Simply because most people actively seek long-term romantic relationships (and eventually form at least one) does not necessarily mean that those relationships will function smoothly or last forever. The process of relationship development can sometimes be “bumpy” and tension may develop between partners in even the most committed and loving of relationships. In this chapter, we examine the topic of conflict, including the events that occur during conflict and how couples...
manage conflict. We also consider relationship dissolution—from the sequence of events involved in breakups to the ways in which people commonly respond to the demise of a romantic relationship.

CONFLICT

Conflict and disagreement are extremely common occurrences in most romantic relationships. Community surveys, for instance, reveal that nearly all married couples report having “unpleasant disagreements” at least some of the time, with most reporting average frequencies of one to three disagreements per month (Hatch & Bulcroft, 2004; McGonagle, Kessler, & Schilling, 1992). In addition, as couples progress from casual dating to more intimate forms of romantic involvement (e.g., steady dating, engagement, marriage), they often experience an increase not only in their levels of love and commitment but also in the amount of conflict in their relationships (e.g., Braiker & Kelley, 1979). In sum, conflict appears to be part and parcel of most dating and mating relationships.

What Happens During Conflict? The Role of Attributions

As anyone who has ever had a disagreement with a loved one knows, partners not only act and react to each other during conflict, but they also experience emotions and thoughts, express beliefs, make attributions, and come to conclusions. Research now suggests that these affective and cognitive processes play a crucial role in conflict-related interactions. As noted by Bruce Orvis, Harold Kelley, and Deborah Butler (1976), partners in even the most ideal relationship often place different (and sometimes contradictory) interpretations on each other’s behavior. In their seminal article on attributional conflict in young couples, these social scientists identified several basic attributional “facts” about interpersonal conflict.

The first fact is that during conflict, attributional processes become activated as each partner seeks to understand the cause of the conflict and of the other’s behavior.

“I thought he loved me. So why did he forget our anniversary?” Julia wonders.

“Why isn’t she speaking to me?” Richard thinks. “What’s going on? Did I do something wrong?”
When the relationship is progressing smoothly, partners do not ask why; agreement does not need explaining. It is only when an unpleasant—or unexpected—event occurs that the flow of the relationship is interrupted and partners begin to actively search for an explanation.

The second fact is that the attribution process is selective. During conflict, partners can—and do—quickly and easily bring to mind information that serves their personal interests. In addition, partners often genuinely believe that they possess an accurate understanding of the causes of each other’s behavior and feel that their own behavior is justified.

“He deserves the silent treatment for not remembering our anniversary. I always remember to do nice things for him, like the time I planned that huge surprise party. He knows how important this day is to me. I bet he’s still mad because I threw out his ratty old T-shirt—this is just his petty way of getting back at me,” Julia fumes.

“Is she still upset about that comment I made? She knows I was only kidding. How many times do I have to apologize? I hate this silent treatment stuff; it’s so childish. I wish she’d just grow up and tell me when she’s mad. At least I have the decency to communicate openly about my feelings,” Richard sighs with exasperation.

Orvis and his colleagues (1976) noted that attributions can serve conflicting personal interests and still meet the criteria of plausibility because “ordinary events, including interpersonal behavior, readily lend themselves to different interpretations..., [and] the everyday attributor has great freedom to select from many different kinds of information and causes” (p. 380). In other words, faced with an unpleasant or unexpected interpersonal event, the individual has at his or her mental fingertips an array of seemingly plausible explanations, any one of which may promote or further his or her own agenda.

The third fact is that the attributions that partners make during times of conflict can create “attributional conflicts”—disagreements about the causes of behavior—that usually are irresolvable. Partners often disagree, not only about the ostensible conflict of interest, but also about the reasons for their behavior.

“I’m mad because you forgot our anniversary. How could you? And don’t give me any lame excuses; I know how you operate, and I know that this is your way of getting back at me for throwing out that stupid T-shirt,” Julia yells.
“What? You’ve got to be kidding me. I’m not mad about the T-shirt. I forgot because I’m under a lot of pressure at work; you know how that new project has sucked up all my time. The deadline is getting closer and I’m the one whose job is on the line. I can’t believe you think I would deliberately do something like this!” Richard argues.

Both partners in our example agree that Richard forgot their anniversary. However, they disagree about the reasons for this event. Richard honestly believes that he forgot because he is under extreme pressure at work. Julia just as firmly believes that he forgot because he is upset that she threw out his old T-shirt and therefore is punishing her. As noted by Orvis and his colleagues (1976), the multiple interpretations that can be given to any one behavior, the relative inability of each partner to prove that a particular causal explanation is correct, and the continuing conflict of interest itself all “make it improbable that the actor and the partner can come to see eye-to-eye in the matter” (p. 381). During conflict, then, partners often find themselves with both a source of initial disagreement plus an additional source of conflict regarding attributions. Richard and Julia may end up not only arguing about the forgotten anniversary, but about the putative reasons for the original conflict.

