

Stages of Development in Intimate Relationships

Paul David
Antioch University Seattle

Stage theory is a well established developmental model for understanding the different transitions that humans undergo as they move through the life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). The stage model presented here delineates a series of phases that couples typically go through in trying to build their relationship with one another. Since attachment is the main bond that emotionally connects a couple (Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002; Johnson, 2004), the focus of this model is not so much concerned with marital relationships per se, but with the broader context of intimate relationships where couples have, or are trying to form, secure attachments with one another. In presenting this model, I begin with a discussion of the complementary emotional dynamics involved in first establishing such an attachment, and then follow with a description of the various stages of emotional transition that typically characterize intimate relationships.

Complementarity

Partners in intimate relationships tend to select one another based on two opposing principles. By far the most influential is the principle of symmetry; that is, the tendency of partners to select one another based on similarities in their demographic characteristics, values, attitudes, and personalities. This tendency toward symmetry is well documented and is why the vast majority of people seek intimate partners who share the their same background, traits, interests, and tastes (Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002).

While the principle of symmetry exerts a powerful influence in the pairing process, another less understood—and by far more complicating—factor is the principle of complementarity; that is, the tendency of partners to select one another based on differences that offset their backgrounds and makeup. This principle reflects our tendency to pair with a partner who represents the qualities we are lacking. Given that one of the central functions of intimate relationships is to provide opportunities for increased functioning in life (Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006; Hendrix, 1988; Prodsky, 1991), it makes sense that we would choose intimate partners who could better manage in those areas where we are deficient.

According to Love (2001), one of the most powerful expressions of this principle of complementarity is the way in which we are biologically programmed to select partners with different genetic structures. This biological process is based on research about tissue rejection in organ transplants that led to the discovery that our bodies actually have the capacity to detect and select different DNA. More specifically, scientists have found that human genes—especially those that control the immune system—direct us to select mates with a different genetic makeup (Goodenough, 1998). This matching process is managed through a segment of DNA called the human lymphocyte antigen (HLA). Functioning as our immune system's disease detector, HLA

codes for a limited number of diseases and transmits this capacity to potential offspring through DNA. Accordingly, if we mate with someone with a different HLA code, we can increase our offspring's immunity to disease.

The research on HLA highlights our tendency to mate with partners who have dissimilar genetic codes. When we come into contact with relevant genetic differences, we tend to experience an attraction to someone who in essence offers us the possibility of passing on greater immune capacity to our offspring. Putting it another way, a powerful aspect of human attraction can be explained as a biological response to meeting our complementary genetic match. Subsequent research on olfactory sensation (Wedekind, Seebeck, Bettens, & Paepke, 1995; Jacob, McClintock, Zelano, & Ober, 2002) confirms the biological process through which this genetic information is transmitted, further establishing the influential role that the principle of complementarity plays in shaping intimate relationships.

At the more psychological and relational level, this principle of complementarity is also manifested in our tendency to select partners who possess the critical qualities that offset what we are lacking. For example, in regard to basic personality types like those specified in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1980), introverted types are likely to select more extraverted types, feeling types are likely to select more thinking types, sensing types are likely to select more intuitive types, and so on. Although the research on personality types clearly indicates a tendency to select partners that are similar to us (Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970), it also suggests that successful intimate relationships involve matching based on personality differences that are also complementary; that is, when successful, we tend to select mates with not only similar personality characteristics, but with dissimilar ones that can offset and help compensate for our particular personality type (Kiersey & Bates, 1984). Thus, for example when successful, introverts will tend to select more introverted types, but will also tend to select partners who are more extraverted than they are to help them more easily socialize and balance out the limitations of their introversion.

As Prosky (1991) notes, this complementarity is the underlying basis of both the couple's strengths and difficulties. On the one hand, the combination of assets can enhance capabilities at the relationship level; on the other hand, it can also generate a considerable amount of resentment at the individual level. This resentment manifests itself in a variety of ways as both partners become frustrated with the each other's differences. For example, the neat one resents the disorder of his or her partner who, in turn, cannot comprehend why the neat one does not relax; the active one continually attempts to solicit the sedentary partner's participation in his or her activities, leading the other partner to question why they can never spend a quiet moment either together or alone; the practical one gets frustrated by the other partner's wishful thinking, while the other partner cannot understand why he or she should spend so much time and effort on trivial details; and so on.

Whatever the configuration, the complimentary qualities that bring a couple together--the very qualities that can potentially contribute to a couple's success, can

present major obstacles to a couple's individual and collective sense of well being. As a result, many partners struggle with the fear that they are incompatible with one another. They believe, as Protsky (1991) observes, that they may have made the wrong choice for a partner, and have little understanding of the inevitability and universality of their situation, nor do they comprehend the importance for their own life development in terms of the differences they find so frustrating.

