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Maintaining Undesired Relationships

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Abstract
As social creatures, we spend our lives in the company of others, rather than in isolation. Consequently, we maintain many relationships out of need rather than desire. Unfortunately, some of these relationships are ones that we would not maintain if given a choice. Although a considerable amount of research on relational dynamics can be applied to unwanted relationships, scholars have made little attempt to generate an integrated overview of what communication characteristics typify such relationships, how they differ from desirable relationships, or how they should best be maintained.

The maintenance of unwanted relationships piques public interest. Articles with titles such as *You Bug Me!* (Precker, 2000) and *Do You Attract People You'd Rather Repel?* (Finella, 2000) that are scattered throughout the pages of newspapers and magazines, and books such as *Dealing With People You Can't Stand* (Brinkman & Kirschner 1994) serve as a testament to the attraction such relationships have on people's attention. But unwanted relationships should catch attention as well because a closer examination of these relationships could broaden and enrich our understanding of personal relationships. Relationships people want to maintain pose challenges (e.g., managing dialectical tensions or dealing with conflict), but greater challenges can arise in relationships that one or both parties wish did not exist. It seems likely that at both an individual and societal level, more problems arise from relationships people would not maintain if given a choice than from relationships that people choose to nurture. The widely documented tensions in Ireland, the Middle East, and the former Yugoslavia may illustrate some problems that result from social groups being unwillingly forced to coexist. At an interpersonal level, individuals face undesirable relationships on a regular basis and often experience negative consequences from them (Hess, 2000; Levitt, Silver, & Franco, 1996).

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Maintaining Undesired Relationships

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A s social creatures, we spend our lives in the company of others, rather than in isolation. Consequently, we maintain many relationships out of need rather than desire. Unfortunately, some of these relationships are ones that we would not maintain if given a choice. Although a considerable amount of research on relational dynamics can be applied to unwanted relationships, scholars have made little attempt to generate an integrated overview of what communication characteristics typify such relationships, how they differ from desirable relationships, or how they should best be maintained.

The maintenance of unwanted relationships piques public interest. Articles with titles such as *You Bug Me!* (Precker, 2000) and *Do You Attract People You'd Rather Repel?* (Finello, 2000) that are scattered throughout the pages of newspapers and magazines, and books such as *Dealing With People You Can't Stand* (Brinkman & Kirschner, 1994), serve as a testament to the attraction such relationships have on people's attention. But unwanted relationships should catch scholars' attention as well because a closer examination of these relationships could broaden and enrich our understanding of personal relationships. Relationships people want to maintain pose challenges (e.g., managing dialectical tensions or dealing with conflict), but greater challenges can arise in relationships that one or both parties wish did not exist. It seems likely that at both an indi-

vidual and societal level, more problems arise from relationships people would not maintain if given a choice than from relationships that people choose to nurture. The widely documented tensions in Ireland, the Middle East, and the former Yugoslavia may illustrate some problems that result from social groups being unwillingly forced to coexist. At an interpersonal level, individuals face undesirable relationships on a regular basis and often experience negative consequences from them (Hess, 2000; Levitt, Silver, & Franco, 1996).

Research on unwanted relationships and their challenges offers an opportunity for theoretical advances in the study of personal relationships. Unwanted relationships provide a rich context for the study of many communication challenges, and they offer a venue assessing the generalizability of theory. At present, some theories of relational phenomena apply only to voluntary and desired relationships (Wiseman & Duck, 1995). Studying unwanted relationships can help scholars learn more about communication under difficult circumstances and can help scholars discern which principles of relational maintenance are universal and which are context-specific. Duck (1994b) argued that "the 'negative' and 'positive' sides of relationship need to be incorporated together theoretically into one set of principles that can deal with both" (p. 4). Doing so entails testing theories in a wide range of relational contexts (Wood & Duck, 1995), especially those that differ in significant ways from the more traditional contexts studied by researchers.

This chapter provides a foundation from which to study such relationships. A diverse set of constructs and theories are pulled together to help illuminate the characteristics that differentiate undesired relationships from their more desirable counterparts. This chapter examines the assumptions that underlie the study of undesired relationships, delineates the factors that give rise to such relationships, discusses the nature of communication processes in such relationships, and suggests directions for future research.

ASSUMPTIONS FOR STUDYING UNDESIRED RELATIONSHIPS

The study of undesired relationships is founded on a set of assumptions that may differ from ones scholars often make when studying maintenance of more traditional relationships. These assumptions are as follows.