The fourth fact is that “meta-attributions”—explanations for explanations—may arise and create additional problems for the partners. The researchers propose that partners often evaluate the credibility of the attributions that are made for a particular behavior (Orvis et al., 1976). When one partner gives a causal explanation that is not credible, that is illogical, or that seems particularly unconvincing, the other partner may wonder why it was given.

“Wait a minute. He just hired an assistant,” Julia thinks. “And his boss said she’d extend the deadline if he needed more time to finish the project. So why would he use that as his excuse for missing our anniversary? It doesn’t make any sense. I just know he’s still upset about the T-shirt. If he’s not, then something else must be going on.”

The issue of why a certain attribution was made may raise serious doubts about the giver of the attribution (e.g., his or her candor, trustworthiness, honesty, or perceptiveness) and about the future of the relationship and may become yet another source of conflict between partners.

Investigations of the moment-by-moment thought processes that occur between romantic partners during conflict episodes support many
of the observations initially made by Orvis and his colleagues (1976). In one study, for example, married couples visited a “family interaction lab” that was created by researchers Alan Sillars, Linda Roberts, Kenneth Leonard, and Tim Dun (2000). The lab resembled a combination living room and dining room, and each couple spent 15 minutes in this setting discussing one of their current unresolved disagreements. The spouses then went to separate rooms to view the videotape of their interaction. The videotape was designed to stop playing after each 20-second interval; when it did, participants reported into a microphone what they remembered thinking and feeling at the time.

Analysis of these spontaneous thoughts revealed that individuals tended to treat their inferences as objective observations (“He’s attacking me”; “She’s lying”). They seemed unaware of the possibility that they might be mistaken in their assumptions and/or conclusions. Similarly, participants’ thoughts showed little evidence of complex perspective-taking. For example, only 3% of their codable thoughts had a mutual or relational focus (i.e., showed awareness of the interdependence between each partner’s behavior), and only 5% of their thoughts focused on how the partner might be interpreting the situation. Furthermore, when participants did attempt to identify or acknowledge the partner’s perspective, they tended to view that perspective in simplistic and undifferentiated terms (“He thinks he’s right”; “She knows I’m sick of talking about this”). Negative thoughts and feelings also occurred much more frequently than positive ones. And finally, both husbands and wives displayed a tendency to view their own communication during the conflict more favorably than that of their partner. Specifically, both spouses attributed positive acts (e.g., collaboration and cooperation, disclosure and openness, soliciting information, attending to the partner) more often to themselves than to the partner, and both attributed negative acts and intentions (e.g., confrontation, avoidance and withdrawal, topic shifting, stonewalling, lying, insincerity) more often to the partner than to themselves. The researchers concluded,

A surprisingly high proportion of thoughts were negatively valenced and there was minimal evidence of attention to the inherent complexity and ambiguity that exists in the communicative process. Participants showed a tendency to construe their own and their partner’s communicative acts as objectifiable behaviors with unequivocal meaning. Presumably, this is part of the problem that occurs when interaction does not go smoothly—people treat their inferences as objective observations. (Sillars et al., 2000, p. 496)
Taken as a whole, these data suggest that people’s perceptions, attributions, and thoughts during conflict often are subjective, simplistic, and self-serving. Knowing this, couples should strive for accuracy, for objectivity, and for empathic understanding of each other’s position during times of duress and disagreement.

Attributional Styles

In addition to exploring the attributional processes that occur during conflict, researchers also have identified the types of attributions that romantic partners make for each other’s behavior, and whether these attributional styles are associated with such important relational events as satisfaction and stability. In their exhaustive review of the marital attribution literature, Thomas Bradbury and Frank Fincham (1990) concluded that there is a clear association between attributional styles and marital satisfaction (also see Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Karney & Bradbury, 2000). Individuals in nondistressed relationships explain the partner’s positive behavior as being due to his or her internal disposition and believe that the cause of the behavior will be stable over time and globally influential in a variety of marital situations (see Figure 5.1a). Nondistressed individuals attribute negative partner behavior to external circumstance or the partner’s temporary state and believe that these circumstances or states will be unstable over time and specific to that one marital area. By enhancing the impact of positive events and minimizing the impact of negative events, this particular attributional pattern promotes relational well-being.

Distressed partners demonstrate the opposite attributional pattern. Specifically, they attribute each other’s positive behaviors to situational (rather than dispositional) causes, assume that these causes are unstable and unlikely to be repeated, and believe that these causes are operative in one specific situation rather than in many or all marital situations (see Figure 5.1b). Essentially, a distressed spouse views a partner who does something positive as “having acted unintentionally and with less positive and more negative intent, having little control over the cause of the event, being influenced by a temporary state rather than by a persisting trait, behaving involuntarily, being motivated by selfish concerns, being less deserving of praise, and having a less positive attitude toward the respondent” (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990, p. 5). Conversely, a distressed spouse attributes negative behaviors to the partner’s enduring dispositional characteristics; these causes are believed to be stable over time and are perceived as globally influential across marital situations rather than as specific to one or a few situations. By discounting positive
NOTE: After reviewing the marital attribution literature, Thomas Bradbury and Frank Fincham (1990) concluded that there is a clear association between marital satisfaction and attribution styles. People in satisfying or nondistressed relationships tend to attribute positive spouse behaviors to internal, stable, and global causes. They tend to attribute negative spouse behaviors to external, unstable, and specific causes. This attributional pattern enhances the impact of positive events and minimizes the impact of negative events, and therefore promotes marital well-being.
Figure 5.1b  The Attributional Style of Distressed Couples

Distressed Couples Make Relationship-Harming Attributions

Event | Attributional Style | Outcome
--- | --- | ---
Positive | External | Distress
“You remembered our anniversary.”

