Relationship Stages: An Inductive Analysis Identifying Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Dimensions of Knapp's Relational Stages Model

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Knapp's (1978) ten stage model of relationships has been widely cited and endorsed, nonetheless a solid empirical foundation for this model is lacking. This study was conducted to provide the preliminary information necessary to identify, empirically, the stages of "coming together" and "coming apart". Focus groups were conducted to identify behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions indicative of the ten stages proposed by the Knapp model. Findings indicate that people generally report different thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in each stage. The findings are discussed in terms of the further development of Knapp's model and creation of a corresponding measurement scale. Directions for future research involving the development of such a scale are also discussed.

Research on relationship development and dissolution has provided scholars with many models and theoretical explanations (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Baus & Allen, 1996; Cahn, 1987; Cushman & Cahn, 1985; Duck & Pittman, 1994; Honeycutt, 1995; Millar & Rogers, 1976, 1987; Roloff, 1981; Taylor & Altman, 1987; Tzeng, 1993; Werner & Baxter, 1994; Wheeless, Wheeless & Baus, 1984; Zeggelink, 1993). All models describing relationship

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processes share basic assumptions that relationships, relational actions, feelings, and communication behavior of the participants change over time.

The various models describing relationship progression have the two common phases of development and deterioration (Perlman & Fehr, 1987). One such model that describes these processes is Knapp's (1978) relationship interaction stages. The model consists of 10 stages, five that describe "coming together" and five that describe "coming apart." The stages of relational development are initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding. The stages of deterioration are differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating.

Taken together, Knapp's (1978) stages represent the most complete possible progression of a relationship The model is a full treatment of the relational life-cycle, whereas other approaches have been limited in scope in that they address particular behaviors or part of the process (e.g., Richmond, 1978; Newcomb & Bentler, 1981; Rusbult, 1987). This is not to say that these specific foci are inferior or misguided, but simply to point out that the potential of the Knapp model lies in its comparative comprehensiveness. The literature shows that there has been no consistent program of research that has sought to develop a relationship stage model along with valid measurement instruments. We contend that Knapp's relationship stage model is ripe for such further development on the strength of its original description and theoretical base.

Knapp (1978) represented his model metaphorically as a dual staircase upon which relationships ascend, descend and stabilize. Although other similar models and modified versions exist (e.g., Wood, 1982, which is partially based on Knapp's model; Wheeless et al., 1984), Knapp's original conception is clear and intuitively compelling, with movement through stages explained in terms of social exchange and social penetration principles. In Knapp's model, direction and motive power are determined by social exchange theory. That is, evaluations of relational rewards and costs result in decisions about where the relationship will go and how fast it will get there.

The model carries with it several assumptions about the progression of relationships through the stages. Movement though the model occurs in a systematic, sequential fashion which may be in any direction. Although relational movement up, down, and sideways on the "staircase" is an ongoing and changing process, researchers should be able to classify relationships at any given time. It is this tool that is currently unavailable as Knapp did not outline a deductive method for determining relationship stages. This problem of classification method gives rise to the current study.

RATIONALE

The goal of this study is the inductive creation of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of the Knapp (1978) relational stage model. Although Knapp's model is often cited, and parts have been used to support further theory development (e.g., Wood, 1982), it has remained undeveloped as an actual instrument of classification. Knapp's explication of the model focused on describing the communication topics and patterns that occur during each stage. As a consequence of developing an accurate instrument to classify relationships, we hope to extend Knapp's model to include cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of each stage. In other words, we hope to generate items that reflect what people think, feel, and do during each stage. By including these components in our investigation we hope not only to ultimately classify relationships, but also to define each

stage in a more complete manner.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited from a large Midwestern university. Respondents received credit toward a communication course research requirement. Participants were divided into three focus groups (all single males, all single females, and married people).

The first focus group consisted of seven white males (mean age of 22 years old). Focus group two was comprised of five white females and two African American females (mean age of 21 years old). The third focus group consisted of seven married people, 2 white males and 5 white females (mean age of 25 years old for the males and 26 years old for females). There were two married couples in this group.

