

Stages of Relational Development

(Note: Main points draw heavily from Knapp's model of relationships: using "steps" as depicted in the class handout. However, our text uses the idea of moving up/down—like an elevator)

Movement through the stages:

- Movement generally systematic and sequential. However, sequence is changeable/fluid; some stages may be skipped.
- Movement may be forward—toward greater intimacy if moving forward.
- Movement may be backward—maybe due to decrease in intimacy; maybe b/c stages skipped and going back and "picking" them up...
- Escalation "up" represents a movement towards greater intimacy (trust/closeness) (not necessarily sexual intimacy) and relational satisfaction can increase.

STAGES:

(Note: These stages can apply to close friendships as well as romantic relationships.)

Pre-interaction awareness – when we become "aware" of the other person (prior to contact).

Ex: seeing someone from across a crowded room; noticing someone at a party; a friend telling us about someone they want to set us up with

Initiating – making contact; perceptual and interactional contact; at this stage we take note of the other person and decide to interact—and initiate.

Experimenting – to explore the unknown;

- Stage characterized by small talk; an exchange of surface-level information; asking questions to get "breadth" but maybe not too much depth; (Note: reciprocity in self-disclosure important); reducing uncertainty while getting to know each other (bringing up topics to "check-out" how the other person reacts/responds)

Exploration – to continue to explore the unknown; going from low risk self-disclosure to more riskier self-disclosure—increased breadth and depth from previous stage; reciprocity continues to be important.

Intensifying – "involvement"; here the relationship tends to go beyond acquaintance-ship moving the conversation to "friend/close friend/relational partner" level.

Verbal cues that reflect the intensifying stage:

- Forms of address become more informal—such as use of a nick name or term of endearment
- Use of first person plural becomes more common (Ex: "We" should do this....)
- More risk with self-disclosures (in breadth and especially depth)
- Private symbols begin to develop—such as special jargon or slang; enables communication to become more high-context (E. Hall), that is, more information can be communicated through the context (shared history, traditions), without constructing/using direct, verbal messages.
- More direct statements of commitment may appear. (Ex: I really like you a lot; I like hanging out with you, etc).
- Increase in nonverbal and haptic (touch) communication. Space and possessions become more accessible to each relational partner. (Ex: couples or friends who begin coordinating their outfit, or friends who share each other's clothes/makeup; inviting each other to each other's houses for family vacations/events.)

Integrating - this stage represents greater commitment.

Communication behaviors that might typically occur at this stage:

- I, me and mine, often become “we, us and ours”.
- Rules and roles in the relationship have been negotiated and mostly are shared/understood.
- Social circles might merge and others begin to treat the pair as a common package (Ex: one invitation/evite or one present)
- The pair may cultivate attitudes, opinions, interests and tastes that they think distinguish them from other people. (Ex: my husband and I started saying we were “suburb” people and wouldn’t move to the city; my friend and her husband say they are “small town folk caught up in a big city; another couple friend of ours always brags that they never fight about money or fight at all)
- Intimacy trophies are exchanged—in order to be identified and/or feel belonging in the relationship (ex: pictures, class rings, rings, ipod playlists ☺)
- Similarities in manner, dress, verbal behavior may also accentuate oneness.
- Actual physical penetration of various body parts may contribute to perceived unification.
- Designation of common property. (Ex: having “our song” or a joint bank account; buying a car together or some other major purchase)

“REVISING” –at any point in these stages we may make/engage in a re-evaluation of the relationship especially if a person is unhappy with the accommodations that they have to make with regard to the relational partner (perhaps via a Social Exchange analysis).

If this is the case, then you may choose to terminate the relationship and begin to de-escalate it (moving *across/down* the steps/elevator). Even if continue to pursue the relationship, one may find themselves having to make these ‘revisions’ (re-evaluations) or modifications at some point.

Bonding - Bonding is both an EVENT and a PROCESS. Bonding is a commitment to the revised relationship. A bonding ceremony can be public or private (process is marriage; event is wedding).

--With public ceremony such as marriage, relationship has institutional support—there are laws, prescriptions, precedents that the couple can rely upon for support and guidance.

--if the event is less public or private, (such as “moving in together” , or for example, the “post-it” note commitment between Derek and Meredith in Grey’s Anatomy), then the couple must rely more on each other to keep the relationship intact.

--Several features of bonding:

- Voluntary
- Will continue for an indefinite period.
- ***Brings on the rise of NEW RULES (as it redefines the relationship)**
- Decisions are usually made jointly.
- ****Bonding remains a process after the event because once the commitment made, the relationship will continue to evolve—it will continue to move towards and maintain intimacy and will be influenced by the push – pull of relational dialectics. Part of how a relationship evolves and is maintained, is through communication.**

A Dialectical Perspective on Communication Strategies in Relationships

- idea that personal relationships fraught with contradictions, or dialectics, which we learn to manage as we strive to maintain our relationship
- these are forces that are present throughout our relationship with a relational partner

Three most recurrent dialectics are:

Autonomy-Connection Dialectic – primary/central dialectic in relationships.

- No relationship can exist unless the people involved give up some sort of individual autonomy
- Too much autonomy can destroy the relational identities and the connections with others which are important
- We try to figure out how to balance this tension between “being together” and “being apart” throughout our relationship, even as it grows and changes.

Novelty-Predictability Dialectic - certain amount of predictability is necessary for relationships to function. Developing patterns of relating enable stability in our lives.

- Must balance predictability with a certain amount of novelty (unpredictability)
- Too rigid or too predictable can be dysfunctional.
- Overly predictable/repetitive can contribute to declining affective arousal—a kind of emotional deadening of a relationship

Openness-Closedness Dialectic – open disclosure is a necessary condition or intimacy but then that creates a vulnerability for the relational partners; balancing privacy and boundaries in a relationship.

MAINTENANCE BEHAVIORS (mostly from Dindia and Baxter research, based on couples and what they do to maintain their relationships—identified communication strategies).

- Openness – direct discussion/listening; express empathy and self-disclose regularly
- Togetherness – spending time together; doing this as a couple
- Positivity—make interactions positive, pleasant, and upbeat; doing favors for the other person
- Ceremonial—celebrate important events (such as birthdays and anniversaries); discuss enjoyable past times (thereby creating high context moments)
- Assurance—expressing love/demonstrating importance of the relationship; letting partner know how important they are and that they are a priority in your life