Mapping Social Psychology Series
Series Editor: Tony Manstead

RELATING TO OTHERS

The area of research on personal relationships has had an almost apocalyptic growth in the last ten years and this book introduces students to the most recent work. Using his experience as Editor of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships and the Wiley Handbook of Personal Relationships, Steve Duck has been able to overview the field by tracing the developments of recent research beyond the traditional experimental laboratory work on attraction to strangers and including the most up-to-date work by a range of authors. He emphasizes and delineates the important roles of relationships in our everyday personal lives and brings together some of the most exciting work by key scholars in the discipline.

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and disorderly (where one of the above three disengagements was not successfully accomplished by at least one of the partners). This latter category ranged from cases where one of both partners sincerely and deeply wished that the divorce had not happened and would still like to be married to their former spouse, to cases where the two partners were clear that they no longer loved each other or could not stand the perpetual conflict in the marriage, but nevertheless still wanted to be in the marital role — to be “a husband” or “a wife,” to share the dreams and the “walking off into the sunset together.” It is clear from this research that there are many types of divorces, not just one, and that the process of divorcing differs across divorces (see Further reading for more detail).

A final point to bear in mind is that people’s reflections on their relationships affect their approach to break-up (see Burnett et al. 1987). In an intriguing study by Harvey et al. (1986), it was found that people have particularly vivid “flashbulb” memories of past loves and that the memories of those loves serve as important benchmarks in people’s constructions of, and approaches to, their lives, and probably their future relationships. Break-up today sets the scene for tomorrow’s relationships: the degree of eagerness with which they are sought, the amount of wariness with which they are approached, and the extent to which the person specifically watches out for or guards against particular features of the new relationship.

In brief, past break-ups tune up our awareness of what can go wrong or of which partners do not work for us; we try to learn from that and avoid the problem next time.

So, as we move on to reflecting about the nature of the extended process of dissolution of relationships, we should not forget that a person’s way of leaving a relationship can set the scene for beliefs about future relationships.

A model of dissolution

All of the above considerations help us to move toward a particular overview of the dissolution of relationships, first outlined in Duck 1982a; 1982b). This approach sees relationship dissolution as composed of several different but connected phases, each of which directs a person’s thoughts, actions, and interpersonal communications in characteristic ways. It takes account of the fact that a person feels uneasy about a relationship before he or she talks to the partner about it, that there are other persons in a network who contribute to a couple’s consideration of break-up, and that a major concern for people is that they leave relationships with some feeling that they have acted correctly or in a manner justified by the circumstances they faced or the people they dealt with (see Figure 6.1).

The intrapsychic phase

We frequently moan about people — our partner, boss, and colleagues included. It seems that that is a regular part of life, not something special and unusual; but it is sometimes a prelude to a break-up. In reviewing the literature on conflict and break-up (Duck 1982a) it became clear to me that there is a phase at which individuals reflect on their relationship and prepare a mental list of its deficiencies, along with those of the partner. At such a phase the exchange balance in a relationship might be assessed (cf. Chapter 5) but that is not really an automatic cause of the break-up of relationships, as some commentators appear to suggest (Huesmann and Levinger 1976). The moaning or complaining phase of breakdown is primarily an internal phase with little outward show, and a person could decide to do nothing on the basis of the arrayed deficiencies. This could be because of a wish to try to put things right, or because of a preference to talk it through with the partner (or maybe to wait for a suitable alternative relationship), or because of inertia, lack of will power, or lack of an appropriate opportunity or mechanism. Whichever is true, break-up is not an inexorable consequence of an imbalance in the equity of a relationship.

At the point where the complaints build up to a measure beyond a certain threshold, I suspect that the person would begin to communicate the problem indirectly at first, by means of hints or “needlings” (Harre 1977). There is some evidence (Duck 1982a; 1982b) that disaffected partners first start to communicate their dissatisfaction this way and then begin a “talking to a wall” style of communication that involves them expressing their views about the partner to someone who provides the necessary ear, but who is a third party, either someone neutral and relatively anonymous (such as a bar server or a stranger on the train), or one who does not know the partner well and will not rush off and relay the information to him or her. At this stage of breakdown, the person is really searching for some self-justification as opposed to any real action.
The dyadic phase

Once a person feels there are strong enough complaints and grounds for taking things up with the partner, something more has to be done. It is not just a question of weighing up the rewards and costs of a relationship, deciding one does not come out ahead, and then “leaving.” Leaving sounds easy if you say it fast, but it actually involves real confrontations, real arguments, real pain, real attempts at reconciliation, and real resolution. After the intrapsychic phase, then, comes the interpersonal mess. A partner has to be argued with!

It is unlikely, even if they were initially attracted to each other by their similarities, that two people will take the same view of their relationship (Duck and Sants 1983) and it is particularly likely that, when the relationship is to be carved limb from limb, the two partners will disagree about the attribution of responsibility for the breakdown. Any revelation of the dissatisfactions mulled over in the intrapsychic phase is likely to cause a certain amount of shock and hurt to the injured party. In turn, it is probable that a person with a problem to discuss will also experience pain, in that if the problem is clearly bad enough to cause the termination of the relationship, that process must be begun; while it is acknowledged but resolvable, both partners may feel the distress of knowing that things are not right for one another.