There is an important value in the complimentary differences beyond meeting the world as a more complete unit; namely, these differences provide the potential basis for the further maturation and differentiation of each partner. As Hendrix (1988) argues, the essential psychological function of an intimate relationship is to provide an opportunity for two incomplete people to have the opportunity to make themselves much more whole and more differentiated human beings. Thus, by joining with someone different—with someone almost opposite in many ways, each partner has the chance to enhance the underdeveloped parts of him or herself. For example, the neat one can learn to be more relaxed, while the sloppy one can learn to be more orderly; the active one can learn something about inner peace, while the sedentary one can learn to act more vigorously; the practical one can learn to envision possibility, while the dreamer can learn to be more realistic; and so on (Prosky, 1991).

If both partners can accept and learn from one another, they can move toward their own completion by becoming more developed and resourceful human beings. While this learning process is very difficult and produces much resentment and frustration, research shows that the resulting collaboration can also generate considerable contentment and satisfaction in the relationship (Aron, Norman, Aron, & Lewandowski, 2003). From a developmental perspective, this process can be understood as a transition between fusing and then differentiating in the relationship (Bowen, 1978). What I propose here is a model for deciphering the different phases that couples typically experience as they go through this fusion-differentiation process. This model consists of four different stages: (1) infatuation & fusion, (2) conflict & power struggle, (3) adjustment & consolidation, and (4) maturation & differentiation.

Stage I: Infatuation & Fusion

The first stage of an intimate relationship takes place as two people meet, become intensely involved, and fall in love. This is the most pronounced “in love” phase of the relationship and is what is often popularized in film and literature as the romantic part of an intimate relationship. Love (2001) refers to this stage of an intimate relationship as the infatuation syndrome. She describes this syndrome as a powerful neurochemical and psychological transformation of the lovers where they experience a kind of altered state of consciousness characterized by increased positive attitude, energy, concentration, and feelings of euphoria with one another. While this transformation is certainly an important part of helping partners bond and form a strong attachment (Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002; Johnson, 2004), it keeps them focused on their similarities and the comfortable aspects of their differences. Accordingly, they will tend to form this intense bond without a sufficient understanding of the major differences that will likely play a

central role in their later development. Largely ignoring these differences, they surrender to their courtship--a state of being that generally functions to limit critical reflection and to promote an intense idealization of the relationship (Hendrix, 1988).

Beside the limitations involved in being unable to understand their major differences, the couple's infatuation also has the tendency to pull each partner away from their individual selves and fuse them together. Spurred by the altered state of consciousness generated by their infatuation, this fusion creates the mistaken impression that they have actually connected with someone who is more or less identical to themselves. However, this fusion of selves, which can provide an enormous sense of exhilaration at the beginning of the relationship, gradually deteriorates over time. As this deterioration takes place [over an average period, according to Love (2001), of about six months], more tension and conflict enter the relationship because each partner can no longer suppress the parts of themselves they put aside to fuel their infatuation.

At this juncture, having become aware that they are quite different from one another and that they can no longer continue to suppress their individuality, many partners become disillusioned and terminate the relationship. However, many others continue with the hope and the commitment that they can work out their difficulties. Some of these partners, particularly those that have already achieved a certain amount of differentiation, begin revising their expectations. Rather than considering the loss of their infatuation as a crushing blow, these partners come to realize their difficulties are part of the normal transition that successful couples must make in moving from a "romantic relationship" to a "working partnership" (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). When they are able to make this transition, the partners are in the position to develop a more stable relationship and proceed to Stage IV. More typically, the partners who remain together, but who fail to come to terms with their relationship in this manner, often move to Stage II.

Stage II: Conflict & Power Struggle

Stage II involves the struggle of couples to differentiate themselves from their fusion. Fused together, they struggle about how to exert their individuality in the relationship. The less that they are differentiated, the more likely they will concentrate on each other's limitations (Gilbert, 2006; Hendrix, 1988). In essence, this struggle is the underside of Stage I. What was perceived as a strength in Stage I is viewed as a liability in Stage II. What was seen as the partner's seductive beauty in Stage I is perceived as his or her time-consuming preoccupation with physical appearance in Stage II; the strong silence of the partner in Stage I becomes his or her unwillingness to discuss the relationship and other intimate matters in Stage II; and so on (Protsky, 1991). In other words, from the relative optimism of Stage I where the glass was half full, couples find themselves in the worry and anxiety of Stage II, where there is more ongoing conflict and the glass now becomes half empty.

