

# Relationship Maintenance Strategies

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People spend substantially more time maintaining personal relationships than they do developing or de-escalating them (Duck, 1988). Maintaining relationships can last decades, whereas the initiation or termination of relationships can last only a day. Given the centrality of communication to long-term relationships, an important question emerges: What communication behaviors do people use in order to maintain their close relationships? This entry will define relationship maintenance, examine two perspectives used to explain it, and discuss the impact of culture and computer-mediated communication on relationship maintenance.

## Defining relationship maintenance

As is the case with most concepts, definitions of *relational maintenance* vary. Dindia and Canary (1993) reported that scholars typically rely on four definitions. These four definitions are: (1) Maintenance communication protects the relationship to keep it in existence (i.e., stable). After all, if the relationships are terminated there is little reason to attempt to maintain them. Accordingly, people engage in maintenance behaviors to keep their relationships stable. (2) Relationship maintenance means preserving the status quo. This definition focuses on protecting what exists in the present, for example, keeping a relationship's level of intimacy constant. (3) Maintenance involves keeping a relationship in a satisfactory condition. On this view, maintenance behaviors help sustain (and perhaps increase) desired relationship characteristics such as commitment, satisfaction, liking the partner, loving the partner, and others. Without such characteristics, close relationships are vacant of what most people value in long-term relationships. Finally, (4) maintenance can refer to keeping the relationship in repair. Every relationship endures difficulties. Maintenance behaviors thus function to restore the relationship as the partners want it to be.

The 1980s witnessed increased scholarly interest in maintenance communication. For example, communication strategies such as openness, avoidance, affinity-seeking, among a variety of other behaviors, were presented as maintenance communicative strategies. To synthesize the first wave of maintenance strategies, Stafford and Canary (1991) performed factor analyses on over 80 behaviors that the literature and married

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couples identified as maintenance behaviors. The results of the factor analysis yielded five maintenance strategies: positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks. Before discussing these relational maintenance strategies, we should acknowledge that maintenance behaviors vary from being nonstrategic to strategic. For example, one might cook dinner because that person loves to cook. That behavior would be seen as nonstrategic. Or one might cook dinner to show the partner that one is responsible, likable, and relationship-worthy, which would reflect a strategic maintenance behavior. This entry focuses on maintenance communication strategies; that is, different strategies used to promote relational quality.

Canary and Stafford (1992; Stafford & Canary, 1991) created measures of five communication strategies. First, *positivity* includes tactics such as being cheerful (when not wanting to be), refraining from criticism, engaging in spontaneous and fun events, and others. Next, *openness* refers to discussing current and future directions of the relationship, as well as disclosing one's goals for the relationship. Importantly, the disclosure that occurs during maintenance focuses on the relationship and not on personal issues or feelings. Third, *assurances* involve behaviors that show one's commitment to the partner, stress one's faithfulness, and provide support to the partner. Interestingly, research indicates that married couples tend to use assurances more than do dating or engaged partners. Fourth, *social networks* involve behaviors that rely on friends and families as resources that help stabilize the relationship. For example, having weekend visits with one's family, sharing the same friends, and engaging in the same activities with friends typically help support the relationship. Finally, *sharing tasks* refers to doing one's fair share of the work, performing chores equitably, planning (e.g., grocery lists), and so forth.

Subsequent research has found that maintenance strategies strongly predict important relational characteristics, such as commitment, relational satisfaction, stability, liking, and loving others (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013). Commitment concerns wanting to remain in the relationship indefinitely; satisfaction references happiness with the relationship; stability entails how sturdy the relationship is; liking references admiration; and love concerns affection and attachment to the partner. In particular, positivity and assurances are most effective in predicting relational factors such as satisfaction, commitment, and love. Some research has found that openness can be negatively associated with relational quality when positivity and assurances are controlled. In such instances, the content of openness would be largely negative because the content of positivity and assurances is removed, leading people to discuss unrewarding features of their relationship. Importantly, maintenance strategies must be enacted in a consistent and continuous manner because their effectiveness diminishes daily (Canary et al., 2002).

Other researchers have sought to expand the five-strategy measure. The most systematic attempt to do so is likely Stafford's (2011) four-study proposal of a new typology of maintenance strategies. Stafford's new typology included the following maintenance behaviors: *positivity*, *assurances*, *understanding*, *relationship talk*, *self-disclosure*, *social networks*, and *sharing tasks*. As the reader can see, four of the original five strategies remain, whereas openness has been split into two strategies, and a new strategy (understanding) has been identified. When compared to the five-strategy maintenance typology presented above, Stafford's new measure accounted for approximately

10% additional variance for men's relational satisfaction but only 1% additional variance for women when predicting relational satisfaction. Additionally, a recent meta-analysis reported consistent support for the 1992 five-strategy measure in terms of predicting relational characteristics, such as satisfaction, commitment, love, and so forth (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013); accordingly, the five-strategy typology is often used.

