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Intervening Earlier: An Upstream Approach to Improving Relationship Quality

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Abstract

Relationship quality has far-reaching consequences for health and well-being. To date, large-scale efforts to improve relationship quality have targeted established relationships. However, a novel approach would be to target relationships much earlier. Investment-based programs would intervene (on a voluntary basis) before partners become strongly tied to one another (i.e., within the first few months of "official" dating) and help people to avoid investing in relationships that they might later decide are wrong for them. Selection-based programs would intervene before an official dating relationship has formed, perhaps by helping people to identify especially compatible partners from within their network of friends and acquaintances. To develop such interventions, researchers must (a) identify when important relationship experiences (e.g., perceived responsiveness, capitalization, and sexual satisfaction) become reliably predictive of long-term outcomes and (b) identify how this information could be better incorporated into early relationship decisions. Overall, efforts to facilitate the initial formation and development of high-quality relationships may hold promising, untested potential.

Keywords

romantic relationships, decision making, interventions, marital quality, mate selection

Tweet

A novel, untested approach to improving relationship quality would help people pursue and invest in better suited partners.

Key Points

- Relationship distress and instability are societal problems in need of innovative solutions.
- Existing interventions have focused on improving established relationships, but little research has attempted to help people develop better relationships in the first place.
- Investment-based interventions could help people evaluate whether new dating relationships are right for them, before making substantial investments.
- Selection-based interventions could help people select more suitable dating partners from within their existing social circles.
- Before such interventions are feasible, we first need an influx of basic research on the early dating and predating relationship phases.

Introduction

Strengthening and stabilizing relationships is a long-standing goal for relationship scientists, therapists, and policymakers alike. Divorce can have far-reaching consequences, reducing life satisfaction (Lucas, 2005) and increasing mortality risk (Sbarra, Law, & Portley, 2011). Consequences can be particularly acute for couples with children (see Amato, 2000, for review): Children who grow up in households without both of their biological parents are at risk of worse academic performance, poorer psychological well-being, and poorer outcomes in adulthood compared with children whose parents' relationships remain intact (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Lansford et al., 2006; Potter, 2010).

At the same time, low-quality relationships—relationships that are strained, unsupportive, and otherwise unfulfilling—have a range of negative consequences as well. Compared with individuals in high-quality marriages, those in unsatisfying marriages tend to have poorer psychological well-being (Kim & McKenry, 2002) and a greater risk of depression (Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997), as well as a variety of negative stress-related health outcomes (see Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014, for a recent review). Unhappy relationships may be even more stressful compared with singlehood; for example, one study found that individuals in low-quality marriages had higher ambulatory blood pressure than unmarried individuals

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(Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008). For couples with children, parents' relationship conflict is detrimental for children's adjustment (e.g., Buehler & Gerard, 2002), as well as children's own marital quality in adulthood (Amato & Booth, 2001).

Existing Interventions Target Relationship Maintenance

What can be done to reduce the societal prevalence of relationship distress and instability? To date, relationship science has largely approached this issue by attempting to improve the quality (or slow the decline in quality) of established relationships. A large body of research has examined couple therapy as treatment for marital distress (see Snyder, Castellani, & Whisman, 2006, for review). Randomized studies have shown significant relational benefits for several approaches to couple treatment, including traditional behavioral couple therapy (BCT; see Hahlweg & Markman, 1988, for a meta-analysis), integrative behavioral couple therapy (IBCT; for example, Christensen et al., 2004), and emotion-focused couple therapy (EFCT; for example, Denton, Burleson, Clark, Rodriguez, & Hobbs, 2000; Goldman & Greenberg, 1992). However, therapy is not effective for all couples, particularly in the long term. For example, one recent randomized clinical trial compared the long-term effectiveness of BCT and IBCT among distressed couples (Christensen, Atkins, Baucom, & Yi, 2010). Regardless of which treatment was received, approximately half of the couples showed clinically significant improvement by the 5-year follow-up compared with at pretreatment, whereas the other half were either unchanged or deteriorated (often divorced) 5 years posttreatment.