Assumption 1: Relationships Often Exist as Nonvoluntary Associations

Few scholars would deny that some relationships are nonvoluntary, but the majority of relational communication theory focuses on relationships formed by voluntary association (Galvin & Cooper, 1990). Family scholars (e.g., Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Galvin & Cooper, 1990) often discuss the impact that nonvoluntary association has on families, but by and large, the

relational maintenance literature focuses on what forces can hold relationships together or tear them apart, how relationships develop, or how they deteriorate, rather than on how people sustain a relationship when separation is not an option. If scholars approach the study of relational maintenance from an assumption that relationships are often nonvoluntary associations, then a broader range of relationships must be studied so that the theory developed can be applied to all relationships.

Assumption 2: Close and Ongoing Relationships can Sometimes be Characterized by Negative Affect

Many scholars suggest that liking is an essential quality of close relationships (e.g., Bell, Daly, & Gonzalez, 1987; Byrne & Murnen, 1988; Dickens & Perlman, 1981; Rubin, 1973). This stipulation is unwarranted. Undoubtedly, the majority of people's close relationships are affectively positive, as are the relationships that people most highly value, so the characterization of close relationships as involving liking is often appropriate. However, the assertions that liking constitutes a *necessary condition* for a close relationship or that all close relationships are affectively positive inaccurately represent the social milieu of most people's lives. As Berscheid (1983) noted:

> It is clear that strong negative affect experienced more or less regularly, perhaps even exclusively, in a relationship many would consider as close on other grounds is not unusual. At the least, a classification scheme that excluded such relationships from the domain of close relationships would exclude many family relationships. (p. 115)

In attempt to delineate the factors that make relationships close, Kelley et al. (1983) focused on causal interdependence rather than liking. In their definition, relationships are close when they have frequent, strong, diverse, and enduring causal interconnections. Although some of these authors later questioned the necessity of duration in this definition (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), they stated explicitly that affect was irrelevant to the definition of closeness.

Assumption 3: Relational Development and Maintenance Sometimes Involve Fluctuating or Even Declining Levels of Intimacy

Many theories of personal relationships have stated that relational development and dissolution are characterized by increases or decreases in intimacy level (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973). These theories typically saw relationships as continuously in a process of growth, and thus, gradually in-

creasing in intimacy, unless they were left to stagnate or deteriorate. Ayres (1983) suggested that instead, relationships develop to a certain level of intimacy and then enter a maintenance phase of stable intimacy levels. The common assumption among all these theories is that intimacy increases or stabilizes during relational development and maintenance, and that a reduction in intimacy signals relational deterioration.

More recent perspectives (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) propose that many relational qualities are dialectical in nature, and thus they vary over time as relational partners attempt to satisfy competing tensions between opposing forces. For example, the needs for autonomy and interdependence may drive partners to increase or decrease intimacy at different points of their relational lives. Thus, intimacy may go through periods of increase and decrease during the maintenance phase of a long-term relationship. Research on relationships with disliked partners suggests that people often try to minimize intimacy throughout the course of an ongoing relationship (Hess, 2000).

Although existing evidence suggests that most healthy and desired personal relationships do indeed experience steady or increasing levels of intimacy throughout their development and maintenance, theory and research also show that some relationships may be characterized by partners' attempts to minimize or reduce intimacy as one way of maintaining the relationship (Hess, 2000). Such a trend might seem like evidence of relational decline, but reduction of intimacy as a coping mechanism for an undesired relationship may be seen as a way of reducing conflict and thus, *preventing* relational dissolution.

Assumption 4: Unwanted Relationships Can be Healthy Relationships

A substantial amount of research suggests that unpleasant or undesired relationships have detrimental effects on people. For example, unpleasant relationships at work and school have been linked to workplace cynicism, decreased work effectiveness, and decreased psychosomatic well-being (Fritz & Omdahl, 1998; Kinney, 1998; Schwartz & Stone, 1993). Is this negative impact inevitable? Unwanted relationships will probably never be pleasant, but it seems realistic to believe that researchers can identify the causes of negative impacts and provide ways to minimize their effects so that some of these relationships can be maintained without such unhealthy consequences. Duck (1987) observed that:

> For something like 10,000 years, people have been warring with each other, fighting other nations, sparring with their neighbors, hating their colleagues, quarreling with their loved ones, arguing with one another, and suffering the pangs of despised love without the benefit of scientific research into relationships and their problems. (p. 278)

The study of unwanted relationships is one area where research has the potential for significantly improving the quality of human life. One purpose of this chapter is to suggest research directions that might help people learn how to make undesired relationships healthy relationships.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The investigation of undesired relationships must begin by answering two fundamental questions: What conditions cause a relationships to be unwanted?; Why do people maintain unwanted relationships? These questions define the context in which the undesired relationship exists. Understanding the conditions that create unwanted relationships allows us to better understand their internal forces, because these relationships develop within the constraints defined by those conditions.

