

# Big Theories of Intimate Relationships

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## Chapter 3

### Chapter Summary

#### The Evolutionary Perspective

- **People's preferences are subject to the pressures of natural selection.** Like physical traits, preferences, and desires that allow for survival are most likely to be passed on.
- **Through *sexual selection*, traits that are most desirable to the opposite sex are most likely to be passed on.** For instance, birds who sing enticing songs are most likely to attract mates and have children who are likely to inherit the ability to sing enticing songs.
- **The desires and physical traits that people today have are those that were best suited to the *environment of evolutionary adaptedness*.** This refers to how humans lived thousands of years ago.
- **The *theory of parental investment* predicts that there will be gender differences in what males and females desire in a partner.** Females have a greater investment—in terms of time and energy—in offspring than males do. They are also limited in the number of offspring they can have. Because of this, females should strive to mate with males who will give them offspring with the greatest chance of survival; males should strive to mate with as many females as possible to optimize their number of offspring.

#### Attachment Theory

- **Attachment theory suggests that people's intimate relationships are related to their relationships with their *attachment figure*.** This attachment figure is a primary caregiver.
- **People have an *attachment behavior system* that helps to control how close or distant they are from others.** The way people develop this system is dependent on their perception of their attachment figure. When they feel secure that the attachment figure is present and responsive, people's attachment behavior system relaxes. When they wonder whether the attachment figure is present and responsive, people's attachment behavior system becomes activated. They become upset and strive to restore closeness to their attachment figure.
- **Over time, people develop *internal working models of attachment*.** These models include expectations regarding the degree to which their attachment figure will be responsive to their needs. These internal working models of attachment have been divided into three different types: (1) *secure*, in which the attachment figure is seen as reliable and expected to be responsive to the infant's needs, (2) *avoidant*, in which the attachment figure is seen as unavailable, and the infant defensively avoids close contact with others, (3) *anxious/ambivalent*, in which the attachment figure is not consistently available or responsive, and the infant becomes preoccupied with checking on the attachment figure's availability.
- **Attachment theory suggests that people apply these internal working models of attachment to their romantic relationships.**
- **Another line of attachment theory has focused on the underlying structure of people's attachment models.** This theory has proposed two dimensions that can each range from negative to positive: (1) views of the self, and (2) views of others. People with positive views of self and other are classified as *secure*. People with positive views of the self and negative views of others are classified as *dismissing of intimacy*. People with negative views of the self and positive views of others are classified as *preoccupied with*

*relationships*. People with negative views of the self and of others are classified as *fearful of intimacy*.

## Social Exchange Theory

- **Social exchange theory focuses on the outcomes of relationships.** Social exchange theory suggests that relationship partners focus on the positive outcomes (*rewards*) and negative outcomes (*costs*) of their relationships. Rewards include *social rewards* and *material rewards*. Costs include *opportunity costs*. According to this theory, people evaluate their relationships both in terms of actual rewards and costs and in terms of anticipated rewards and costs.
- **People evaluate their relationship outcomes based on their *comparison level* and their *comparison level for alternatives*.** Comparison level refers to the outcomes that people think they deserve, or can expect to get, in a relationship. Comparison level for alternatives refers to the outcomes that people think they could get if they were to enter a different relationship. People with a low comparison level and low comparison level for alternatives tend to have a high level of *dependency* on their relationship and may feel unable to leave.
- **Alternatives are broadly construed.** They include, not just alternative relationships, but alternatives to being in a relationship. They also include all the consequences someone might face for leaving his or her relationship. These include losing investments that have been put into the relationship, social disapproval for leaving the relationship, and other factors that make people feel unable to leave, no matter how much they might want to.
- **Commitment is a product of satisfaction and dependence.** Commitment, defined as the intention to remain in a relationship, is comprised of the desire to stay (i.e., satisfaction) and the inability to leave (i.e., dependency).

## Social Learning Theory

- **Social learning theory views behavior as central to relationships.** Partners affect each other's lives through the behaviors they exchange.
- **Partners learn from their relationship behaviors.** Each time partners engage in positive behaviors, they learn they can trust each other and view the relationship positively. Each time partners engage in negative behaviors, they question whether they can trust each other, and begin to view the relationship negatively. Partners bring these memories of past behaviors, and ideas of whether they can trust their partner and relationship, into their next interaction with their partner.
- **Coercion theory, one subset of social learning theory, captures cycles of behavior.** This theory states that, if people get a response from their partner after engaging in a particular behavior (e.g., yelling to get their partner's attention), they will continue to engage in that behavior.
- **Escape conditioning, another subset of social learning theory, captures another aspect of cycles of behavior.** This idea states that, if a behavior brings an end to an uncomfortable situation, people will repeat that behavior. For instance, if storming out brings an end to an uncomfortable argument, people will storm out again the next time they experience an uncomfortable argument.

## Social Ecological Models

- **Social ecological models focus on the external circumstances of relationships.** These external circumstances include the *microsystem* (immediate environment with friends and family), *mesosystem* (more removed environment including neighborhood), and *macrosystem* (even more removed environment including country).
- **One social ecological model is the ABC-X model.** In this model, A stands for a stressor, B stands for people's resources to deal with that stressor, C stands for people's perceptions of the stressor, and X stands

for people's experience of and reaction to the stressor.

- **An extension of the ABC-X model is the Double ABC-X model.** This model introduces the element of time. In this model, AA stands for the pile-up of stressors over time, BB stands for changes in a couple's resources over time, CC stands for couple's interpretation and perception of how they are coping with the stressor, and XX stands for the couple's experiences over time in coping with stressors.