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Journal of Social and Personal Relationships 1995; 12; 547
DOI: 10.1177/0265407595124008

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://spr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/12/4/547
RELATIONAL SCHEMAS AND COGNITION IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT
There is a recent trend toward the development of a comprehensive model of relational cognition, examining how information about interpersonal experiences is perceived, interpreted, stored and recalled. I present illustrative examples from recent adult attachment research, and argue that a better understanding of cognition about interpersonal dynamics could help to integrate the various domains of relationships research.

KEY WORDS • close relationships • relational schemas • social cognition

Whenever Andy sighs unhappily, Elaine tries to comfort him; whenever Karen raises her voice in anger, Frank turns away and adopts a cool demeanor. There is a strong tradition in relationships research of regarding such recurring interaction patterns as the basic elements of social relations (e.g. Kelley, 1979; Kelley et al., 1983). It is probably unnecessary to point out, given the widespread influence of cognitive science, that one of the critical aspects of such recurring interaction patterns is how the individuals involved construe the situation. Each person has developed, over time, a set of expectations about the likely course of events in various contexts, and these cognitive models guide their information processing and behavior in the current situation.

Interaction expectations seem ideally suited to a social cognitive analysis, exploring how information about one’s interpersonal experiences is perceived, interpreted, stored and recalled. However, with some notable exceptions (see, e.g. Berscheid, 1994; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991; Fletcher & Fitness, in press, for reviews), the close relationships field has not yet taken full advantage of the models and methods of social cognition. Nor, for that matter, have mainstream social cognition researchers paid enough attention to people’s cognition about interpersonal dynamics, tending to focus instead on the perception of social objects such as self and others in isolation.

A fuller integration of relationships research and social cognition could

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prove extremely fruitful: when one brings the principles and methods of the information-processing paradigm to bear on the study of how people think about their interpersonal interactions, one sees the possibility of developing a comprehensive model of relational cognition that can illuminate and integrate the many different domains of relationships research.

This integration, while overdue, has been taken up in earnest over the past few years. I recently conducted a review of the rapidly developing literature on relational cognition (Baldwin, 1992). My review of some key contributions (e.g. Horowitz, 1988; Mitchell, 1988; Planalp, 1985; Safran, 1990) led to the construct of relational schemas, based on the notion that people develop cognitive structures representing regularities in patterns of interpersonal relatedness.

A relational schema is hypothesized to include a representation of one’s interaction partner, along with a representation of self-with-other (e.g. Ogilvie & Ashmore, 1991) or self as experienced in that relationship. Importantly, most theorists emphasize that these person schemas are embedded in an interpersonal script, representing a typical pattern of interaction between self and other. Thus, the theoretical focus is placed on people’s cognition about interpersonal dynamics and patterns of behavioral interdependence. A useful way of formulating the interpersonal script is as a series of if–then contingencies or associations, such that a given behavior by self is expected to produce a certain response from the interaction partner, and so on. A person might anticipate, for example, that ‘If I act weak and vulnerable, my mother will take care of me’, or ‘If I get angry my spouse will withdraw from me’, or ‘If I express my opinions forcefully my employer will respect me’. This if–then formulation provides a theoretical link between cognitive models of information processing, and interpersonal and social learning models of personality, which all feature if–then contingencies as a core construct (Baldwin, 1992).

The notion of relational schemas contributes more than a mere translation of pre-existing concepts into social cognitive jargon. First, it ties the study of relationship knowledge in with the massive literature on cognitive processes: relational expectations presumably influence attention to relevant interpersonal events, inferences about ambiguous interactions, and memory for schema-congruent experiences, for example. Second, it brings with it an impressive toolkit of precise and powerful research methods, such as incidental memory, reaction-time and construct-priming paradigms.

The heuristic value of adopting a relational-schema perspective can best be illustrated by examining a number of research implications in a specific domain. In recent work done in collaboration with Beverley Fehr and others (Baldwin & Fehr, 1994; Baldwin et al., 1993; Baldwin et al., 1994) we have undertaken a social-cognitive analysis of adult attachment behavior. Following from Bowlby’s construct of ‘mental models’, our hypothesis has been that individual differences in attachment orientation reflect differences in chronically accessible relational schemas. We have sought to elucidate the interpersonal expectations held by individuals of different attachment styles, examining a number of domains relevant to people’s ‘felt security’, such as expectations that one’s partner will be dependable and trustworthy, and will respond positively to overtures for closeness.

We have used self-report questionnaires as one measure of interpersonal expectations, framing questions about interpersonal scripts in an if–then format that combines specific behaviors with their possible outcomes. In one study (Baldwin et al., 1993, Study 1) we asked subjects to report how they
thought their partner would respond to them in a number of different contexts. In the domain of closeness, for example, subjects considered the context ‘You tell your partner how deeply you feel for him/her’, and indicated the degree to which they would anticipate this being met with acceptance or rejection. Consistent with the notion that the different attachment styles reflect different interpersonal expectations, results showed that anxious/ambivalent subjects expected more negative outcomes in this domain than either secure or avoidant subjects. An advantage of expressing expectations in this if-then format is that it allows precise examination of which behaviors by self (e.g. seeking closeness, trusting, depending on others) are expected to lead to particular responses from others (e.g. acceptance, rejection, support or abandonment).