Why Certain Relationships Are Perceived as Unwanted

Relationships can be unwanted for rational and/or emotional reasons. The rational reasons can be described as interference with personal goals, and the emotional reasons share the common factor of negative affect.

Goal Interference.   The rational side of human behavior is governed by people's logical thought processes. The purpose of cognition is to formulate alternative choices for behavior and to select among those options (Greene, 1984). Scholars characterize the rational thought process as being goal-driven in nature, noting that our rational choices are made to achieve certain goals (e.g., Berger, 1997; Bogdan, 1994). These goals encompass a wide range of objectives. Task-related goals, such as getting a job done, come to mind easily, but virtually all other reasoned and intentional human behavior can be described in terms of goals. For example, social behaviors such as maintaining a certain identity, interacting in socially appropriate ways, maintaining or increasing valued resources, and regulating arousal are all goal-driven processes (Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989). Thus, any relationship that poses an ongoing obstruction to the accomplishment of these goals can become unwanted. Relational partners who disconfirm a desired identity, cause anxiety, or deplete a person's desired resources may be unwanted. Sometimes this goal interference is brought about because of mutually conflicting goals between two people.

The perception of a relationship as unwanted emerges from a goal-directed perspective as follows. Goals are hierarchically organized (Berger, 1997), meaning that some goals supersede others. Overtly avoiding another person or terminating a relationship goes against social etiquette and may have negative consequences for people. In lieu of reason to

eliminate social ties with someone, people are likely to interact with that person when social norms make such behavior expected. However, when maintaining a relationship interferes with higher-order goals, such as accomplishing a task or presenting a certain face, the relationship becomes undesired. For example, a student who was talking in class about undesired relationships reported an incident with a friend who needed temporary housing, but became a nuisance after moving in. When this guest's lifestyle began interfering with the host's plans, the relationship became unwanted. Another student mentioned a work relationship that was undesired because the co-worker interfered with the objectives she was trying to accomplish (task goals). Other people have spoken of relationships that were unwanted because friends and family did not approve (social interaction goals) or because they were publicly embarrassed by the other person's behaviors (impression management goals).

For goal interference to make a relationship unwanted, the interference must have a lasting effect over time. Goals are not always consistent, and they can change suddenly from one time to another (Berger, 2000). If a relationship interferes with a goal on one or two occasions, then it is more likely to be an interaction that is undesired rather than the relationship itself. For instance, a person may wish to avoid talking to a close friend when he or she has pressing deadlines, but still value the relationship. More enduring objectives must be obstructed for the relationship to be undesired on the basis of goals.

Negative Affect. It would be a mistake to describe people's behavior only on the basis of rational thought (i.e., choices based on goal assessments). One of the hallmarks of human behavior is that people often base actions on emotional impulses, behaving in ways that defy any sane reason. This tendency can cause unwanted relationships. Relationships that are neutral or even beneficial with respect to goal success may be unwanted because of negative affect. Fritz and Omdahl's (Fritz, 1997; Fritz & Omdahl, 1998) research on negative coworkers provides a good example. Despite the importance of coordinating work for task effectiveness, many people report relationships in the workplace that they would prefer not to maintain. While this chapter was being written, a department at a university received a large donation from a wealthy alumnus to endow a program that would host business executives for annual seminars. However, when the donor visited the department he was so offensive that the faculty hoped he would not return. Despite the goal-related benefits (funding a program to improve students' education), the negative affect he aroused meant that people did not want to have a personal relationship with him.

Although disliking may result in seemingly irrational behavior, the desire for dissociation in such circumstances makes rational sense. Theories of cognitive consistency (e.g., Heider, 1958; Newcomb, 1968) state that

people prefer that their perceptions fit together harmoniously. For relationships, two perceptions are relevant: affect and relational association (Heider, 1958). When affect is negative, people prefer a lack of relational association. Thus, continued maintenance of the relationship is seen as undesirable.

Negative affect can arise from a variety of sources. Wiseman and Duck (1995) reported that when asked to describe friends and enemies, people typically reported endearing qualities of friends (e.g., loyal, caring) and malicious actions by enemies (e.g., inflicted emotional pain, lied to others). When discussing the subject of relationships with disliked partners, students often talk about disliking others because of incompatible personalities, antisocial behavior, or heinous actions by the other, such as being judgmental, pushy, or harassing. Once people develop an enduring dislike for another person, relational interaction with that person becomes unwanted.

Why Undesired Relationships Are Maintained

If people would prefer not to associate with certain others, why do they continue to maintain these relationships? It is because these relationships are seen as nonvoluntary associations (Hess, 2000). Many scholars (e.g., Levinger, 1965, 1976; Rusbult, 1987; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) have suggested that relationships are held together by barriers that prevent them from coming apart. This explanation makes good sense—the forces tearing the relationship apart are overcome by forces holding it together. The forces that act as barriers to relational dissolution can be classified into two broad categories, external and internal.