Also, large-scale programs have attempted to address relationship problems before they develop by teaching couples how to manage their disagreements in healthier, more constructive ways. For example, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995) targets couples who are engaged to be married and teaches them to recognize and avoid destructive relationship conflict strategies (e.g., escalation, withdrawal). From 1996 to present, the U.S. federal government has allocated hundreds of million dollars toward relationship education programs for low-income couples. Drawing from skill-based intervention research, these programs typically recruit couples with children and equip them with new tools and skills for handling relationship conflict. Disappointingly, however, these large-scale programs have yielded few measurable benefits (e.g., Wood, Moore, Clarkwest, Killewald, & Monahan, 2012).

In sum, psychologists have had success in designing accessible intervention strategies that can help motivated couples to prevent long-term marital distress and dissolution. At the same time, the mixed effectiveness of marital interventions suggests a ceiling to the number of relationships that can be preserved and improved through intervention strategies. Even preventive interventions—those designed to prevent relationship problems before they arise—typically target couples shortly before they marry (e.g., Stanley et al., 1995). For couples with intractable incompatibilities, this premarital relationship phase may already be too late. To help a broader range of individuals to achieve better relationship outcomes, we may need to develop interventions targeting people in the early dating stages (i.e., within the first few months of an official dating relationship), or even predating stages of a relationship (i.e., before a dating relationship has officially formed).

What If We Targeted Relationships *Much* Earlier?

A growing body of research suggests that the issues plaguing low-quality relationships tend to be present and detectable early on. One longitudinal study found that newlyweds whose marriages deteriorated over time tended to have relatively low satisfaction at the beginning of the study (Lavner, Bradbury, & Karney, 2012). In addition, people may also have insight about whether a relationship is likely to be satisfying in the future: Couple members' explicit (e.g., Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012) and implicit (e.g., McNulty, Olson, Meltzer, & Shaffer, 2013) evaluations of their partners and their relationships often predict future satisfaction and stability. The fact that detectable warning signs are present at the beginning of marriage strongly suggests that these warning signs first arise *before* marriage, in the dating phases—or possibly even in the predating phases—of a relationship.

If scholars broadly consider different possible timings for interventions, a suite of new opportunities emerges. When considering the entire life cycle of a relationship, the decision to date exclusively is rarely an "early event": Couples typically know each other from within their social circles for months, if not years, before they begin officially dating (Eastwick, Keneski, Morgan, MacDonald, & Huang, 2017; Hunt, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2015). Subsequently, couples often date for many months and gradually increase their investments in the relationship; later, these investments may cause a couple to "slide" into commitment in the absence of a clear, active decision about whether the relationship is right for them (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Overall, the decisions that people make during the early relationship phases—decisions such as whom to pursue and what relationship investments to make—may offer a promising yet largely unexplored route to helping people to improve their own relationship outcomes (Joel, MacDonald, & Plaks, 2013). People may be able to boost their own relational, health, and well-being trajectories by more selectively

choosing and investing in new relationships that are right for them and rejecting those that are not right for them.

In the present article, we explore the possibility that the average relationship will be more satisfying, and fewer committed relationships will ultimately end, if scholars develop interventions that target relationships well before marriage. We first consider *investment-based intervention strategies*: interventions that target individuals in the early dating stages, before substantial investments into the relationship have been made. Next, we consider *selection-based intervention strategies*: interventions that target individuals in the *pre*dating stages, before the relationship becomes "official" (i.e., before two people agree that they are romantic partners). In each case, we review emerging research on what form such intervention strategies could take, as well as the gaps in basic research that need to be addressed before successful interventions might be feasible.