## Explaining relationship maintenance

Researchers have adopted equity and dialectical approaches to understand relational maintenance. Equity represents a theory of fairness, wherein people want to have equal ratios of outcomes/inputs. Since early Greek democracy, the idea of equity has been the primary principle for judging fairness in Western societies. Other concepts of fairness include *equality*, where both partners obtain the same amount of rewards regardless of inputs that each gave, and *need*, which concerns how outcomes should be given the person with the most need, regardless of equality of outcomes or the equity of both people's outcomes/inputs.

In Western cultures, *equity* fairness is most often determined by comparing each person's outcomes (or benefits due to the relationship) divided by inputs (or contributions). Equity occurs when the outcome/input ratios are the same for both people. That is, if the outcome/input ratio is the same, then both people are "equitably treated." Outcomes refer to a range of benefits, such as having someone smart to talk to, receiving affection and love, having someone to share events with, financial support, greater chances for networking, being with someone who is physically and socially attractive, and so forth. Inputs include personal and social energies that one gives to the relationships, such as forgoing one's career to be with the partner, taking less money, offering one's physical beauty, engaging in more household chores, being with one's partner who embarrasses themselves in public, and so forth. Equity theory explains that people who are equitably treated feel more contentment, relational satisfaction, and less anger, sadness, and guilt than people who are underbenefited. Also, equitably treated partners feel more contentment and relational satisfaction than do overbenefited people, who experience guilt as a result of their getting more than they deserve.

Equity theory has usefully predicted the use of maintenance strategies; simply put, people are motivated to maintain fair relationships. People find little reason to maintain an involvement where they are treated unfairly. Being underbenefited has been associated with feeling resentful, depressed, and angry. Being overbenefited has been associated with guilt. Accordingly, people engage in maintenance behaviors in a manner that coincides with equity theory, in an inverted U manner. That is, overbenefited people use a moderate number of maintenance strategies, equitably treated people use the highest number, and underbenefited people use the least number of maintenance behaviors.

An additional understanding of how maintenance occurs rests on how partners manage dialectical tensions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The dialectic view holds a few ontological assumptions about how people maintain their relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The first assumption is that people in relationships experience

tensions that reflect the presence of unified contradictions that coexist in all relationships. On this view, maintaining a relationship means responding to tensions that exist between two opposing but mutually necessary dialectical poles. By extension, the second assumption concerns how polar tensions remain meaningful only if the alternative goal is present. In short, *relational dialectics* involves the interplay between opposing but mutually necessary poles. Importantly, the interplay between poles constitutes relationships in continual, changing, and fluctuating ways. Accordingly, partners constantly experience the push and pull of relational dialectical tensions.

Research reveals that many forms of dialectical tensions exist in friendship as well as romantic relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Three dialectics have received the most attention in the literature. The first dialectic is most often called *interdependence/autonomy*. In this dialectic, partners want to be connected but also remain individuated. The dialectic of *predictability/novelty* concerns how one wants to predict the partner's beliefs and behaviors, yet one also wants new and interesting experiences. Finally, *openness/closedness* involves disclosing personal information to your partner, and the concomitant desire to protect yourself by being closed.

Dialectics are not "problems" in the usual sense. Rather, relational dialectics represent a feature of life itself. Also, according to this view, relational partners often have competing needs, where one person is drawn to one dialectical pole and the partner experiences the opposite pole. For example, one person might want more openness while the partner desires more closedness. These competing needs reference *antagonistic dialectical tensions* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). On the other hand, partners can share the same combination of dialectical tensions, for example, where both people want more openness. Such cases refer to *nonantagonistic tension* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Moreover, research shows that not all dialectical tensions are uniformly critical to the relationship. For instance, connection–autonomy and openness–closedness dialectics have been rated as the most important to the development of participants' relationships.

Some research concerns how people react to their dialectical tensions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Using *selection*, a person adopts one dialectical tension over its opposite. For example, people might avoid their partner when their partner's need for privacy is clear and appears to outweigh their own desire for closeness. *Separation* entails the denial of a dialectical tension by separating the opposite tensions from one another. For instance, partners might purposefully engage in individual activities and events to secure time away from the partner. *Neutralization* compromises polar opposites. For instance, using neutralization one might avoid the issue or handle topics ambiguously (e.g., instead of going out to watch a new film, one person might suggest that they watch a video instead). *Acquiescence* refers to giving in to a relational feature, not wanting to deal with a dialectical problem. For example, one might accept that being married involves a higher degree of stability and less passion than wanted; so, one subscribes to the dialectic of stability.