Negative | Internal |
“You forgot my birthday.”

Internal | “You are an uncaring, inconsiderate person.”

External | “Your secretary must have reminded you.”

Unstable | “You’re usually not so thoughtful. It won’t happen again.”

Specific | “You never remember other important occasions.”

Stable | “You always treat me this way.”

Global | “This is just another example of your thoughtlessness.”

NOTE: People in distressed marriages demonstrate the opposite attributional pattern. They attribute positive spouse behaviors to external, unstable, and specific causes, and they attribute negative spouse behaviors to internal, stable, and global causes. This attributional pattern diminishes or discounts the impact of positive events and accentuates the impact of negative events, thereby promoting relational distress.
events and accentuating the impact of negative ones, this attributional pattern promotes relational distress.

Research reveals that these attributional patterns may play an important role in determining how well a couple responds to stressful life events. For example, in one recent investigation, psychologists James Graham and Collie Conoley (2006) asked a sample of married couples to complete a variety of measures including a stress questionnaire that assessed the level of stress experienced by each partner within the past year (these numbers were combined to form a total accumulated stress score for the couple); a relationship attribution questionnaire that determined the extent to which the partners attributed negative spousal behaviors to internal, stable, and global causes; and a marital adjustment scale that provided an overall index of marital quality. The results revealed that relationship attributions moderated the association between marital quality and accumulated life stressors. This means that while the level of stress that the couples experienced was related to their marital quality, the relationship (between stress and marital quality) was partly dependent on the kinds of attributions that the couples made. Specifically, there was a strong and negative correlation between stress and marital quality among couples who made negative relationship attributions: Couples who attributed their spouses’ negative behavior to dispositional, stable, and global causes experienced lower levels of marital adjustment in the face of an accumulation of life stressors. However, stress and marital quality were unrelated among couples who made positive relationship attributions: Couples who attributed their spouse’s negative behavior to situational, unstable, and specific causes did not report lower levels of marital adjustment in the face of an accumulation of life stressors. The researchers concluded that “the presence of negative marital attributions appears to have the potential to make the relationship of couples more vulnerable to the impact of stressful events, while the presence of relationship-enhancing attributions appears to serve as a protective factor” (Graham & Conoley, 2006, pp. 237–238).

Clearly, the kinds of attributions that people make about their partners’ behaviors are important in determining both the overall quality of their relationships and how well those relationships can withstand problematic life events.

Conflict Resolution

Whether conflict promotes relational satisfaction or produces interpersonal distress depends, in part, on how the conflict is managed by
the partners. For example, research generally reveals that relationship satisfaction is strongly associated with the use of “positive” or constructive conflict resolution strategies. Men and women whose partners employ reason (problem-solving and the use of rational argument, e.g., presenting alternatives, seeking solutions to the problem), assertion (direct expression of opinions or wants, e.g., clearly stating one’s position, redirecting the conversation to the issue or topic, emphasizing points by gesture or eye contact), or partner support (acknowledgment of the partner’s views, e.g., actively listening or questioning, expressing clear agreement with the partner, making compromises or concessions) are happier and more satisfied than individuals whose partners make less use of these strategies (e.g., Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; for a review, see Cupach & Canary, 2003).

“Negative” conflict resolution strategies are associated with interpersonal distress and dissatisfaction (Noller et al., 1994). Negative strategies include coercion, defined as seeking control through the use of force (e.g., blame, threats, sarcasm, physical or verbal aggression); manipulation, defined as attempting to gain compliance by indirect or false means (e.g., providing misleading information, attempting to make the partner feel guilty or defensive, feigning sincerity or various mood states); and avoidance, characterized by a physical and/or emotional retreat from the situation (e.g., changing or avoiding the topic, avoiding eye contact, minimizing the situation by joking).