The present approach is distinct from the existing relationship intervention approaches described above in that it focuses on individuals rather than couples. Although relationships themselves are dyadic (at minimum), relationship decisions are frequently made by individuals, especially in the context of brand-new relationships (e.g., the decisions to pursue, start dating, and invest in a new relationship). Thus, researchers may not need to recruit *couples*—which would be a particularly challenging feat in these early relationship stages—to contribute to our understanding of how people can selectively pursue and invest in relationships that are right for them. Rather, researchers need to understand what diagnostic information about the (future) relationship is available to individuals as they choose to pursue certain dating partners rather than others.

Investment-Based Interventions: Can We Help People Invest in Relationships That Are Right for Them?

One novel intervention option would be to target people who have recently begun dating someone new, *before* they become highly invested in the relationship. Ending a relationship becomes increasingly painful and costly as the relationship becomes more established. Over time, dating romantic partners become increasingly attached to one another (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1994) and reliant on each other for support and validation (e.g., Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Dating length is typically accompanied by a number of intangible investments, such as self-disclosures, sacrifices, and the construction of a mutual sense of identity (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008). As these investments increase, people become more committed to their partners and more likely to stay in those relationships over time, independently of whether or not that relationship makes them happy (see Le & Agnew, 2003; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010, for reviews). Overall, the less time and energy placed into a relationship, the easier it is to exit that relationship.

Despite previous estimates that romantic attachment bonds take 2 years to fully develop (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994), new data suggest that many people feel strongly attached to new romantic partners—relying on them as a key source of support and validation—after as little as 3 months of dating (Heffernan, Fraley, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2012). In other words, people may be able to effectively evaluate new dating partners for long-term fit in a somewhat narrow window before they begin to feel "locked into" the relationship. The goal of investment-based interventions would be to make the most of this crucial and potentially fleeting relationship phase by helping people to evaluate whether a brand-new dating relationship should or should not progress toward a committed long-term partnership.

Most longitudinal relationship studies recruit people in established relationships. A meta-analysis of longitudinal dating studies found an average relationship length of approximately 20 months at Time 1 (Le et al., 2010), and researchers commonly require couples to have already dated for a certain length of time (e.g., 3 months, 6 months) prior to participating in a study. As such, although we know a great deal about how people maintain established relationships, we know relatively little about how people choose to invest in those relationships in the first place. Before investment-based interventions could successfully develop, researchers would first have to answer two basic research questions: What markers of future relationship quality are detectable and useful in helping people decide whether to invest in new dating relationships (i.e., prescriptive features), and what information do people use when they make poorer decisions (i.e., biasing features)?

Early Markers of Long-Term Relationship Quality (Prescriptive Features)

We first consider what indicators of long-term relationship quality might be detectable early on in a relationship. In other words, what features of the relationship itself might be predictive of future positive outcomes and exist in some elementary form for individuals to consider before a substantial investment has been made? One promising candidate is *perceived partner responsiveness* (Reis et al., 2004): the extent to which people feel understood, validated, and cared for by their partners. Theorists have argued that responsiveness is central to satisfying relationships as it underlies the many processes (e.g., constructive conflict, sacrifice) that are required for a relationship to flourish over time (e.g., Reis & Gable, 2015). Perceptions of a partner's responsiveness are grounded in the partner's actual behaviors (e.g., Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008), and reliably predict relationship quality (e.g., Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006) and health (e.g., Slatcher, Selcuk, & Ong, 2015). However, it is not yet known how assessments of responsiveness in *newly* formed relationships correspond to long-term outcomes.

A related potential indicator of a new relationship's potential is the extent to which romantic partners respond enthusiastically to each other's positive events and experiences (*capitalization*; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Successful capitalization attempts predict positive relationship outcomes, such as increased feelings of liking and trust (e.g., Reis et al., 2010), and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Logan & Cobb, 2013). One laboratory interaction study suggested that perceiving a partner as supportive in response to positive events is even more predictive of relationship quality than perceived supportiveness in response to negative events (Gable et al., 2006). Considering that the early stages of a relationship are typically fueled with passion and positivity (e.g., Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999), a partner's response to capitalization attempts may be a particularly accessible indicator of whether a new dating partner will be responsive to one's needs down the road.