External Barriers.   External barriers are forces that originate outside the individual and make the person feel constrained to that relationship. These forces of connection can come from at least three sources: social ties, work ties, and proxemic ties. Social ties refer to elements of social life that bind people together, such as friendships, family relations, and marriages. In a review of external barriers that hold marriages together, Attridge (1994) cited financial burdens of divorce (e.g., lack of economic self-sufficiency), difficulty in disentangling networks of mutual friends, and legal ties that must be severed as forces that can hold a marriage together when it might otherwise have broken apart.

In addition to these social barriers, people may maintain relationships because of their work. The desirability of the present job or the difficulty of finding a new one may make it worthwhile for a person to endure an unwanted relationship. Athletic teammates can face this situation acutely because the two may work together very closely and there might be no opportunity for a person to be traded, especially in high school or college athletics.

Finally, people are often constrained to relationships by physical proximity. Whether it is due to residential area (e.g., residing in a small town) or living arrangements (e.g., family member, roommate), people can be forced into relationship just by the inevitability of encountering each other. A student once talked about how she maintained an undesired relationship throughout high school because she lived in a small town and could not avoid the other person. She was happy when she could end the relationship by moving away from home for college.

Undesired relationships caused by external ties cause a collision of psychological and social forces. Internally, the person may prefer not to have the relationship, but external pressures force the interaction. Such a situation is bound to be stressful, as research has demonstrated (Hess, 2000). Ultimately, though, these situations can often be tolerable if handled in a constructive manner. Despite the conflict between the desire not to relate and the externally generated need to do so, these situations are ultimately resolved through the rational prioritization of goals. Regardless of whether the relationship is unwanted because of goal interference or negative affect, people in these circumstances choose to subordinate their disdain for maintaining the relationship to their desire to satisfy more important objectives or social needs. Those needs may range from providing for dependents to presenting a socially desirable face or treating people according to certain moral standards, but in all cases the external barriers are constraints only because other goals override the desire to terminate the relationship. Recalling Berger's (2000) point that goals are hierarchically organized, it can be said that what happens in cases of external constraints is that the goal of ending the relationship is subordinated to some higher-level goal.

At face, the discussion of goal subordination calls into question whether any but a few atypical relationships (e.g., people who have been institutionalized) are truly unwanted. After all, if people choose to maintain these relationships because of higher-order goals then the relationship seems to be at least partially desired. However, if the term *unwanted relationship* were restricted to relationships that were undesired to the degree that ending the relationship overrode all other considerations, then the term would encompass so few relationships that it would be practically useless. The term *unwanted relationship* is used in this chapter to describe a relationship that a person would choose to discontinue if nothing extraneous to the relationship were taken into account.

Internal Barriers. In contrast with external barriers, these forces arise from within the individual. In these cases, people experience conflict with their own desires. Attridge (1994) identified factors such as self-identity goals, religious beliefs, and sense of commitment. As with the external ties, these forces hold a relationship together because relational

satisfaction is subordinated to goals that are perceived as being more important.

Some internal barriers function in a different way. These barriers primarily center on safety and security, fear of making changes, or a lack of faith in the ability to leave the relationship. For example, one student talking about such a situation discussed how she sustained a relationship because it was difficult for her to deviate from the history of closeness she had with the person. Another recalled maintaining a relationship with a mutual friend whom she disliked. In attempting to explain why she continued in this relationship, she could only say that she did not know why she did it. It was an unidentified fear of ending the relationship that propelled ongoing interaction. In other cases, fear of making changes or desire not to hurt the other led to relationships that were unhealthy for the individual who found the relationship undesirable. In these cases, people's reasons for maintaining undesired relationships seem less rational and sometimes even dysfunctional. Relationships maintained under such circumstances might have little chance of being healthy for the individual who sees it as undesirable.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND RESEARCH

Special Characteristics of Undesired Relationships

Unwanted relationships are characterized by the goal conflict or negative affect that makes them undesirable and the barriers that keep them together. As a result, these relationships cause discomfort to those who find the relationship undesirable, whether that is only one person or both partners. Because undesired relationships are sustained by forces counteracting the pressures that would otherwise tear the relationship apart, they exist in the battleground of opposing forces. That tension creates an emotionally-strenuous situation. Although any relationship may be a source of discomfort from time to time, undesired relationships cause discomfort throughout their entire existence (e.g., Hess, 2000).

Undesired relationships are also characterized by a number of communicative behaviors that seem to set them apart from other relationships. Most notable among these behaviors is a greater tendency to create distance with relational messages (Hess, 2000). Because these relationships, by virtue of their existence, are closer relationships than people want, they are characterized by people's attempts to make themselves more distant from the unwanted partner. This characteristic and other communication behaviors that seem to differ from those in more desired relationships are discussed later when specific communication characteristics of unwanted relationships are addressed.