Other reactions to dialectical tensions require greater imagination. For instance, using *discussion*, partners talk openly about the tension they are experiencing. *Contact* refers to searching for ways to initiate small talk, demonstrating signs of affection, and planning for future meetings. *Revitalization* refers to a proactive but indirect response.

For example, to revitalize passion, one might arrange to meet one's partner in a restaurant that that person has wanted to experience. A nuanced response to dialectical tensions concerns *reframing*. Reframing involves adjusting one's own perspective of dialectical tensions in a different light so that the experience of a dialectical tension is no longer contradictory.

## Culture and relational maintenance

Close relationships are infused with prevalent beliefs, norms, and symbols of a given society. Hence, relational maintenance cannot be appreciated without an adequate understanding of various invisible cultural foundations and values. Regardless of one's cultural membership, relational maintenance strategies are associated with desired relational characteristics such as satisfaction, and others mentioned above.

One would speculate that high context cultures (China, Japan, Korea, etc.) place a great emphasis on personal relationships and implicitly agree on expectations, whereas low context cultures (USA, Germany, Sweden, etc.) are individualistic, hence placing less emphasis on the subtle, nonverbal dimension of relational maintenance and more emphasis on explicit maintenance messages and strategies. Indeed, research has supported the proposition that individualism–collectivism potentiates differences in relational maintenance styles across cultures: individualists consistently indicated a greater use of explicit relational maintenance than did collectivists. Given these findings, researchers inferred that stable close relationships operate within their idiosyncratic histories and microcosmic cultures of interdependence and common (“couple”) identity.

A recently developed cultural theory (separate from individualism–collectivism) has been used in relational maintenance research: *cultural modernization theory* (CMT) (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). CMT predicts that modernization and cultural change do *not* correspond in a direct fashion; hence, societies espousing individual rights and egalitarian values (e.g., United States) have regressed to more traditional, religious values. This regression has occurred between 1981, when the initial wave of World Values Survey (WVS) was launched, and 2008 when the fifth wave was completed. However, countries with prevailing survival-driven values (e.g., Japan) have adopted more rational values. CMT contributes to the scholarship of relational maintenance by tapping into more systemic, historical, and sociological roots of societies and their cultural assumptions. CMT enables a cogent and rich analysis by referring to four parsimonious, empirically supported factors generated by massive data sets collected from over 80 countries.

Indicating one's cognitions and behaviors is the product of cultural conditioning. A valid measure of cross-cultural differences should account for factors such as political and religious histories (e.g., World War II, postcommunist Europe and former Soviet states), economic ideology/reality (e.g., 1997 Asian financial crisis), geography, and language. CMT condenses these factors into one construct, *cultural values*. Cultural values comprise two value dimensions: survival–self-expression and traditional–modern values. *Survival values* cultures view close relationships as a source of economic

and physical security; *self-expression values* cultures consider the foremost important functions of relationships are for exercising individuals' right to choose dating partners, maintain privacy, and achieve independence; *traditional values* cultures connect close relationships to the preservation of traditional family values and face; and *modern values* cultures believe in rational choice, personal autonomy, and shared control in relationships. Naturally, partners in countries located on the traditional/self-expression quadrant of the cultural map self-report use of maintenance strategies to a greater extent than do their counterparts in the survival/modern values quadrant.

As we have noted, the construct of equity has effectively explained relational maintenance and satisfaction in the West, whereas equity as a standard of fairness is less applicable in East Asia. Equity theory appears more familiar to cultures espousing self-expression values (e.g., United States and Japan) versus survival values (e.g., China and Singapore). In one study (Yum & Canary, 2009), Malaysia, a marginal self-expression culture, did not exhibit a pattern resembling an inverse U-shape association between equity and relational maintenance, as predicted by equity theory. Instead, Malaysia and Singapore, each of which values survival though they differ quite a bit in GDP, revealed a linear increase in overbenefitedness and use of maintenance strategies. That is, people used maintenance strategies to the extent they believed that they were overbenefited, suggesting that a different standard of fairness exists in those countries.