Sexual satisfaction is a third relationship quality indicator worth considering, as sexual satisfaction predicts a range of long-term positive outcomes in the context of established relationships (e.g., Sprecher, 2002). Indeed, it is a common lay belief that sexual satisfaction hinges on compatibility between partners, such that a relationship that is not sexually satisfying from the very beginning is doomed to fail (Maxwell et al., 2017). Even among those who intend to wait until a relationship is well established to engage in intercourse, sexual chemistry and satisfaction with other sexual activities (e.g., kissing) could still be assessed. Although data suggest that sexual desire tends to wane over the course of a relationship (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999) and that a healthy sex life requires effort to maintain (e.g., Maxwell et al., 2017; Muise, Impett, Kogan, & Desmarais, 2012), perhaps low sexual satisfaction at the beginning of a relationship is diagnostic of sexual or relationship dissatisfaction long-term.

Couple members can surely assess these features with respect to their new relationship partners, but we need to learn when these features (in conjunction) become most diagnostic of later relationship success versus failure. The limited existing longitudinal data on newly formed relationships suggest that relationship evaluations are malleable during this nascent period (Arriaga, 2001; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). For example, in one study, researchers recruited 100 participants who had begun dating someone less than 1 month earlier and administered four surveys over the course of a year (Fletcher et al., 2000). Whereas some constructs were reliably correlated over this period (e.g., commitment), others were only modestly correlated (e.g., closeness). Future research needs to recruit well-powered samples of individuals who are just beginning new dating relationships and then assess the promising constructs just described (e.g., responsiveness, capitalization) to determine when these constructs become predictive of long-term relationship outcomes. Then, interventions can stress these features as useful decision-making tools (e.g., "consider your sexual satisfaction at Month 1 and perceived responsiveness at Month 3 when deciding to invest further").

Potential Gaps Between Descriptive and Prescriptive Relationship Decision Making (Biasing Features)

Crucially, to select a well-suited long-term partner, people must typically reject many *ill-suited* partners. For example, imagine that after going on a handful of dates with Beth, Tom has successfully inferred that Beth is not particularly responsive to his needs and that a relationship with Beth would be unsatisfying long-term. For this information to be helpful, Tom must now reject Beth so that he is free to pursue other, potentially more compatible partners. This is a context in which early relationship interventions may be particularly helpful, as growing research suggests that rejecting partners is difficult.

One factor that appears to bias people toward pursuing rather than rejecting relationships is *prosociality*. People can be reluctant to inflict the pain of romantic rejection on potential suitors, even if their own romantic interest is low. For example, one pair of laboratory experiments found that people overestimated their willingness to reject unsuitable potential partners, in part because participants who actually confronted this situation were more concerned about hurting the feelings of their potential suitor than participants who merely considered the situation hypothetically (Joel, Teper, & MacDonald, 2014). These concerns for the romantic partner's feelings may continue to shape decisions as a relationship progresses: People who perceive their partners to be highly invested in the relationship are more committed to maintaining those relationships over time, even if their own satisfaction in the relationship is relatively low (Joel, Gordon, Impett, MacDonald, & Keltner, 2013).

Another factor that can dissuade people from rejecting unsuitable partners is their *general desire to be in a relationship*. Humans possess strong, cross-culturally consistent motivation to form romantic bonds (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Nickola, 2015), and missing out on romantic opportunities is perceived to be highly aversive (Joel, Plaks, & MacDonald, 2017). Single individuals face a variety of social pressures to enter into relationships (DePaulo, 2014). Many single people fear that they will fail to secure a romantic partner and ultimately wind up alone, which can motivate people to settle for lower quality partners (Spielmann et al., 2013). *Fear of being single* is also associated with longing for ex-partners and even predicts attempts to renew relationships with ex-partners (Spielmann, MacDonald, Joel, & Impett, 2016).

