a situation merely by encoding enough information to provide a relatively routine or automatic response, or by engaging in a more thoughtful transformation of motivation. Individuals do not initiate relationship interactions by mentally activating a blank slate; instead, they activate relevant schemas and expectations, norms and knowledge structures, tendencies and motives. As such, transformational activity that occurs while perceiving a situation can be automated, immediate, and with minimal awareness, or more thoughtful, controlled, and deliberate. Transformational activity directs behavior.

4. The process of perceiving a partner’s behavior has similarities with the process of perceiving the initial situation. Perceiving a situation begins by filtering situation structure through one’s person factors. Similarly, evaluating the partner’s behavior begins by filtering immediate outcomes through a meaning detection process. Not all partner behaviors cause a person to reflect on broader meaning and infer partner motives. Just as situations may or may not elicit elaborate transformation activity, immediate outcomes may or may not undergo broader meaning analysis. Person factors that influence how a situation is perceived and evaluated also influence how the partner’s behavior is registered and evaluated (e.g., interpersonal expectations, one’s current psychological state). Consequential
situations trigger more elaborate transformational activity; similarly, consequential and/or diagnostic partner behavior triggers more a more elaborated perceptual and interpretational process.

There also may be differences in the cognitive processes that take place as one initially confronts and makes sense of an interaction situation versus how one interprets the partner’s behavior after interaction has commenced. In general terms, the upper part of Figure 3.1 is more focused on one’s own motives and chronic perceptions that generalize across interaction situations. These are processes focused on the self-in-relationship context, as exemplified by the research traditions on own commitment, closeness, and love, and by research on attachment and other individual differences. The bottom portion of Figure 3.1 is more focused on inferences about the partner-in-relationship, as exemplified by the research traditions on trust and partner responsiveness.

5. A final summary point is that the various perceptual processes that unfold during interaction usually occur in a synchronized, contingent manner. Person A’s perception of the situation will affect her behavior, which will affect Person B’s outcomes and his interpretation of Person A’s behavior, which in turn affects Person A’s outcomes and her interpretation of Person B’s behavior, and so on. Each person behaves in the manner each sees fitting in the moment, which may or may not be adaptive for the relationship or the self over the long run. Over time, interaction directs the course of the relationship in ways that either reinforce or erode it, and that strengthen or undermine each partner.

Promising Directions for Future Research
Figure 3.1 integrates research on varied topics to model interaction and explains how specific interactions affect relationships. As such, Figure 3.1 provides a roadmap for situating new research on close relationships, suggesting how distinct topics of study and different ways of examining relationships (i.e., different levels of analysis) may fit together. New research should continue to work on integrating what is known about the causes and consequences of relationship interactions. For example, research on rejection sensitivity, attachment insecurity, and low self-esteem shows that each are distinct variables, but they are person factors likely be activated by similar situational characteristics, such as situations that make a person feel vulnerable. Without compromising a precise understanding of the differences between these variables, one can map these variables onto Figure 3.1 and understand their common situational causes, as well as common consequences for interaction (e.g., inappropriate responses to situations that call for greater closeness). Situating new research into the processes depicted in Figure 3.1 is an exercise in integrating novel ideas and well-worn principles that is likely to have theoretical benefits by providing rigorous and precise explanations.

A second promising direction for future research is to provide ever more precise accounts of the causes of relationship interactions. Figure 3.1 indicates that specific situational characteristics trigger specific person factors and motivational processes, which in turn cause behavior in interactions. Essentially, the key elements to relationship interactions are each partner’s motivation and ability (as captured through the person factors of each partner) combined with a couple’s opportunities (as captured by situational characteristics and person factors of the other partner). But this description falls short of a precise account of causal factors. The origins of specific interaction patterns are difficult to identify and model. Lessons from developmental psychology suggest that to identify the cause of a phenomenon, one should try to
change the phenomenon. Trying to change relationships, however, raises ethical and practical issues. Instead, recent research has modeled causes of relationship processes by administering specific experimental procedures or measuring specific interaction patterns at one point in time, and then measuring changes in more general variables (e.g., trust, commitment, satisfaction) in the same couples over a broader timeframe. New research following this recent trend will likely yield better and more precise explanations of causes of relationship interactions.

Another promising direction for future research is to examine not only how specific interactions affect relationship well-being but also how they affect each partner’s individual well-being. Pro-relationship motives and interaction tendencies by definition are thoughts and actions that make a relationship more likely to last. What is good for the relationship, however, may not always be good for each partner. For example, when a person forgives a partner for abusive behavior, the effect may be to save the relationship but also to lower the person’s sense of self-worth. Existing research has shown that interactions benefiting a relationship can also benefit individuals (Rusbult et al., 2009). But this may not always be the case (see Arriaga & Capezza, 2010) as relationships age; a couple’s relationship history may yield behavior tendencies that sustain a close bond but damage individual partners.

The need for more research to identify causes and consequences of couple interactions highlights the importance of studying ongoing relationships, rather than interactions among strangers. Couple interactions may operate under the norms and expectations that guide social interactions among strangers. But couple dynamics also operate under tailored expectations and tendencies that reflect an idiosyncratic relationship history. A couple’s history shapes and moderates their interactions in ways that may stray from normative interactions. In this respect, relationships research provides an exercise in studying psychological processes that are
interesting precisely because they are not context free, as also occurs with cross-cultural research; lessons of how a relationship history changes an otherwise typical process (akin to how cultural practices affect behavior) can be exported to other social disciplines in which processes often may be assumed to be more general than the actually are.

Conclusion

Interaction is the centerpiece of interdependence theory. Understanding how close relationship partners influence each other is a central legacy of interdependence theory that has had a profound effect on how relationships are studied (Fletcher & Overall, 2010; Simpson & Winterheld, 2012). Research on relationships rests on a core assumption that interdependence is fundamental to social life. The take-home message of interdependence theory is twofold: (1) studying interaction is crucial to understanding social behavior, and (2) an analysis of interaction is incomplete without accounting for the way individuals affect each other. In a 1983 book titled Close Relationships (Kelley et al., 1983), the authors described ways that interdependence affects a multitude of interpersonal processes (e.g., power dynamics, emotional experiences). Three decades after publication of that book, interdependence theory concepts continue to provide a framework for understanding interaction among relationship partners. Interdependence theory has been central to understanding intimate relationships, which are, after all, the contexts in which people form deep and intimate connections with others, seek general security and develop their sense of self, and ensure evolutionary success.

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Figure 3.1.

Interaction and adaptation.
A and B enter interaction

Interaction situation (situation structure, S)

Perceiving the situation
Person A interprets & evaluates the situation (encoding and framing the situation, S)

A's behavior (Person A enacts an overt response)

Adaptation processes
1. Recalibrating own person factors.
2. Using discretion in reevaluating relationship.
3. Managing and selecting future situations with partner.

Person A adapts

Perceiving the partner's behavior
Person A registers Person B's behavior (immediate outcomes)
Person A evaluates Person B's behavior (meaning analysis)

B's behavior (Person B enacts an overt response following a process parallel to Person A)

A and B exit interaction

(generic, asocial response)
Figure 3.2.

Hypothetical interaction of a married couple.