Another potentially destructive conflict style is the demand-withdraw pattern of communication, in which one partner desires change and approaches the other about it while the other partner withdraws from the issue or conflict. Demand-withdraw consistently has been linked with marital dissatisfaction and instability (e.g., Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Noller et al., 1994; Uebelacker, Courtnage, & Whisman, 2003; Wegner, 2005). There also is a robust sex difference with respect to this pattern; research with married couples demonstrates that women typically demand and men typically withdraw (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman & Levenson, 1988). However, laboratory examinations of actual conflict interactions between couples reveal that it is not so much the sex of the spouse that predicts the occurrence of demand or withdraw responses but rather whose issue is being discussed and the relative power distribution between partners (e.g., Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Sagrestano, Christensen, & Heavey, 1998). For example, husbands—like wives—tend to adopt a demand orientation when discussing issues that are important to them. In addition, the less powerful (and often less satisfied) partner is generally the one who demands change, whereas the more powerful partner is generally the
one who attempts to avoid the issue and maintain the status quo. Since women often have less marital power than do men, this may explain why women are more likely to demand and men to withdraw. Interestingly, survey data indicate that, relative to heterosexual partners, gay and lesbian partners are less likely to engage in the demand-withdraw pattern; this may possibly reflect the fact that their relationships are characterized by a more equal power distribution than is typically observed in heterosexual couples (see Kurdek, 2005b).

Is there a secret to resolving conflict? Obviously, no one strategy will work well for all couples. However, we can glean some hints from the available literature. First, successful conflict management requires open and honest communication in which both partners clearly express their opinions, positions, and wants. Second, the partners should remain focused on the issue or situation at hand. Third, each partner must attempt to understand the other’s perspective and try to recognize his or her own contribution to the interaction and the partner’s responses. Fourth, the partners should try to express positive affect whenever possible and to suppress (or at least not reciprocate) negative feelings and expressions. Finally, the partners’ goal should be to reach an equitable solution rather than a win-lose one, and both must be willing to compromise and negotiate in service of that goal.

**RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION**

Conflict, distress-maintaining attributions, and negative conflict resolution strategies certainly can contribute to unhappiness and the demise of a relationship. However, even stable and satisfying relationships end. Research indicates that over 50% of all first marriages and approximately 60% of all remarriages in the United States end in divorce or permanent separation (Castro-Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Henley & Pasley, 2003; Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1994). Between 1950 and the mid-1980s, the divorce rate rose steadily; since that time, it has remained fairly steady and currently falls at 3.7 divorces per 1,000 people in the population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007a). Although the United States has one of the highest divorce rates in the world, rising divorce rates now characterize many other nations as well (Kumagai, 1995; Lester, 1996). For example, Canada, Japan, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom all experienced a marked increase in the ratio of divorces to marriages in their populations between the years 1980 and 2003 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007b). It is important to recognize that because these estimates
do not include information about the termination rates of premarital or cohabiting couples, actual rates of relationship dissolution in general are probably much higher.

Interestingly, some kinds of committed relationship appear more prone to dissolution than others. National surveys indicate that heterosexual married couples are less likely to end their relationships than are heterosexual and homosexual cohabiting couples (see Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). For example, in one recent study, psychologist Lawrence Kurdek (2004) compared the rate of relationship dissolution among three groups of participants: cohabiting gay male couples, cohabiting lesbian couples, and heterosexual married couples. His results revealed that significantly more of the cohabiting homosexual couples (19% of the gay male couples and 24% of the lesbian couples) than of the heterosexual married couples (15%) had ended their relationships. In sum, divorce or relationship termination is an increasingly common experience in the lives of men and women in the U.S. and around the world.

Why Do Relationships End?

Researchers have identified a wide array of factors that are associated with the likelihood of divorce. For example, a number of personality traits and dispositional characteristics are correlated with relationship dissolution. We will examine the association between individual difference variables and marital stability in Chapters 14, 15, and 16. Other factors that are implicated in divorce are demographic. For example, recent reviews of the divorce literature (e.g., Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006; Teachman, Tedrow, & Hall, 2006) indicate that the following variables reliably predict marital dissolution:

- **Age at marriage**: This is one of the most consistent predictors of divorce. Men and women who marry at younger ages have an increased risk of divorce.
- **Education level**: Lower levels of educational attainment are associated with an increased likelihood of marital termination.
- **Race or ethnicity**: Among married couples, African Americans are the most likely to divorce, followed by whites and Latinos. Asian married couples are the least likely to divorce. In addition, there is some limited evidence that divorce is more likely among interracial couples than among same-race couples.
- **Remarriage**: The likelihood of divorce is higher in second marriages than it is in first marriages.
Interpersonal factors are also strongly implicated in relationship dissolution. For example, people often end relationships because they become disillusioned with the partner and the relationship. Social scientist Ted Huston and his colleagues (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001) found that divorce was associated with declining feelings of love, lowered rates of affectionate behavior, increasing ambivalence about the marriage, and the growing conviction that one’s spouse is not responsive. The various theories we reviewed in Chapter 3 suggest a number of additional interpersonal reasons why relationships might end, including changes in the factors that initially promoted relationship development. For example, self-disclosure can fuel the progression of a romantic relationship as the partners learn new things about each other and experience increased intimacy. Self-disclosure also increases the risk, however, that an individual will reveal something about himself or herself that the other finds unappealing. In addition, researchers find that the disclosure of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors may produce unhappiness and contribute to relationship dissolution (Gottman & Levenson, 1992).