The shift from the bliss of Stage I to the tension of Stage II accentuates a major transition in the couple's relationship. The failure to understand and adjust to this

transition as a normal developmental task keeps the couple mired in their worry and anxiety. Love (2001) characterizes this phase of the relationship as the post-rapture stage in which the sentiments of “I-love-you-but-I’m-not-in-love-with-you” predominate. As these sentiments take hold, the partners become frightened by the disintegration of the images they held of their lovers, and commonly make a frantic attempt to reinstate their former perception of merged bliss. As Hendrix (1988) notes, these effects create a very difficult but powerful learning opportunity, but one that is mostly outside of the couple’s awareness. This lack of awareness and understanding compounds the pain. Their fights are rarely about what the couple perceives them to be; rather, their quarrels are superficial manifestations of their deeper struggle to differentiate themselves (Gilbert, 2006).

Gottman’s (1999) research on conflict in intimate relationships documents this phase of the couple’s conflict in painful detail. In this stage, the couple gets bogged down in gridlock and becomes embroiled in power struggles. Different ways of dealing with conflict and destructive engagement in criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling eventually cascade the couple into a mutually reinforcing pattern of distancing and isolation. As Johnson (2004) argues, at the root of this conflict is a state of disconnection that erodes the couple’s emotional bond and reduces their capacity to manage their conflict.

It is during this struggle, as Protsky (1991) points out, that each partner experiences a pull toward the opposite pole and consolidates his or her differences. At some point--which can take years to reach--the partners finally begin to realize that their attempts to change one another are failing. They begin to see themselves for who they are, and are able to face the fact that the only person they can really change is themselves. This is an extremely important juncture and a point of decision. According to Protsky (1991), it is here that the relationship road divides and the couple is compelled to make a choice about what route to take. One route leads to their separation, another to the consolidation of their differences, and still another to their differentiation.

There are generally two different paths that couples take when deciding to separate at this stage. The first is taken prior to the critical point at which the partners acknowledge their differences. It occurs while the couple is still in the midst of their fusion and struggle to differentiate themselves. They have not yet reached an understanding of each other's positions and are not ready to be fully responsible for themselves. Thus, when they separate, the partners tend to do so with a good deal of blaming and anger. The relationship is broken off without the partners having come to any sort of mutual understanding, and frequently communication between them is cut off. The pain from the wounds of their conflict is reduced by taking this particular path; but these wounds continue to fester until some more substantive resolution is reached between the parties or by each partner individually (Protsky, 1991).

The second path is taken after the critical point at which the partners identify their differences. The consequence of taking this path often leads to a sadder-but-wiser understanding. Anger and blaming are at a minimum, and each partner recognizes his or her contribution to the breakup. There is also some comprehension of the process that

brought the couple to the point of separation. Separation obviously brings to an end the possibility of being able to utilize the relationship for their further development. However, separation can also bring great relief, a heightened sense of self, and the possibility of investment of energies elsewhere (Prodsky, 1991).

Stage III: Adjustment & Consolidation

Another major route that partners take is to consolidate their differences; that is, they can form a stable definition of themselves--the one with which they entered the relationship--such that each performs the functions for the relationship that lie within the domain of his or her half of the world. In taking this route, partners can choose to function literally as each other's "other half," and specialize in their own areas of proficiency. Instead of the partners advancing the underdeveloped parts of themselves, they each exercise the already developed parts of themselves in attempt to reduce their frustrations and make their relationship work more smoothly. The partners in effect agree to play it safe in trying to stabilize the relationship in this manner.

Consolidation of differences works fairly well for the management of the external world, but as Prodsky (1991) argues, it has several internal limitations. First, it builds in as a constant feature of the relationship a sense of frustration and irritation with the areas of marked difference between the two partners. Chronic dissatisfaction results and is manifested in frequent arguments over the same issues. The relationship is well-defined--each knows what to expect of the other, but it pays the price in a high degree of rigidity and repetitiveness.

Second, as the partners become fixed at one side or the other of their complementarity, their natural traits often become exaggerated, and over time they can become caricatures. In this situation, for example, the sloppy one might become more disorganized; the sedentary one might become more inert, and the active one might become more frenetic; the practical one might become more joyless, the dreamer might become more fantastical, and so on.

Consolidating differences generates a third limitation as partners become more and more dependent upon one another. This leads to mounting resentment. It is one thing to feel that one's contribution is appreciated; it is quite another to feel so obligated that if one partner does not contribute, the other suffers. The latter is a sort of tyranny of neediness, often masquerading as love. The partner who does not make the expected contribution is faulted. When one partner relies on the other to complete his or her existence, too great a burden is placed on the relationship, and failure to fulfill expectations generates distress and resentment. Moreover, an undercurrent of resentment can erupt into serious fights, physical illness, and psychological problems for the couple.

In a relationship in which less is necessary for the completion of each partner, each contribution can be viewed more as a gift than as something owed or due. The relationship actually builds up a supply of good will that can be drawn upon in times of stress. However, if partners create a relationship in which they expect others to

contribute for them, resentment can be generated and stored when their needs are not met. Conversely, if partners create a relationship in which each partner is relatively self-sufficient, there can be gracious appreciation for the contributions made, and good will can be generated and stored (Gottman, 2001).