One strength of the social cognitive approach is that a number of methods are available for studying relational schemas without having to rely exclusively on self-report methodologies. Spreading activation paradigms, for example, allow one to examine the kinds of interpersonal outcomes an individual automatically associates with various behaviors. In the basic lexical decision task, for instance, subjects are provided with a context (e.g. the word ‘doctor’). When asked to identify letter strings as words or non-words, they are quicker to recognize targets (e.g. ‘nurse’) that are strongly associated with the context word in a cognitive structure. In a lexical decision study of attachment cognition (Baldwin et al., 1993, Study 2), we found that when given the context stem ‘If I trust my partner then my partner will . . .’, secure individuals were quicker to identify the word ‘care’, whereas avoidant individuals were quicker to identify ‘hurt’. This method could be adapted to study any number of different relational expectations.

Relational schemas also serve as memory structures that organize relevant information, thereby facilitating subsequent recall. This can be problematic, of course, when a schema representing a dysfunctional pattern selectively aggregates one’s negative experiences, leading one to recall only the unpleasant aspects of one’s interpersonal life. For example, imagine a study in which people of different attachment styles are exposed to a series of vignettes, with some describing interactions such as ‘Bob told Mary he was feeling insecure about his job, and Mary told him to grow up’. Insecure subjects, who theoretically have negative expectations about the responsiveness of others to expressions of vulnerability and dependency, should be much more likely than secure subjects to preferentially recall information of this type (Baldwin et al., 1994).

Relational schemas can also be studied using priming procedures. Interpersonal beliefs typically are assumed to exert a stable, uniform influence on experience and behavior. Framing interpersonal beliefs as relational schemas, however, leads to the prediction that their influence should depend on the cognitive accessibility of the schema. For example, there probably is a degree of stability in adult attachment behavior deriving from individuals’ chronically-accessible relational schemas. At the same time, most people likely to have mental models corresponding to many different patterns of interaction, ranging from being nurtured lovingly to being rejected heartlessly. Therefore, their view of attachment may vary noticeably depending on which relational schema is most accessible at the moment (Baldwin & Fehr, 1994). Consider a man discussing a highly stressful issue with his current romantic partner: might he not act very differently depending on whether he was recently reminded of his unfailingly supportive mother or his rejecting and dismissive ex-wife? This type
of hypothesis can be examined using the kinds of priming procedures that have proved very useful in the impression formation and self-construal literatures. Priming studies would involve bringing a specific relationship or interpersonal pattern to mind — through a guided visualization of the significant other, or perhaps through just reading the significant other's name — and then observing the effects that the accessible relational schema has on information processing and social behavior. A recent experiment along these lines (Baldwin et al., 1994) suggests that this type of manipulation can indeed activate relational schemas representing secure, avoidant or anxious/ambivalent relationships, producing information-processing effects on later lexical decision and incidental recall tasks.

There are many more research possibilities. For instance, we need to consider the motivational implications of relational schemas, as people presumably are motivated to pursue certain patterns of relationship, such as being nurtured when needy, and to avoid other patterns, such as being hurt when vulnerable. Other questions parallel the range of topics being discussed in the larger social cognition literature: to what extent is interpersonal knowledge represented episodically as exemplars from past experience, versus semantically as abstract, generic representations of overlearned patterns (Baldwin et al., 1994)? Is interpersonal knowledge represented largely in such declarative structures, or largely procedurally? To what extent do relational schemas function automatically, without deliberate, conscious effort? These questions and more need to be addressed, through the development of precise methodologies, in order to establish a comprehensive model of relational cognition.

The notion of relational schemas can be applied across a number of content domains, which could exert a unifying influence on the field and lead to a clearer elucidation of commonalities and differences in how people process information in various arenas. One could study the relational expectations underlying a sense of trust or support in communal relationships, for example, based on the expectation that ‘If I need something my partner will try to provide it for me’. Adopting an if-then format leads one to enquire about the specific patterns that underlie these expectations: what are the behaviors that are seen as most and least likely to produce the desired response? Some people might anticipate that directly self-disclosing one’s anxiety, neediness and vulnerability is the most effective route, while others might have learned that valiantly struggling on one’s own, perhaps making periodic allusions to the Book of Job or Joan of Arc, is the best way to call forth the sympathy and support of others.

Other important topics involve expectations of negative, dysfunctional interaction patterns that are involved in conflictual, abusive or depressogenic relationships. How, for example, do expectations about the responsiveness of others influence the way a person feels and acts in a conflict (see, e.g. Bugental et al., 1993)? Research could examine the cognitive representation of these expectations, and the various factors that make the relational schema more or less accessible in different contexts.

Finally, as emphasized by others who are examining relational cognition (see, e.g. Fletcher & Fincham, 1991; Fletcher & Fitness, in press) it will continue to be important to examine the links from cognition to motivation, affect and the cultural context of personal relationships. As I argue elsewhere (Baldwin, 1992), research into these issues will be facilitated by adopting a formulation that lends itself to careful empirical work, using well-established
experimental methods from the social-cognitive literature. Taking this approach promotes the theoretical and empirical integration of interpersonal dynamics with cognitive factors such as schema-accessibility, automatic processing and so on.

NOTE

1. It is possible to study a number of different types of relational cognition, including, for example, thoughts about other people’s relationships (see, e.g. Frey & Smith, 1993; Planalp, 1985; Sedikides et al., 1993). Perhaps most important, however, is cognition about one’s own relationships with one’s significant others, so my review emphasized self–other relational schemas.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Preparation of this article was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to thank Beverley Fehr, John Holmes and Pat Keelpan for their helpful comments and discussions. Correspondence may be addressed to Mark Baldwin, Department of Psychology, University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3B 2E9.

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