Across cultures, a particularly common interpersonal cause for divorce is the unfaithfulness of one of the partners. Evolutionary scholar Laura Betzig (1989) examined reasons for divorce in a sample of 160 societies. Infidelity or adultery was the most common cause of conjugal dissolution, mentioned in 88 societies (or 55% of the sample). (We will consider the topic of infidelity in greater detail in Chapter 13.) Other frequent causes of divorce or marital dissolution included sterility, usually that of wives (47% of societies); cruelty or maltreatment, primarily by husbands (34%); and “displeasingness” or personality conflicts (32%). Interestingly, polygyny—a husband electing to add another wife to the household—and subsequent co-spouse conflict was the eighth most commonly reported cause of marital dissolution, cited by 16% of societies. As we have seen, polygyny may be an optional form of mate choice in certain cultures, but it is neither common nor does it necessarily produce positive outcomes for the partners. Betzig noted,

Polygyny in effect legitimizes what would be extramarital sex on the part of a husband. The result is that, to a wife, the most important “other women” are cowives rather than lovers. When a husband has added too many of them or neglected her to favor them, a woman may divorce him. (p. 661)

Other researchers have also found lower rates of marital satisfaction and higher rates of psychological distress among wives in polygynous
marriages than among wives in monogamous marriages (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2006); this provides additional evidence that polygyny may not be conducive to optimal marital functioning and thus may contribute to relationship dissolution.

Other causes of divorce appear to be culture-specific. Psychological and physical abuse associated with alcohol abuse by husbands has been documented as a primary reason why many women in Poland and Russia seek divorce, increasing economic opportunities for women are associated with rising divorce rates in Japan and Africa, and political unrest (which led many men and women to marry hastily and perhaps unwisely) seems to be a factor in Iranian divorce rates (see Goodwin, 1999).

Changes in the social environment may also produce an increased likelihood of relationship dissolution. Several scholars have posited that the increased economic independence of women, the reduction of legal barriers to divorce (e.g., “no fault” divorce laws), the reduced social stigma associated with divorce, and other social changes that occurred in the United States during the 20th century have made it easier for individuals involved in unhappy marriages to dissolve their unions (see Amato & Irving, 2006; Berscheid & Campbell, 1981). The nature of a person’s available alternatives constitutes another social factor that is implicated in relationship termination. Caryl Rusbult and colleagues (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982) asked a sample of young adults to think of a time when they became dissatisfied with a romantic relationship and to describe their response to that situation. Their results revealed that men and women who believed that the available alternatives would be “better” and more satisfying than the current partner and relationship were more likely to choose to end that relationship. Other researchers similarly find that divorce rates increase when the existing social environment conspires to create abundant opportunities for remarriage (e.g., high geographic mobility rates, imbalanced sex ratios that result in many marriage prospects; Secord, 1983; South, 1995; South & Lloyd, 1995).

These are only a few of the many factors that can contribute to the demise of the association between two people.

**How Do Relationships End?**

Several models of romantic relationship termination have been proposed. For example, relationship scholar Steve Duck (1982) suggested that relationships undergo four phases of disengagement and dissolution. Each phase is characterized by different patterns of
communication and interaction between the partners. The first phase, the *intrapsychic* phase, begins when one partner (or both partners) crosses a threshold of what Duck calls “unbearable dissatisfaction” with the current state of the relationship. During this phase, the individual privately focuses on the partner’s behavior and identifies any causes of dissatisfaction with the partner. In addition, the individual assesses the internal dynamics of the relationship, evaluates the negative aspects of being in the relationship, considers the costs of withdrawing from the relationship, and assesses positive aspects of any available alternatives to the relationship. This cognitive activity is essentially private and generally is not directly expressed to the partner. In essence, an individual in this beginning phase of relationship dissolution asks himself or herself, “Am I happy? Are things between us okay? Will I be better off by myself or with so-and-so?” Once a person comes to the mental realization that leaving the relationship might be better than staying in it and resolves to confront the partner about this issue, the second phase is engaged.

During the *dyadic* phase, the focus becomes interpersonal. Here, the person must confront the partner with his or her dissatisfaction, express his or her discomfort, and present his or her view of the relationship. The partner, in turn, may question the individual’s views, provide alternative explanations for events, present his or her view of the relationship, and so on. This interpersonal process is likely to be difficult and to produce stress and even anger as the two partners face their differences of opinion and negotiate their respective roles. Together, the partners must make a choice between repairing the relationship or allowing its demise; in so doing, they weigh the pros and cons of the relationship and consider alternative forms of the relationship. If the partners decide that the relationship cannot be repaired, then the final steps in the dyadic phase “involve preparation for the post-dissolution state: essentially this means starting to create the ‘public story’ about the causes and course of the disengagement” (Duck, 1982, p. 24).

The third phase of dissolution, the *social* phase, centers on the public and social repercussions for dissolving the relationship. The partners are faced with the tasks of dealing with their “newly single” status (not an easy situation in a social world that values couplehood) and subsequent doubts about their futures. In addition, they must explain the situation to friends, family, neighbors, and others in the social network and must face the judgment and possible disapproval of those social entities. The social phase concludes when each partner creates and distributes publicly a story about the relationship’s demise;
these stories attribute blame and provide causal explanations for the breakup and often are used by the partners to save face.