Together, this research suggests that even if people can accurately anticipate the long-term quality (or lack thereof) of a new relationship, they may struggle to act on that information. Reluctance to inflict pain on others, desire to be in a

relationship generally, and fears of winding up without a partner may all interfere with people's willingness to reject romantic opportunities, even if those opportunities are unlikely to result in a satisfying partnership. Much like domains such as diet and exercise, people may consciously know which choices are most consistent with their long-term relationship goals, yet have difficulty enacting them. Over time, these challenges only become harder as people become increasingly invested in, and thus committed to, the relationship (Le & Agnew, 2003).

Selection-Based Interventions: Can We Help People Choose Better Partners in the First Place?

Breaking up with a romantic partner is clearly painful and difficult, even in the early stages of dating. Yet earlier interventions are also possible: Researchers could develop interventions that help people to evaluate whether a potential partner was right for them before agreeing to be the person's romantic partner (i.e., before the relationship is "official"). For millennia, professional matchmakers have attempted to serve this function for single individuals, using intuition and experience to pair potential partners with each other (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). Alternatively, a scientific approach would attempt to determine empirically what the early detectable signals of long-term compatibility are; some existing research bears on this issue.

Compatibility Before a Face-to-Face Interaction

The earliest possible approach would be to target couples before they even meet. That is, if an intervention could introduce potential partners to each other who are more likely than chance to be uniquely compatible, that intervention might help to create happy, lasting relationships. In fact, many online matchmaking services claim to do exactly this: They ask their customers to complete a wide variety of self-report measures, they (purportedly) use a proprietary algorithm to match compatible partners, and they introduce those partners to each other. Companies like eHarmony often point to their algorithms as a reason why their users have happier, more stable relationships, on average (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, & VanderWeele, 2013).

Nevertheless, several recent lines of research suggest that this approach is unlikely to be promising because very little predictive signal can be gleaned before two people meet face-to-face (for reviews, see Eastwick, Finkel, & Simpson, 2017; Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2014). Recently, a pair of studies used machine learning—a statistical approach that determines what predictors of a given outcome are robust and likely to reemerge across samples—to predict people's initial romantic feelings for one another (Joel, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2017). Participants completed more than 100 self-report measures of preferences and personality and then met a series of opposite-sex potential partners on 4-min speed dates. Machine learning procedures were generally able to predict who would generally desire and be desired by others from these measures; for example, people who desired others tended to have a strong need to belong, and people who were desired by others tended to rate themselves as popular and attractive. But these self-report measures were generally irrelevant to compatibility; that is, no combination of self-reported preferences and traits could predict who would uniquely desire whom. This study suggests that algorithms based on self-reported preferences and traits are unlikely to be useful at matching compatible potential partners together in the hopes that they immediately experience chemistry. The goal of matching partners who can grow initial chemistry into a satisfying long-term relationship remains, especially, elusive.

Compatibility in Existing Social Networks

If it is not a promising strategy to develop interventions that target potential partners before they meet, one alternative strategy would be to intervene after potential partners meet and get to know each other but before they actually form a dating relationship. In the existing literature, this period of relationship initiation is relatively neglected; only a handful of studies have attempted to examine the stretch of time after an initial interaction (i.e., with a stranger) but before the official formation of a relationship (Campbell & Stanton, 2014). Nevertheless, some evidence suggests that romantic compatibility becomes especially tangible during this period. One set of studies examined how much people achieved consensus about which of their opposite-sex friends and acquaintances possessed desirable qualities and how satisfying they would be as relationship partners (Eastwick & Hunt, 2014). As people got to know one another better, consensus about who possessed desirable qualities actually declined. Moreover, as time passed, people started to exhibit more and more idiosyncrasy in their judgments of who was or was not likely to be a good relationship partner; among long-term acquaintances, partner desirability was almost entirely "in the eye of the beholder." In other words, during the stretch of time in between an initial interaction and the formation of a relationship, people will come to believe that some potential partners are especially good matches for them, whereas other potential partners are especially bad matches.