Relational Health

One assumption made in this chapter is that a relationship need not be unhealthy (or dysfunctional) just because it is unwanted. A relationship is dysfunctional when its interactions have harmful effects on its members. These harmful effects can include psychological trauma, physiological symptoms of stress, or physical injury from abuse (Gottman, 1994; Kinney, 1998; West, 1995). One worthwhile objective in the study of undesired relationships is to address the question of what factors cause dysfunctions and what can be done to make such relationships healthier.

The conceptual framework proposed in this chapter suggests one factor that may be linked to relational dysfunction is the creation of an undesired relationship due to self-contradictory internal barriers (e.g., fear of making changes, a lack of faith in the ability to leave the relationship, low self-esteem, etc.). These barriers represent self-supplied impulses to sustain the relationship that contradict the self-supplied desire to escape from it. This set of contradictory beliefs seems likely to result in a high rate of dysfunctional relationships because self-contradiction is a common factor associated with psychological pathologies (Krippendorff, 1989; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The account of one survivor of an abusive relationship typifies this situation. She recalled, "by the time the whole thing ended, I just felt like a rag. I didn't feel attractive at all.... I felt totally worthless. How could I possibly get out of this marriage, I was worthless. How could I possibly have any kind of life outside of him now?" (Lempert, 1997, p. 156).

When external barriers create an undesired relationship, the situation is out of the individual's control, at least in the present and immediate future (actors may plan long-term strategies to change the situation and eliminate the undesired relationship). At face, that contrast suggests that relationships that are unwanted due solely to external barriers might be less likely to be unhealthy than those maintained because of internal barriers. However, research on abusive relationships shows that both internal barriers (e.g., feelings of commitment) and external barriers (e.g., economic dependence, lack of child care) play a role in women's decisions to stay in abusive relationships (e.g., Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Strube & Barbour, 1983). So, the question of whether certain types of barriers more strongly predispose a relationship to be unhealthy is unanswered at present. This question is worth addressing with future research, because if certain types of barriers can be identified as leading to more or less healthy outcomes, then scholars can begin to form a set of risk factors for negative outcomes from unwanted relationships. In addition, researchers may also wish to examine what per-

sonality traits or interactive behaviors predict health-related outcomes from unwanted relationships. It seems likely that a combination of all three factors will predict the healthiness or unhealthiness of these relationships. For instance, Thomsen and Gilbert (1998) found that neuroticism was associated with negative marital outcomes (e.g., satisfaction), but also that a combination of neuroticism (a personality trait) and dominance (an interactive behavior) "explained more variance in marital dissatisfaction than did either factor separately" (p. 851).

Specific Communicative Processes in the Maintenance of Undesired Relationships

Coping. Research applicable to unwanted relationships suggests that at least two behaviors should be universal in this context. The first of these is coping. Unwanted relationships cause stress, and stress demands some form of coping by the individual. Coping is "a stabilizing factor that can help individuals maintain psychosocial adaptation during stressful periods; it encompasses cognitive and behavioral efforts to reduce or eliminate stressful conditions and associated emotional distress" (Holahan, Moos, & Schaefer, 1996, p. 25). Wiseman and Duck's (1995) study of enemies showed that people coped by shaping perceptions in ego-protective ways, which helped reduce stress and cognitive dissonance. For instance, they reported that most people saw enmity as unilateral—they were innocent, and the malice was solely due to the enemy's actions and intentions. Wiseman and Duck also noted that people were more likely to focus their energy on maintaining their own self-esteem than on reducing the enmity. In many cases, people responded with self-pity and other forms of nonproductive reflection on the situation.

Another method of coping people may use in unwanted relationships is drawing support from social networks (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1996). For example, talking with others is a common way people cope with enemy relations (Wiseman & Duck, 1995). Several consequences of this strategy are noteworthy. First, such communication can serve as a catalyst to improve matters or it may actually aggravate the problem. Talking with others about an enemy might provide a more neutral perspective or ideas for reconciliation, but it can also strengthen a person's convictions about mistreatment. As Wiseman and Duck noted, talking with others "may cement enmity by making it impossible to 'talk out differences'" (p. 70). Second, utilization of social support can cause the impact of an undesired relationship to spill out into other parts of a social network. Involving others in the matter may change their relations with those parties, and may even create challenging situations when the involved third parties must interact with the recipient of the actor's disinterest.

Distance. The other behavior that seems to be universal in undesired relationships is effort to distance oneself from the unwanted partner. Distance can be seen as a coping behavior, because people use it to reduce stress (e.g., Hess, 2000). However, it is addressed separately from coping, because distancing can result from causes other than stress.