The stories or accounts created during the social phase may be quite different from the ones produced by the ex-partners during the final phase, the grave-dressing phase. Here, each individual is concerned with coming to terms with the breakup and moving on. As noted by Duck (1982),

Once the main psychological “work” of dissolving a personal relationship is over, the problem remains of what to do with the memories associated with it. The processes here remind me of grave-dressing: the attempt to neaten up the last resting place of the corpse and to erect public statements of its form, contribution, and importance. Much of the activity of getting over a relationship concerns simplification, rationalization, and beautification of the course, themes, and outcomes of the relationship while it still flourished. (p. 27)

Essentially, the persons involved engage in a retrospective analysis of the relationship and its death; this allows them to create an acceptable personal story (as opposed to a public account that attributes blame for the breakup) about the course of the relationship and to tidy up the memories associated with it.

In recent revisions of his model (e.g., Rollie & Duck, 2006), Duck has replaced the word phase with the term processes in an effort to call attention to the fact that relationship dissolution may not follow a set sequence of separate stages. In addition, he has introduced a new set of final processes, called resurrection processes, that involve the ways in which individuals prepare for future relationships (e.g., by coming to view the self as someone who has “learned” from the past relationship mistakes and is now better prepared for future relationships).

**Disengagement Strategies**

In Duck’s (1982) model, the dyadic phase involves choosing between repair and dissolution. If the decision is to dissolve the relationship, the partners must then decide how to go about fulfilling that goal. A number of researchers have investigated the means or tactics, called disengagement strategies, that people utilize when attempting to end a relationship. A series of studies conducted by Leslie Baxter (1985) suggested that disengagement strategies vary along two basic dimensions. The first, called *indirectness vs. directness*, refers to the extent to
which the person’s desire to exit the relationship is made clear to the other partner. Direct strategies explicitly make clear the desire to end the relationship, whereas indirect strategies do not. The second dimension is called other-orientation vs. self-orientation and indicates the degree to which the disengager (the person attempting to end the relationship) tries to avoid hurting the partner. Other-oriented strategies demonstrate a desire to avoid embarrassing or manipulating the partner; self-oriented strategies display concern for the self at the expense of the partner. These two dimensions combine to form four categories of disengagement strategy, illustrated in Figure 5.2.

The first category encompasses strategies that are direct and other-oriented. In using the “state of the relationship talk,” one or both partners explicitly acknowledge their dissatisfaction and desire to end the relationship—and they do so in a face-saving context of mutual discussion and agreement to exit: “I’m so glad that we decided to talk things over. We really do want different things in life. I agree that we...

**Figure 5.2** Baxter’s Model of Disengagement Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openly acknowledge a desire to end the relationship with little effort to protect partner.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fait accompli</td>
<td>• Pseudo de-escalation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attributional conflict</td>
<td>• Cost escalation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openly acknowledge a desire to end the relationship while protecting partner’s self-esteem.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• State-of-the-relationship talk</td>
<td>• Fading away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Negotiated farewell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Oriented</th>
<th>Other-Oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>End the relationship without an explicit declaration and with a focus on one’s own needs.</td>
<td>End the relationship without an explicit declaration and without harming the partner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Withdrawal</td>
<td>• Pseudo de-escalation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cost escalation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Research conducted by Leslie Baxter (1985) suggests that the ways in which people disengage from a relationship vary along two primary dimensions. The direct/indirect dimension concerns whether the individual makes his or her desire to end the relationship clear to the partner. The self-/other-oriented dimension concerns the degree to which the individual focuses on protecting the self or the partner. These two dimensions combine to form four categories of disengagement strategy.
should break up.” The “negotiated farewell” is a similar strategy that involves an explicit communication that formally ends the relationship and that allows each partner to share responsibility for the breakup: “We went out to dinner and talked about our situation. We both realized that it wasn’t anyone’s fault, and we decided to end the relationship.” Both of these strategies directly and openly express the goal of termination in a manner that saves face both for the disengager and the partner.

The second category contains strategies that are direct and self-oriented. Here, the disengager explicitly states his or her desire to end the relationship and makes little to no effort to avoid hurting, embarrassing, or manipulating the partner. Examples of these strategies include “fait accompli” and “attributional conflict.” Fait accompli occurs when the disengager declares that the relationship is over with no opportunity for discussion or compromise: “I don’t care what you say. It’s over between us. End of discussion.” Attributional conflict is a strategy in which both partners wish to end the relationship but cannot agree about why the breakup is necessary and thus blame each other (often bitterly) for its occurrence: “It’s all your fault!” “No, it’s your fault!” People who use these strategies openly call for the termination of the relationship but often accomplish that goal at their partner’s expense.

