

Jesse Gray

Week 2

Duck: Interaction and Daily Life in Long-term Relationships

It was interesting to read this chapter and see a hint of all the work done in this field. Much of the content presented here coincides with the popular wisdom about dating and relationships (which you might find discussed in teen magazines); but here it is presented in an academic context and backed by studies and research. I like the author's focus on a couple of key points that seem to be overlooked in the field, such as the fact that everything occurs within the context of everyday life and the mundane everyday interactions between people cannot be ignored. Not every interaction appears deep and meaningful, but they all contribute something to our relationships.

It was interesting to read that it is supposed that we close down certain kinds of cognitive processing if we perceive that we will not develop a relationship with a person. I suppose this indicates that this type of processing is expensive to perform, perhaps because it excludes other mental activity at the time. It also hints at the common perception that someone that we like "doesn't even know we exist"; if that someone has perceived that there will be no relationship, they may well shut down processing of your behavior and not notice things that another person would.

There was a large focus on how similar attitudes and personalities were self-reinforcing and thus the basis for forming relationships. This may often be quite true, but what of the commonly believed "opposites attract", which seems to have anecdotal support. Perhaps the similarity required for self-reinforcement is based on what attributes each person finds important, and other attributes may take on complementary values. For example 2 people might need their partner to have a similar idea of morality, but have no preference for their introverted/extroverted natures (or perhaps even seek out those opposite to themselves).

I also thought the author had a correctly skeptical view on some of the studies that have been done outside the context of actual relationships, and also those that seem to oversimplify interactions beyond a certain point. For example, taking a survey about potential mate characteristics seems unlikely to result in actual data about which people the person will end up forming successful relationships - I would think that a survey approach to this problem would more likely be useful for determining the gap between the person's mental image of a eligible match and their actual behavior. Also the studies based on "intimate topics" seem to be somewhat flawed, as the author suggests. Conversations about anything can be intimate in the right context, and conversations about traditionally intimate topics can be mundane.

Similarly, self disclosure as a simple metric for relationship health is an oversimplification. As the author points out, self disclosure traditionally is thought of as increasing the bond between two people, but since people know this effect (either

intuitively or cognitively) they can (and do) use this effect to manipulate their partner or relationship. I believe that this effect can probably be seen in all the relationship indicators, to some degree, which is why trust is a complicated thing to form (or evaluate, as a human or researcher) - any indicator of commitment or positive affect, if understood properly, can be used to try to manipulate another person. If your goal is manipulation your behavior will not be much different from someone who's feelings are genuine, depending on your level of understanding (again, perhaps intuitively) of these indicators.

Collis: A Theoretical Basis for Health Benefits of Pet Ownership

The author brings up a number of important assumptions underlying current thought and research in the health benefits of pets. To me, one of the most important ones is the assumption of causality between the health benefits and pet ownership. Unfortunately this is hard to control for, because it is hard to give people pets for the purpose of an experiment. However, it would be interesting to verify that pet ownership confers these benefits, rather than the alternative hypothesis that people with lower stress tend to own pets. Also, a third alternative is that pets in general can confer these benefits, but only to certain kinds of people. From personal experience it seems likely that these assumptions are correct, that pets could provide these benefits to many people, but it would be nice to see it treated formally.

The author also mentions the assumption that the tools we use to form relationships with our pets are borrowed from those used to form relationships with humans. This one also seems intuitively to be correct, but it is important to be aware of underlying assumptions.

I found the discussion of insecurity and attachment of infants to their caregiver was interesting. Insecurity is described as produced through a simple heuristic for actual danger (being in unfamiliar circumstances without the caregiver), and relieved through another simple heuristic (being near the caregiver); that insecurity alleviating relationship is called attachment. The infant must intuitively understand this insecurity relief mechanism, and thus desires to be near the caregiver when insecure. It is interesting how in this simplified state, where the infant isn't even described as understanding what "danger" is (and especially not specific dangers or the abilities of the caregiver to prevent them) this variable is still called insecurity. It makes me wonder how this variable relates to insecurity in adults - is it the same thing, but can be triggered by more cognitive analysis of dangerous situations (and relieved by more cognitive analysis of safety)? If so, it makes me wonder if the attachments that occur in adult relationships where one or both parties look to the other to reduce insecurity is a side effect of this process for keeping infants safe, or if it is itself beneficial for survival (or perhaps both). The simplicity of this description of uncertainty is also interesting with respect to developing machines that have these type of responses - it is hypothesized here that something as seemingly complex behaviorally as insecurity and attachment is actually derived from a very simple, one dimensional variable with simple rules for how it effects behavior and how the environment effects its value.

Finally I was curious whether the causality has been examined in situations where stress is shown to be higher in lonely people, and reduced in those with social contact. It intuitively makes sense to me that people with greater social networks will be able to deal with stress better, but perhaps there is also the reverse causal effect, where highly stressed people have trouble maintaining a social network?