These findings suggest that, if heterosexual individuals are finding long-term partners among their networks of opposite-sex friends and acquaintances, there is plenty of opportunity for interventions to facilitate the formation of a relationship between two people who uniquely think very highly of each other. As it happens, most romantic relationships do emerge from this milieu of friends and acquaintances; that is, most relationships initially become romantic when people initiate

sexual behaviors with friends or acquaintances, not strangers (Kaestle & Halpern, 2005; Walsh, Fielder, Carey, & Carey, 2014). Some of these sexual relationships will fizzle, but others will grow to the point that one or both individuals want to make the relationship official. As noted, on average, a months-to-years span occurs between the time that two people meet and the time they begin a dating or sexual relationship (Eastwick, Keneski et al., 2017; Hunt et al., 2015). So, this time period is long enough that interventions are realistic, and there is a great deal of compatibility variance to be predicted by the right sort of intervention.

What would an intervention target during this time? The same consequential constructs already described (i.e., responsiveness, capitalization, sexual satisfaction) might again have predictive power, as they can presumably also be evaluated during the period after a face-to-face encounter but before a relationship has officially begun. For example, in the context of initial romantic encounters, people evaluate the responsiveness of their potential partners and incorporate that information into their initial relationship decisions (e.g., Birnbaum, Ein-Dor, Reis, & Segal, 2014). Also, the experience of capitalization during an initial interaction predicts the desire to engage in additional intimate disclosures (Reis et al., 2010). In addition, given that some degree of sexual activity (e.g., first kiss, first make out) precedes "official" relationship formation on average in modern Western populations (Eastwick, Keneski et al., 2017), sexual satisfaction as assessed at this early stage might also be predictive of later outcomes. In short, even among couples who are not yet "official," there are opportunities to intervene by (a) guiding people to consider forming relationships when they perceive early indicators of responsiveness, capitalization, and sexual satisfaction and (b) guiding people away from relationships that lack these indicators.

Practical Future Directions for Basic Relationship Science

One day, relationship scientists may prevent bad long-term relationships before they begin by helping people to select more suitable partners and relationships in the first place. However, for such interventions to ever become feasible, we must first acquire more basic knowledge about how romantic relationships first develop and how early particular constructs (e.g., perceived responsiveness, capitalization, and sexual satisfaction) predict later outcomes.

To fill these gaps in our knowledge, researchers will need to conduct longitudinal studies that begin far earlier in the courtship process than is currently typical in the field. Admittedly, the predating and early dating stages of a romantic relationship are challenging to study empirically. Unlike initial romantic attraction, fledgling relationships are difficult if not impossible to generate in a laboratory. In addition, because new relationships tend to be unstable, fleeting, and not-well-defined, it is much harder to recruit people who are currently in a fledgling relationship compared with an established dating relationship. At the same time, new research methods such as social media recruitment and mobile-friendly surveys are making "in the wild" research more feasible than ever (e.g., Thai & Page-Gould, 2017). For example, websites such as Facebook allow researchers to target ad campaigns by relationship status, and brief repeated surveys may allow researchers to follow people as they enter and exit relationships. These methods should help future researchers to begin tracking people shortly after they meet a new partner, before they make substantial investments into the relationship.

Conclusion

Few decisions affect as many facets of people's lives as the choice of a long-term romantic partner. To truly understand how people make this decision—and, more ambitiously, how this decision might be improved upon—we need an influx of basic research on (very) early relationship processes. Conducting this research has unique challenges, both for recruitment and for retention. However, given the hope that relationship science may one day be able to help people build better relationships from the ground up—to say nothing of the needed theoretical advances—this research seems likely to be well worth the investment.

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