People seeking greater separation reported many ways of distancing themselves from the relational partner (Hess, in press). Some of these were avoidant strategies, such as making interactions shorter in duration, staying away from the other person as much as possible, or simply ignoring the other. When avoidance was not an option, people reported trying to make the interaction as disengaged as possible. For example, people reported using nonverbal cues that indicated dissociation (e.g., less smiling, standing further away, less eye contact, less touch), restricting the amount of information they shared about themselves, or focusing their attention away from the disliked partner. Finally, people indicated that sometimes they simply tried to alter their perceptions of the interactions, such as by feeling detached or by mentally degrading the person (Hess, in press; see Table 5.1). Wiseman and Duck (1995) found that people preferred avoidance whenever possible when dealing with enemies, but also used disengaging behaviors when necessary. For example, people reported disclosing less information, becoming involved in different social circles, and trying to show the enemy that they have less in common with each other. Interestingly, few people reported trying to resolve differences with their enemy.

The challenge people face in these circumstances is that a certain degree of relational closeness is necessary to maintain the relationship. So, people must find ways to achieve distance without sacrificing the minimal levels of closeness required to sustain the relationship. In some cases, such as with disliked relatives, avoidance might often be a feasible distancing behavior. But in a case such as a blended family where siblings might dislike step-siblings who live in the same household, avoidance can be difficult to do. In cases such as those, dissociative behaviors or even just perceptual strategies might prove most effective.

Antagonism. One interactive behavior that warrants attention in the study of unwanted relationships is antagonism. Antagonism can range from negative remarks or jokes at another person's expense to verbal and physical abuse. Although justified revenge is sometimes socially sanctioned (Axelrod, 1984; Tripp & Bies, 1997), overt and ongoing hostility is rarely acceptable unless the relationship involves members of hostile social groups, in which case hostility against the outgroup is approved by ingroup members (although not necessarily by third parties). Despite the general disapproval of antagonism, such behavior is quite common in our society. Many scholars talk about the prevalence of relational or family violence (e.g., Johnson, 1995; Rusbult & Martz, 1995), and Berscheid (1983) con-

TABLE 5.1

Distancing Tactics Identified by Hess (in press)

Tactic	Definition
Avoidance	Trying not to be in the presence of the other person
Deception	Lying to or misleading the other person on information about oneself
Degrade	Perceiving the other person as less than human, such as by ignoring her/his feelings, or seeing the other person as incompetent
Detachment	Perceiving or feeling a lack of attachment with the other
Discount message	Disregarding or minimizing what the other person says
Group interaction	Avoiding one-on-one interactions with the person
Humoring	Considering the other person to be eccentric and someone just to be tolerated, but not taken seriously
Ignoring	Acting as if the other person is not there
Impersonal	Treating the other person like a stranger; that is, interacting with her/him as a role rather than as a unique individual
Inattention	Giving as little attention as possible to the other person
Nonimmediacy	Displaying verbal or nonverbal cues that minimize closeness or availability
Reserve	Being unusually quiet and uncommunicative when with the other person
Restraint	Curtailing social behaviors that one would normally do, which (if done) would have led to greater relational closeness
Restrict topics	Limiting to conversation to topics that are not intimate
Shorten interaction	Doing what it takes to end the interaction as quickly as possible

tended that the family is one of the most violent institutions an ordinary person is likely to encounter. Berscheid claimed that most of the anger and hostility people experience in daily life is directed toward a relative. Well-documented communication behaviors that are antagonistic or hostile include chronic disconfirmation and double-binds (Watzlawick et al., 1967), verbal aggressiveness (Infante & Wigley, 1986), and boundary violations (Peterson, 1992).

One study on the maintenance of relationships with disliked partners found that all respondents reported using hostile tactics from time to time (Hess, 2000). Although most people reported antagonizing their disliked partners only occasionally (possibly only when most frustrated or when an enticing opportunity presented itself), a few respondents indicated favoring antisocial tactics more often. Research suggests that such behavior will often invite counterattacks and escalation (DeRidder, Schruijer, & Rijsman, 1999), which means that it is not usually the most rational interaction strategy. So, it may be that people interact this way when they feel immune to retaliation or when they cannot control their anger. It is also possible that some people use antisocial acts as a way of expressing or achieving control, as is often the case with abusive relationships (Johnson, 1995). Closer examination of these relationships might reveal the causes of hostility and the effects it has on the people involved. Although the research on verbal and physical abuse makes it clear that such behavior has detrimental outcomes in relationships (Cahn, 1996), the range of impacts that small to moderate degrees of nonabusive hostility has in unwanted relationships is less clear.