The third category contains those strategies that are considered indirect and self-oriented. Here, an individual attempts to end the relationship without explicitly stating that goal and with an overwhelming concern for his or her own feelings and needs (as opposed to those of the partner). “Withdrawal” involves reducing the frequency and/or the intimacy of contact with the partner without telling the partner the real reason for the disengagement (i.e., the desire to end the relationship): “I have a lot of work to do this weekend. I’m going to have to cancel our plans for Saturday, and I don’t expect to have much free time on Sunday. In fact, this whole week is going to be really busy. You should just go ahead and make plans without me.” A second indirect/self-oriented strategy is “cost escalation,” which occurs when the person wishing to exit the relationship attempts to increase the relationship costs of the partner, thereby driving him or her away: “Maybe if I act really mean, he/she will go away.” People who use these strategies are avoiding any explicit discussion of relationship termination while at the same time focusing on their own needs and feelings.

The fourth category contains indirect and other-oriented strategies that attempt to accomplish a breakup without an explicit declaration and without excessive harm to either partner. One example is “pseudo de-escalation,” when one or both partners (falsey) declare that they desire a transformed but less close relationship rather than a final and complete
separation: “It’s not like we won’t see each other ever again. I mean, we can still be friends.” Another is “fading away,” when both partners implicitly understand that the relationship is over (but never directly say anything about this state of affairs): “She went back to school yesterday. Neither of us said anything, but I could tell that it’s over.”

Baxter (1985) pointed out that the process of relationship disengagement is multifaceted and complex and that it is possible for one person to use numerous strategies when attempting to end a specific relationship. In addition, it is probable there are particular strategies that might produce beneficial (or at least less distressing) outcomes for the partners. For example, direct strategies that acknowledge the relationship’s demise might be easier for individuals to bear than indirect strategies that leave them wondering about their romantic futures. Similarly, strategies that take into consideration the feelings of the person who is being left, and that allow both partners to participate in the breaking up process, are likely to produce more positive outcomes than are strategies that do not.

Reactions to the End of a Relationship

People respond to the demise of a relationship in a number of ways. How they respond depends to some extent on the nature of the relationship itself. Based on the theories of relationship development we reviewed in Chapter 3, we could predict that people who receive many rewards relative to costs from their partner, who are satisfied with and invested in their relationship, who have been involved with their partner for some time and feel highly committed to him or her, and who believe that they have few viable alternatives to their relationship will experience a great deal of distress at the relationship’s demise.

Some research supports this contention. Psychologists Patricia Frazier and Stephen Cook (1993) surveyed 85 men and women who recently had experienced the breakup of a dating relationship. Each participant provided information about the ended relationship and the ex-lover, including relationship satisfaction (e.g., how satisfied they were with the partner in a variety of areas), perceived closeness of the relationship, and perceived alternatives (e.g., how easy it would be to find another partner). In addition, participants indicated how stressful the breakup had been for them and the extent to which they felt that they had recovered from the breakup, and they completed a 15-item scale of current emotional adjustment. They also took a self-esteem inventory and a measure of perceived social support from friends.

The results of the study revealed that individuals who had been more satisfied with their partners, whose relationships had been closer, and
who felt that it would be more difficult for them to find another romantic partner reported experiencing greater stress at the breakup. Interestingly, participants’ levels of satisfaction, closeness, and perceived alternatives were not significantly related to the extent to which they felt they had recovered from the breakup or their current emotional adjustment—but their self-esteem and perceived level of social support were.

These results provide a ray of light for men and women experiencing breakups. If the relationships were close and satisfying, then the breakups will probably be painful; however, a positive self-image and a supportive group of friends and family may help to heal the wound and speed the recovery process.

**Accounts: Why Things Turned Out This Way**

Although people’s reactions to breakups can vary widely, one thing that most people do when faced with the loss of a relationship is to try to understand what went wrong and why the relationship foundered. In fact, the models of relationship dissolution reviewed earlier in the chapter specifically posit that the final stages of breakup occur when the ex-partners achieve a sense of understanding and a feeling of closure about the relationship’s end. An important element in this recovery process is the making of accounts. Accounts are explanatory scripts that present the plot, introduce the characters and their patterns of interaction, and tell the “why” of the breakup. Like a novel, play, or some other type of dramatic presentation, accounts tell a story—in this case, that of the relationship and its demise.

According to account scholars John Harvey, Ann Weber, and their colleagues (e.g., Harvey & Fine, 2006; Harvey, Weber, Galvin, Huszti, & Garnick, 1986; Weber, 1998), people create accounts for a variety of reasons. First, account making allows individuals to reduce or eliminate the uncertainty and ambiguity that frequently accompany breakups:

He says, “I know why things didn’t work out. It was because I got too wrapped up in work. And so she found someone else. There’s no doubt in my mind that this is what killed our marriage.”

She says, “It’s not like any one specific thing destroyed our relationship. It was more like a lot of little things that built up over time. I guess eventually I just fell out of love with him.”

Accounts are not always accurate, and the individuals involved may create vastly different accounts of the same situation. Nonetheless, accounts allow their creators to clarify their understanding of the
breakup, to establish blame or exoneration about an event, and to satisfy their need for control and information.