These are some of the reasons, I believe, why research consistently shows oscillation, uncertainty, hesitation, and infirmity of purpose in partners at this point of a break-up (Altman and Taylor 1973; Altman et al. 1981; Weiss 1975). People can often be resentful in a relationship and yet be unwilling to finish it. Most of us know that it is possible to be deeply in love with someone whose faults we nevertheless recognize and we all know that it is possible to be unhappy in such a relationship without the love ebbing away. Oscillations and weakening of resolve seem to me to be perfectly human, but none the more enjoyable for that (Duck 1982a). As partners face up to the consequences of deciding between “break it off” and “try to repair it,” they will inevitably confront their doubts and anguish, and will come into conflict with one another — conflict which has to be dealt with in addition to other pains. Even if they decide to renegotiate the form of the relationship, that has its problems and unpleasant traps (Lee 1984), and the whole dyadic phase is full of guilt, hostility, resentment, stress, and a negative communicative style (Duck 1982a; 1982b; Noller 1985).
The social phase

After the partners have done some fighting — and probably even while it is still in progress — there is an important unseen element to break-up: getting the support of the surrounding network of friends, relatives, and acquaintances. It is not satisfactory merely to leave a relationship: it is important to feel justified in leaving. For this reason both partners consult friends (and relatives) for advice on the problem and for extra perspectives on the partner and their own actions (LaGaipa 1982). The network becomes involved in relationships that are breaking up and has views about them as they spoil (G. J. McCall 1982). It also gives support to the fighting partners, takes sides, pronounces verdicts on guilt and blame, and helps to seal the occurrence of the break-up by sanctioning the dissolution (the most obvious example being a courtroom where a divorce decree is pronounced).

The notion that this phase is simply a barrier to relationship dissolution (Levinger 1979) is important but only partly true and misses the point that there are really two roles that the social network serves in the context of break-up. Yes, the social network probably exerts pressure on a couple to stay together — particularly at the start of a dissolution — and the fear of what parents or neighbors may think could well act as a barrier to some couples’ splitting up (Duck 1982a; 1982b). However, the network also serves a role that facilitates a break-up once the couple seems to be moving toward one. Networks are distributors of gossip (LaGaipa 1982) and upholders of social norms (G. J. McCall 1982). They also serve an important role in recovery from relationship break-up, by supporting individuals when it has occurred (Harvey et al. 1986). Obviously, then, at this point network members do not act as a barrier to break-up, since they actually help people to achieve it.

The grave dressing phase

Getting over a break-up involves not only leaving the relationship — and in some cases dividing up the household, the property, and the children’s access time — but also a realignment of feelings about the relationship, the partner, and the break-up. As LaGaipa (1982) has shown, it is a necessary part of leaving a relationship that each person exits with a reputation for relationship reliability still intact. That is to say, in leaving, a person should not acquire a reputation for untrustworthiness or disloyalty, since that would poison the possibility of future relationships. For this reason, for reasons of self-justification, and for the sake of creating an acceptable perspective on the relationship, partners who split up do a lot of “grave dressing”: the relationship is dead and buried so they start to erect a tablet that says important things about its life and death. This tablet takes the form of a good, credible, socially acceptable version of the life of the relationship and the reasons for its death. As Weber (1983) reports, this very often takes the form of a story indicating that the relationship had a fatal flaw right from the start, that the person worked hard to ignore or correct that flaw but, despite commendable efforts, failed: so the relationship had to die. While a primary role of such stories is this sort of face-saving, it is also clear that the grave-dressing phase serves to keep some memories of the relationship alive and to “justify” the original commitment to the ex-partner (Baxter 1987). Such stories are an integral and important part of the psychology of ending relationships and cannot be written off as inconsequential. By helping the person to get over the break-up they are immensely significant in preparing the person for future relationships as well as helping them out of old ones.

In the field of research on marital and family problems, one growing concern is with “postmarital relationships”, “remarital relationships,” and family reorganization after divorce. Ahrons and Rodgers (1987), for example, argue the case that divorce is becoming a regular feature of married life expectations and that there is “a shift in ideology – from viewing divorce as pathology to viewing divorce as an institution ... the study of divorce is no longer narrowly defined within a deviance perspective” (Ahrons and Rodgers 1987: 23). Once divorce is seen as a common transition rather than as pathological, researchers can reasonably begin to attend to a much wider range of issues, such as “getting over” as well as prevention, and as much to the processes of entering new relationships as to those to do with leaving the old ones. With this thought in mind, we can move on to Chapter 7 on putting relationships right.

Summary

This chapter has examined the process of the break-up of a relationship and explored it as a multifaceted and extended series of
psychological activities rather than as a simple event. It is a process that emphasizes the complex functioning of relationships and the many elements that they require in order to work properly—elements that function quietly and unnoticed until break-up occurs. The chapter identifies these elements as the internal cognitive evaluation of partner, the behavior of relating to partner, the embeddedness of relationships in the social network, and the stories that people create in order to explain their relationship’s existence. In the dying and the death of a relationship all of these “sleeping elements” jerk into vigorous life and make the dissolution of relationships the all-consuming psychological experience that it can easily become.

Further reading


Duck, S. W. (ed.) (1982). Personal Relationships 4: Dissolving Personal Relationships. London and New York: Academic Press. This is the first collection of chapters addressing many different facets of the break-up of relationships, including different styles of divorcing, the role of gossip and social norms, types of commitment, the influence of processes of relationship formation on eventual breakdown, and the role of persuasive strategies in break-up, in addition to a consideration of attribution’s role in dissolution.