Communication and Self-Image.   Another factor that seems likely to have an important impact on communication in unwanted relationships is the management of meaning related to self-presentation and self-image. Because unwanted relationships put people into situations that contradict their interactional preferences, they may face situations that test their self-concepts and pose difficulties with presentation of face more than in ordinary relationships. These situations can entail contradictory goals or feelings, and they impact how people communicate with each other. People who consider themselves good people but act antagonistically toward an undesirable person, people who consider themselves tolerant but find themselves being short with an unwanted co-worker, or people who consider themselves loving but find themselves stewing in anger at an annoying relative all may face cognitive dissonance about their own definition of self. The challenge to manage meanings in these circumstances may impact the communication that happens between the actor and the undesired relational partner. As Duck (1994a) noted, "the disembodied social psychological concepts that we read about as impression management, self-disclosure, interdependence, and social exchange are also created or served mostly in talk" (p. 10).

Task and Social Balance.   One aspect of undesired relationships that seems especially salient in the workplace is the difficulty of maximizing task effectiveness when that task forces participation in an unwanted relationship. Unpleasant peer relationships in the workplace interfere with successful task outcomes (Fritz & Omdahl, 1998). A case could be made that this outcome should not necessarily follow, because keeping interactions focused on task, rather than relational issues, is one way people create distance (Hess, 2000). However, simply interacting on a task level is impossible. First, the general consensus among scholars is that virtually all communication involves both content and relational information, so it is impossible to remove the relational component from a communicative exchange (e.g., Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Watzlawick et al., 1967). Second, effective social interaction is a contributing factor in task success (Bormann, 1990). Bormann's research shows that groups that tried to focus exclusively on task concerns and eliminate any social dimension to their interaction were less effective than counterpart groups that effectively balanced task and social elements in their work. So, to maximize task success, interactants in undesired relationships must find a balance between social interaction and disengagement.

Multiple Audience Problem.   The multiple audience problem is a challenge for relational communication, whether the interaction happens in the workplace or a social setting. It refers to a communicative situation in which a speaker needs to simultaneously meet different, and usually mutually exclusive, purposes with a single message (Fleming & Darley, 1991; Fleming, Darley, Hilton, & Kojetin, 1990). The challenge is to address the conflicting purposes in message construction so that all parties are treated in ways that meet the social actor's goals. Although this problem is not unique to undesired relationships, it is likely to present itself when a mutual acquaintance is present for whom the relationship with the target person is desired. In this case, a person may want to distance herself or himself from the undesired partner without simultaneously suggesting a desire to do so to the favored relational partner. The reverse can also occur. If a third party is present who considers a relationship with the target person unwanted, an individual may wish to show the third party their dissociation from the target person (to avoid perceptions of affiliation) while concealing that message from the target. Researchers have found many creative ways that people attempt such deceit. For example, people can word messages in a way that the target and the third party would interpret differently, display nonverbal cues visible only to the third party, or convey relational messages using indirect references that the target person could not interpret (e.g., Clark & Schaefer, 1987; Fleming & Darley, 1991).

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS
FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Undesired relationships present a challenging context for communication because they force people into situations that are uncomfortable at best, dangerous at worst. Negotiating the competing tensions of contradictory goals, emotional temptations, and social constraints requires successfully dealing with complex challenges in relational communication. So many variations in relational definitions and demands, personality traits, and social demands exist that it is difficult to propose a small set of conclusions about such relationships or recommendations for productive actions. However, one conclusion seems reasonable: that these relationships bring a greater than average share of communicative challenges. Thus, they should be a rich ground for extending our knowledge about the communicative phenomena that can be observed there.

What we do know about undesired relationships can be summarized as follows. They may be caused by obstruction of goals, negative affect, or both. People see them as essential to maintain despite their undesirability due to barriers that arise from external forces, internal forces, or both. Unwanted relationships cause stress to those people who would prefer not to maintain them. Although people are likely to act antagonistically at least some of the time, distance is the primary way people cope with the stress these relationships create, and thus, sustain the relationship. Other communicative aspects of these relationships vary widely, but such issues as image management, task–social balance, and multiple audience problems seem to be likely tensions for a person to face. The combination of input variables (personality traits and the conditions making a relationship both unwanted and nonvoluntary) and process variables (interactive behaviors by the two people) determine the personal and social outcomes from the relationship. Closer examination of these issues seems to offer the possibility of improving the quality of people's lives. How, then, might research best proceed?