Each focus group was conducted by a different moderator. Each moderator was trained in conducting focus group sessions and was informed as to the purpose of the study. A white male served as moderator for the all male focus group, a white female for the all female focus group, and a white male for the married persons focus group. Each moderator progressed the focus group in similar fashion in order to maintain homogeneity of conditions.

Procedures

Three focus groups were conducted to generate responses reflecting cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of relationship development and deterioration as proposed by Knapp (1978). Before the session began, the respondents completed a form that required participants to fill in things they "thought", "felt", and "did" at different stages of personal relationships. Each relationship stage was defined and a blank space was provided for the respondents to complete.

The moderator began the session with a brief discussion as to the workings of the focus group. That is, each session was to be one hour in length and dialog between focus group members was encouraged. This procedure was the same across all focus groups. The moderators introduced a particular stage of relationship development or dissolution, defined it, then spent six to eight minutes soliciting feedback from the focus group respondents. The moderators introduced all stages in the same manner as they are presented in the Knapp (1978) model. That is, moving from the initiating stage progressing through to the bonding stage. This was repeated with the deterioration stages (i.e., moving from differentiating through to the final relationship stage of termination).

Each moderator asked identical questions when introducing particular stages for discussion. That is, a definition of the stage was given followed by the question: "What do you believe people think about at this point in a relationship?" After several minutes of discussion, the moderator asked: "What do you believe people feel at this point in the relationship?" After soliciting several minutes of discussion on this question, the moderator asked the third question: "What do you think people do at this stage of a relationship?" This procedure was repeated for each stage in the model. At the conclusion of each focus group, the information completed at the beginning of the session was collected. Participants were thanked for their involvement then dismissed from the session.

The audio-tapes from each session were subject to a semantical content analysis (Janis,

1965). This technique of content analysis classifies signs according to their meaning. More specifically, the researchers used assertion analysis which provides the frequency with which certain objects are characterized in certain ways (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Assertion analysis combines designation analysis (the frequency with which certain concepts are mentioned) and attribution analysis (the frequency with which certain descriptors are used) to create a matrix of objects (i.e., relational stage), and attributes of the objects (i.e., things that are said, things that are felt, and things that are done at each stage). We believed this type of content analysis would generate characteristics unique to each stage.

RESULTS

Each session was content analyzed for frequency of concepts and frequency of descriptors. This resulted in a matrix of attributes reflecting the particular stages of the Knapp (1978) model. The attributes identified for each stage were divided into three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. This resulted in the 10-stage model containing three dimensions each (see Table 1 and Table 2). Also incorporated in the identification of relationship stage attributes were the worksheets completed by the focus group members at the beginning of the session.

TABLE 1

Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Responses to the Coming Together Stages

Process	Stage Name	Things People Say	How People Feel	What People Do
COMING TOGETHER	Initiating	Talk about relaxing things. Inquire about demographics and commonalities, jobs - general information exchange.	Nervousness. Cautious. Curious. Scared. Hesitant.	Smiling, make eye contact. Shake hands. Show off. Give inviting body language. Buy someone a drink. Show nonverbal interest.
	Experimenting	Talk about past relationships Brag - try to make a good impression. Talk about family or hobbies. Still a focus on commonalities.	Connectedness. Comfort. Uncertainty.	Call on the telephone or visit, Eat a meal together. Go on a date. Touching. Attempt to impress the other person.

TABLE 1 (cont.)
Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Reponses to the Coming Together Stages

Process	Stage Name	Things People Say	How People Feel	What People Do
	Intensifying	Probe about moral values.	Happy. Loving. Warm. Closeness. Wanted and needed.	Hold hands, kiss, hug. Buy gifts, make plans together, do favors without being asked. Make mental projections about the future.
	Integrating	Share intimate feelings. Talk about the future together. Reflect about common experiences - things done together.	Unhappy when apart. Comfortable. Feel like one person.	Go on vacation together. Meet families and friends.
	Bonding	Make plans for the future. Pledge love for the other person. Make agreements about the future. Make promises. Talk about birth control and children. Financial and career issues.	Unity. Relaxed. Overwhelming. joy and happiness. Reciprocal happiness.	Engage in activities apart. Move in together. Think about the other constantly. Have joint possessions. Make sacrifices.