The fourth internal limitation of a relationship in which differences are consolidated is that each partner carries a perpetual fear of being left alone, either through a breakup, illness, or death. The effects of this kind of chronic—though subliminal—fear are very powerful and it contaminates the relationship. Partners become suspicious of one another or become overly worried—selfishly—about one another's well-being. This creates a subtle atmosphere of mistrust that may never be consciously identified by either partner (Protsky, 1991).

The stabilization of differences can also provide important benefits to the couple. It can result in less internal struggle, maintain a sense of dependency, and provide the comfort of a dependable relationship. These benefits are not to be underrated, but it should be understood that consolidation of differences constrains the partners from achieving substantial individual development (Protsky, 1991).

Taking an overview of this critical juncture and the three potential routes that can be taken, it is important to mention that the first and second options are reversible. The separated couple can decide to come back together to work further on their relationship. Partners who have stabilized their differences can decide to understudy each other in order to become more self-sufficient and move their relationship into Stage IV. The decision to move to this phase is not reversible in the same way, although it can lead to a full-circle developmental spiral wherein the partners decide to stabilize their separateness.

Stage IV: Maturation & Differentiation

The fourth stage of the relationship marks the emergence of two mature and self-sufficient individuals who value their interdependence. Building on their solid commitment to one another, each partner has forged a deep sense of individuality and mutuality in their relationship. There is also a new found clarity about the difficulties they encounter with each other (Schoebi, Karney, Bradbury, 2012).

Couples who are able to advance to Stage IV of the relationship begin to value their individual differences, learn the other's point of view, and integrate the complementary elements of their partner into their own functioning (Gilbert, 2006). When a difference causes conflict for these couples, each partner attempts to identify the fear it generates in him or her, with the purpose of better understanding individual weaknesses. Each partner attempts to understand the importance of the other person's position in order to learn more about the other's world.

Blaming the other person becomes out of bounds in disputes, and the acceptance of a high degree of personal responsibility in their conflicts replaces it. Whereas blaming

has the effect of making the other partner more defensive and intractable, hence stifling development; taking responsibility tends to elicit responsibility on the part of the other partner, thereby enhancing development. Partners on this path tend to take more personal responsibility for themselves with each partner attempting to look at what he or she—not what the other—might have done differently to handle their conflict more effectively (Protsky, 1999).

The commitment involved in arriving at Stage IV requires a devotion of time and energy to the relationship equal to that often reserved for work and children. It also requires continually facing oneself and one's own greatest problems and weaknesses. The entry into Stage IV is marked by a gradual recapturing of a sense of harmony. This time it is built not on the highly skewed perceptions of the infatuation phase, but on the hard-won understanding of the self and other. In Stages II and III, struggles were compounded by the couple's mutual lack of understanding; in Stage IV, with an increased clarity about self, there is an increasing degree of clarity about their disagreements. Fights address actual issues, making them far less confusing than Stage II fights, though potentially more painful in the sense that they get more to the root of the matter (Protsky, 1999).

The mature and differentiated couple has evolved into an abiding companionate love that nurtures their friendship and leaves their incompatibilities unresolved (Books, 2011). The partners are able to tolerate a certain amount of aloneness in the midst of their intimacy, because they understand that it is the tradeoff they must make in order to retain their individuality (Williamson, 1991). This perception leads a couple toward an expansion of their goodwill, and a new sense of trust, generosity, respect, and understanding is established between them. Reaching this stage is a major accomplishment and one that yields considerable gratification. Relationships in Stage IV tend to generate and store goodwill so that satisfaction deepens, protecting the relationship from deterioration (Gottman, 1999).

Conclusion

These then are the four stages that typically constitute the evolution of intimate relationships: (1) infatuation and fusion, (2) followed by conflicts about differences and individuation, (3) often accompanied by adjustment and consolidation of these differences, and (4) finally succeeded by a relationship of harmony between two differentiated people. Although this fusion-differentiation process has been presented as consisting of four stages, these stages are only meant to serve as a general framework for depicting the different challenges that many couples face in attempting to maintain and enhance the quality of intimacy in their relationship. In addition, it should be further noted that intimate relationships rarely move smoothly from one stage to another; instead, they tend to move in fits and starts, with different aspects of each stage simultaneously manifesting themselves at any given time. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that the structure of the stage model presented here should be viewed as dynamic in nature with a structure that becomes progressively complex but is not strictly hierarchical in its organization. It should be also understood that this model is meant to portray some—but

certainly not all—of the key emotional features and phases that couples tend to experience in their efforts to achieve greater intimacy with one another.

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