Second, accounts fulfill what Harvey, Weber, and their colleagues termed a “social-presentational” function that may protect and enhance the individual’s self-esteem. During and after a breakup, people often are motivated to present the stories of their relationship to significant others. By influencing the interpretations that others have of the individual and the events of the breakup, accounts may result in social support, help, sympathy, and other beneficial outcomes. Thus, the husband who tells his best friend that “all is forgiven” and that he accepts responsibility for driving his unfaithful wife into the arms of another man projects an image of charity and martyrdom that may produce esteem-boosting expressions of admiration and respect from his friend. The unfaithful wife who confesses her “weakness” and tells her best friend what a “horrible person” she is projects an image of need and dependence that may result in the provision of nurturance, affection, and support: “So you made a mistake,” the friend reassures her. “You’re only human. I love you anyway.”

And third, accounts serve as a potent vehicle for emotional release. In telling the story of the relationship’s demise, individuals may experience a cathartic purging of feelings of guilt, anger, depression, loneliness, insecurity, and confusion: “Here’s what happened to me, and here’s how I feel about it,” the wounded party cries, giving voice to thoughts and pent-up emotions that he or she may not have had the opportunity to express during the breakup itself.

There is empirical evidence that accounts do play a very important role in helping people to adjust to the end of a relationship. In one investigation, researchers Jody Koenig Kellas and Valerie Manusov (2003) asked a sample of 90 undergraduate students who had experienced the termination of an important romantic relationship to “tell the story” of the breakup in a written narrative. These written narratives were then rated for various aspects of completeness, including the extent to which they were coherent, presented the events in a sequential and episodic manner, attributed responsibility to the characters in the story, evoked and made sense of affect or emotions, and developed characters relevant to the story. Participants also completed a scale that assessed their overall adjustment to the loss of their important love relationship. The researchers found that both the coherence of a participant’s narrative and the extent to which he or she segmented the events in a sequential and episodic manner were positively related to overall adjustment. That is, participants whose accounts of relationship dissolution made sense, hung together, were structured in an organized manner, and
were supplemented with examples displayed higher levels of adjustment to the loss of their romantic relationships. These findings suggest that the ability to conceptually organize and understand a breakup relates to the process of adjusting to relationship loss.

In sum, assembling one’s account of a broken relationship—what happened, why the partnership failed, what went wrong or right—appears to provide the account maker with the tools he or she needs for a successful recovery.

Summary

Conflict and disagreements are part and parcel of close relationships. Whether a relationship survives conflict (or whether partners survive termination) is, to a large extent, determined by how that conflict (or termination) is managed. People who communicate their needs and feelings clearly and who acknowledge and support those of their partner are more likely to resolve conflict (or accomplish termination) in a manner that benefits both themselves and their partners.

Key Concepts

- Attributions (p. 80)
- Attributional conflict (p. 81)
- Meta-attribution (p. 82)
- Attributional styles (p. 84)
- Positive conflict resolution strategies (p. 88)
- Reason (p. 88)
- Assertion (p. 88)
- Partner support (p. 88)
- Negative conflict resolution strategies (p. 88)
- Coercion (p. 88)
- Manipulation (p. 88)
- Avoidance (p. 88)
- Demand-withdraw pattern (p. 88)

- Phases of relationship dissolution (pp. 92–94)
  - Intrapsychic phase (pp. 92–93)
  - Dyadic phase (p. 93)
  - Social phase (p. 93)
  - Grave-dressing phase (p. 94)
  - Resurrection processes (p. 94)

- Disengagement strategies (p. 94)
  - Indirect vs. direct dimension of relationship disengagement (pp. 94–95)
  - Other vs. self-orientation dimension of relationship disengagement (p. 95)

- Accounts (p. 98)
Discussion Questions

1. Orvis, Kelley, and Butler (1976) identified several attributional events that occur during times of conflict. Using an example from your own life, describe these attributional events.

2. Compare the attributional styles typically demonstrated by “happy” and “unhappy” couples. How does each style contribute to relationship satisfaction and well-being?

3. Identify three “positive” and three “negative” strategies for managing or resolving conflict. Think of a situation in which you or someone you know has made use of one or more of these strategies. What was the outcome? Was the strategy effective?

4. How do relationships end? Describe the four phases of relationship termination originally proposed by Duck (1982). Consider a time when you (or someone you know) ended a romantic relationship. Did these phases occur?

5. What is an account? Why do people create accounts when experiencing relationship dissolution?

Recommended Readings

These authors present evidence that the way in which couples think about their own and their partner’s behavior is associated with relationship adjustment.


This chapter presents some of the first empirical data gathered on the role of conflict in romantic relationship development.

This edited book contains chapters on all aspects of divorce and relationship dissolution, including historical and demographic aspects of relationship termination, causes and underlying processes implicated in divorce, the consequences of divorce, coping with relationship dissolution, relationship termination among understudied groups, and policy issues pertaining to divorce.