One of the important contributions the study of undesired relationships can make is to create a better understanding of what communication behaviors best contribute to the well-being of those involved, and what people must do to achieve that type of communication. Such communication not only benefits individuals' psychological and physical health (Gottman, 1994), it also reduces the chances of negative experiences leading to increased hostility among the partners or others in their social networks (Berscheid, Boye, & Walster, 1968). Thus, a useful first step in research would be identification of what communication behaviors are associated with relational health or dysfunction in these relationships. Wright and Wright (1995) did this type of work for the study of codependent relation-

ships. They argued that although codependency is usually studied as a personality syndrome, it is more useful to study codependent interaction as it exists within a certain relationship. Although certain people might be more predisposed to enter codependent relations (valuable information in its own right, they noted), it may be more informative to first understand what makes a relationship codependent. Such knowledge can help people identify and change the behaviors that cause unhealthy outcomes. The same approach could work well with undesired relationships. Are there identifiable patterns of communication that are common to such relationships, perhaps associated with certain causes of the undesirability or reasons for maintenance, that signal problematic outcomes? If so, identifying them will have both practical and theoretical benefits.

Another avenue of research that could be productive is to identify personality traits that are associated with either the likelihood of maintaining undesired relationships or the enactment of certain communication behaviors. Several factors seem ripe for investigation. For example, having an external locus of control may predict the likelihood or prevalence of undesired relationships in a person's social life. People who have an external locus of control see themselves as being helpless to control many things that happen to them (Hewitt & Flett, 1996; Rotter, 1966). So, these people are less likely to pursue some valued goals, and research suggests that they have less ability to cope with stressful experiences in their lives (Lefcourt, 1991).

A factor that might predict a person's propensity to stay in an undesirable relationship is risk aversion (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). Research has suggested that high aversion to risk taking may prompt people to compromise their relational desires (e.g., as in maintaining a platonic relationship; Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000). For some people, the safety and security of what is known may form an internal barrier, causing them to stay in undesired relationships, despite any negative outcomes that result. Emotional intelligence is another personality trait that may relate to how people respond to undesired relationships. Salovy, Bedell, Detweiler, and Mayer (1999) argued that people with higher emotional intelligence can cope better in relationships and may be less stressed than those with lower emotional intelligence.

Although these personality traits seem theoretically justified as factors that impact unwanted relationships, such a conclusion is premature without empirical evidence. Levitt et al. (1996) examined personality traits such as self-esteem and attachment style in relation to troublesome relationships and found that those traits "were generally associated more strongly with modes of coping than with whether or not the individual had had a difficult relationship" (p. 533). So, both theoretical and empirical evidence must be examined before drawing conclusions about the impact of

personality traits on the likelihood of developing unwanted relationships or the manner in which a person maintains them.

A third avenue of research that might provide useful information is an examination of whether certain social behaviors can reduce people's chances of finding themselves in undesired relationships. In their examination of coping, Pierce et al. (1996) asked why researchers seem to focus more on how people handle difficult situations than on why some people find themselves in dire straights more often than others. Certainly, personality traits and bad luck are factors. But, Pierce et al. noted that the individuals' own behaviors can also play an important role. For example, if one person fears a depression and saves money whereas another spends it freely, these people would face different situations in an economic downturn. They noted that "coping researchers investigating only those persons who have faced or are facing major economic hardship would identify only the latter person, thus overlooking that the former person avoided the problem by 'coping' with the event *prior* to its occurrence" (p. 434). Analogously, some people might find themselves in more undesired relationships than others in part due to social choices they made prior to such relationships forming or becoming undesirable. Researchers might be able to determine whether individuals' behaviors can actually affect the number of undesirable relationships they face, and if so, what behaviors those are.

One way that people's behaviors might affect their propensity to find themselves in undesired relationships relates to satisfaction of needs. Drigotas and Rusbult's (1992) argued that people stay in unsatisfying relationships to the extent that they depend on that relationship to meet certain needs (e.g., emotional involvement, sex, companionship). It may be that some people invest too heavily in certain relationships (perhaps ignoring warning signs that others would observe) and allow such relationships to become the only channels for meeting those needs. Doing so could make such relationships nonvoluntary to them because of their inability to meet their needs without it. If the relationship later becomes undesired, the person feels trapped. People could avoid the problem by cultivating additional relationships that meet the same need, that is, by creating a "need satisfaction redundancy" across relationships. Of course, while doing so can insulate a person from becoming trapped in certain unwanted relationships, it risks reducing a person's ability to maintain extremely close relationships. Making a relationship ordinary and replaceable as a way of keeping oneself "safe" from becoming trapped makes the relationship less special because uniqueness and irreplaceability are hallmarks of close relations. So, people who wish to avoid becoming entrapped in a relationship that cannot be replaced must be careful that their strategies do not subvert their ability to maintain close and meaningful relations.

Undesired relationships are, and always will be, one of the more difficult relationships that people encounter. Because they are an inevitable aspect of social interaction, everyone must face such relationships throughout the course of their lives. It is for challenging relations such as these that the relational research holds much promise. Learning how to manage such relationships in productive ways provides benefits for theory construction and for practical application.

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