In fact, CMT accounts for the gradual cultural change in fairness and justice within a stable relationship and the transition from equality to equity. Relational maintenance in survival societies lies within the network in which it is nested (e.g., China and Singapore). In such cases, individuals appear more motivated to use maintenance strategies when they believe that they are getting a better deal than their partners in survival values countries. The construct of individualism–collectivism, on the other hand, fails to explain this connection: Japanese are high in collectivism; however, the equity–maintenance link among Japanese coincides with that of individualistic Americans. Japanese use maintenance behaviors in ways that equity predicts, but yet have the least amount of maintenance behaviors when compared to other countries (Yum & Canary, 2009). Both Japan and the United States lie on the self-expression quadrant; hence, the findings from these countries correspond to CMT-based cultural patterns and changes.

## **Computer-mediated communication and maintenance**

Emerging about 25 years ago, the World Wide Web has changed how people view connections between computer-mediated communication (CMC) and relationships. The first wave of the “Net Generation” has reached its adulthood, which partly accounts for the accelerating speed of the Internet revolution and subsequent evolution. In a critical way, the Internet, especially social media, has changed how people meet, connect, dine, shop, and even conduct social research. Furthermore, the Internet has changed how close friends, romantic partners, and families communicate with each other and maintain relationships. In addition, access on mobile communication devices potentially contributes to new expectations for relational maintenance, for instance, the mere frequency and digital literacy regarding CMC.

According to the 2013 United Nations International Telecommunication Union, digital natives (i.e., people active worldwide on the Internet for at least five years) constitute more than 30% of people between 15 and 24 years of age. Geographical proximity is not a precondition for meeting and becoming attracted to the prospective partner. Long-distance relationships can survive if the partners are competent users of mobile digital devices; consequently, relational maintenance patterns have been evolving. In the past, young couples chose to cohabit prior to marriage to keep the relationship afloat. However, in recent years, similar to the digital landscape in Europe, European countries (e.g., United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France) found partners prefer “living apart together” (LAT) to unmarried cohabitation (Penn, 2007). Even when married, couples often choose to keep separate residences. As Penn put it, couples maintain “24/7 exclusivity without 24/7 togetherness” (2007, p. 320). Research indicates that much of the LAT period is spent digitally on maintenance communication and that the amount of digital messages makes a difference in the quality of relationships.

An important question remains regarding why and how digital natives encode and decode relational messages in mediated space whether they are apart or together (e.g., some couples text each other even when sitting together): Do partners use social media for proactive, constructive maintenance strategies to compensate for absence of physical presence as digital lovers/friends *or* as counterproductive, antisocial strategies that, for example, avoid contact and present negative messages? The limited research on the topic indicates that partners who often use positivity and assurances through CMC tend to enjoy greater relational satisfaction than do partners who do not use these maintenance strategies through CMC. Also, maintaining close relationships successfully involves face-to-face communication beyond the computer.

## Conclusion

Maintaining close relationships requires an examination of the communicative strategies that partners use to keep their relationships intact, in status quo, as partners want them to be, in repair, and as dialectically helpful. Given these various concepts of maintenance, it is no surprise that researchers have analyzed various strategies of maintenance, alternative outcomes, and different directions for future research. This entry concludes by proposing areas for future research.

First, it would be helpful to see further research regarding the culture–maintenance link. We now know that countries that have values that differ from those of the United States engage in maintenance behaviors that do not follow the curvilinear manner that equity predicts. It appears that non-Western cultures do not reinforce equity as a standard of fairness. Also, it is quite probable that alternative cultures engage in different types of maintenance behavior. Importantly, historical norms and rules regarding relationships need to be recognized to account for the use of various maintenance communication.

Second, and considering the equity–maintenance link, one might as well pose a question regarding the connection or disconnection between mediated relational maintenance and equity theory. Does one’s perception of equity (or a lack thereof)

induce or reduce the use of mediated relational maintenance strategies? What type of mediated relational maintenance strategies exist beyond the five strategies emphasized here? More research is required regarding CMC adaptation and creation of relational maintenance theories that can capture the trends and directions of communication practices in the global digital age.

Finally, observational research can add to maintenance research. More precisely, fieldwork is much needed to discover how observations of maintenance communication emerge. Also, researchers could rely on observational data in tandem with survey data to flesh out how partners' behaviors correspond to partners' perceptions of maintenance.

SEE ALSO: Affection Exchange Theory; Affectionate Communication and Personal Outcomes; Communal Coping; Dialectical Tensions in Relationships; Family Stress; Forms of Affectionate Communication; Human-Computer Interaction; Long-Distance Relationships; Models of Relationship Development; Normative Model of Social Support; Relational Dialectics Theory; Self-Disclosure; Social Exchange Theories; Social Networks and Relationships; Support Types

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