TABLE 2
Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Responses to the Coming Apart Stages

Process	Stage Name	Things People Say	How People Feel	What People Do
	Differentiating	Arguing. Apologies. Talk about being incompatible.	Separate. Slight loneliness. Confusion. Inadequate.	Try to make compromises.
COMING APART				

TABLE 2 (cont.)
Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Responses to the Coming Apart Stages

Process	Stage Name	Things People Say	How People Feel	What People Do
	Circumscribing	Anxious. Talk about every day matters.	Cold, distant. Uncaring. Depressed. Frustrated. Unloved.. Misunderstood.	Pursue different activities. Act aloof.
	Stagnating	Talk about how our discussions are "old news." Give short answers to questions	Unwanted. Scared. Bored. Sentimental.	Cease physical contact. Cease going out.
	Avoiding	Stop/avoid communicating. Only discuss general matters - no talk about the relationship. Frequently say "I don't care" and "I don't know."	Nervousness. Helpless. Annoyed.	Eat in silence. Stay busy. Spend a lot of time away.
	Terminating	Talk about staying in touch. Discuss what went wrong.	Unhappy but relieved. Sad, depressed. Happy. Lonely. Scared.	Cry. Divide up belongings.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted as preliminary research for the further development of Knapp's (1978) relationship stages model. The items generated through focus groups appear to support the existence of cognitive, affective and behavioral components within each stage of Knapp's model. For each stage, respondents easily identified behavioral, affective, and cognitive items that correspond to Knapp's descriptions of the stages for "coming together" and "coming apart." Of interest was the concurrent appearance of items in more than one stage. Some items overlapped from one stage to the next (i.e., discussing "needing" one another and making plans for the future appeared in both the intensifying and integrating stages of the coming together process) whereas other items transcended specific stages and were indicative of both the coming together process as well as coming apart (i.e., discussing common, "every day things" appeared in both the initiating and circumscribing stages). In order to develop a more thorough conceptualization and operationalization of Knapp's model, these items need to be nominally categorized

according to the ten stages.

There were limitations to the study. As is often the case in scientific research, sampling error poses some threat to our findings. The sample was small and relatively homogeneous. Respondents were all undergraduate students, primarily Caucasian, and predominately heterosexual. This is hardly representative of the population. Additionally, the stages were imposed upon respondents in that they were asked to generate items for pre-assigned stages instead of being allowed to independently identify stages. However, it should be noted that all respondents produced cognitive, affective, and behavioral items for each stage with ease.

The stages of relationships have long been of interest to scholars of interpersonal communication, sociology, and psychology. Previous efforts to conceptualize these stages have provided some theoretically compelling ideas yet there remains a need to validate these stages and ultimately to create a corresponding measurement instrument. This study provides the foundation necessary to advance and develop Knapp's model and theory. The identification of behavioral, affective, and cognitive sub-dimensions provides a starting point for operationalizing the model. The identification of behavioral, affective, and cognitive sub-dimensions within the Knapp model provides a more comprehensive understanding of relational development and decline. This pilot study is but a starting point with which development of relational assessment measures may be undertaken.

Future research should focus on the development of a psychometric measure of the relational stages as well as the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions contained within each. Such an effort is underway. Other possible avenues for research include assessing both relational partners' perceptions of stage membership and examining the discrepancies between them. A future general research question might address the consequences of such inconsistencies in perception and its impact on relational quality. Specifically these discrepancies could be examined in conjunction with relational or marital satisfaction, sexual communication satisfaction, interpersonal competence, and interpersonal solidarity.

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