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Non-verbal Communication: From Good Endings to Better Beginnings

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Human beings can't help but form relationships. We have them with cars, clothes, watches, teddy bears, dogs, cats, goldfish; you name it, and we can have a relationship with it. And thank goodness we have both the motivation for and the skill to connect with objects both inanimate and animate, because the truth is that without relationships we could not survive infancy and childhood or have a life worth living as adults.

What we seek most, being close to others in meaningful romantic relationships and friendships, turns out to be a struggle for many of us. Some of us are better at relating to our stuffed toys or attractive cars than we are to people. Frustratingly, we often create barriers to connecting even when we believe it would be in our best interest.

Non-verbal language and communication play a crucial role in the resolution of this struggle. Relationships follow a dynamic process

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repeatedly cycling through choosing, beginning, deepening, and ending phases. The four-phase relationship model we present here provides a framework for understanding how relationships develop and how to deal with the inevitable endings in a way that allows them to provide the information we need to make our future connections better. In such a system, closeness is not as a static goal to attain but rather a constantly moving target that often needs re-negotiating between participants.

Sternberg's Approach to Relationships

Perhaps no one person has done more to further our understanding of “relationship” than Robert Sternberg. Sternberg’s triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986, 2019) has provided clinicians and researchers a viable framework for understanding the distinct yet interrelated components of love—intimacy, passion, and commitment. Intimacy involves feelings of connection, closeness, and trust and is heavily dependent on effective communication between partners. Passion integrates excitement, desire, and sexual attraction and may involve obsessive thoughts or a strong need to be with a partner—the feeling of “Can’t get you off of my mind.” Commitment, the only element Sternberg describes as conscious and intentional, involves a decision to stop looking for other partners followed by an ongoing choice to continue the relationship.

Combinations of intimacy, passion, and commitment result in eight different types of love. *Consummate love*, strong and enduring, encompasses all three elements and is described by Sternberg as rare. Intimacy and commitment lead to *companionate love*. The presence of intimacy alone yields *friendship*. *Infatuation* describes a relationship built solely on passion. A relationship built solely on *commitment* and devoid of intimacy or passion is referred to as “empty love.” Intimacy and passion combine to create *romantic love*. Passion and commitment without intimacy yield “fatuous” or “*foolish love*.” Sternberg describes relationships in which none of the components are present as “*non-love*.”

Since the introduction of his relationship theory, Sternberg has been interested not only in the components of love, but also how love develops over time. While the triangular theory of love describes the structural

nature of love, for Sternberg, the development of love is best understood within the context of story. According to Sternberg, each of us has a set of stories about love which guide how we think about relationships and our expectations for how those relationships play out. Often these stories are out of our awareness yet include predefined roles that we unknowingly assign to ourselves and partners. For example, roles in the fairy-tale story may involve a prince and a princess (Sternberg, 1995).

Sternberg's duplex theory of love combines the triangular and love as a story models and suggests that exposure to multiple love stories leads us to form our own. Many themes of our stories come from childhood experiences with our parents, siblings, and friends, and these stories are expanded as we incorporate experiences from our adolescence. The stories influence our perception of the actions of others as well as impacting our own actions as we try to shape our relationships to fit our own stories (for an extensive description and examples see: <https://lovemultiverse.com/understanding-love/different-kinds-of-love-stories/>).

The stories we seek to live out are related to many factors—what we observed growing up, how our needs for affection were met (or not), our relationships with friends and family members when we were children, and the impact of our culture and community, including the media we read and watched. Sternberg (2019) lists 26 stories, based on analysis of love stories in literature, previous psychological research, and anecdotal case material. Although the stories Sternberg and his colleagues analysed were from people in the United States, they were similar to stories found across cultures (Sorokowski et al., 2021). Sternberg suggests we form our own stories of love and then seek to fulfil them by finding partners who fit our narrative expectations. He and his colleagues have noted that we are most likely to succeed in close relationships with people whose stories of love are most like our own. We gravitate to those who embrace similar stories about love yet seek out partners who fulfil the complementary role within our love story.

For most of us, the love we long for is what Sternberg describes as Consummate love. Consummate love involves the intimate communication of a soulmate, the sexual passion of a lover, and loyal, unshakeable commitment, as in “til death do us part.” Sternberg has noted that consummate love is sought by many and achieved by few. In his

conceptualization of relationship process, when passion decreases, the consummate love relationships ends and the choice may be made to “settle for” a less vibrant connection he terms companionate love, or perhaps to leave the relationship in search of a different partner.

The possibility of ending a consummate love relationship in the service of recreating consummate love again intrigues us. We are most interested in this re-creation when it involves doing the work to allow the rebirth of an even stronger and better relationship *with the same person*. By focusing on the flow of dyadic love, we have noted that many relationships “end” multiple times, with the lessons learned and incorporated from those endings offering an opportunity to draw closer.

Interpersonal Perspective on Relationships: The Four-Phase Model

When asked what relationships they seek and value, most adults are likely to mention two—a loving spouse/romantic partner and a “best” or close friend. Recent data from YouGov finds that over half (56%) of US adults believe in the idea of soulmates (Ballard, 2020). Much energy is put in the pursuit of finding that soulmate, romantic or platonic.

In the 1970 film “Love Story,” based on the book of the same title by Erich Segal, Oliver says to his terminally ill wife Jenny, that “love means never having to say you’re sorry.” The novelist Lauren Kate writes, “true love never says goodbye.” While this makes for great movie making and best-selling books, the reality of what it takes to achieve long-lasting close relationships is different. Such examples give the mistaken impression we should put most of our relationship effort into finding and connecting with the “right” person because if we find him or her, then we’ll be “set” for life. Attaining relationship closeness, according to this view, is much like an Alpine skier who after finishing the difficult turns and twists around the poles of the giant slalom race, goes into the “tuck position” and effortlessly glides to the finish line.

There is a difference in theoretical expectation between “close relationships” and “closeness in relationships.” *Close relationships* suggest a stationary state we strive to attain and once we have, we try to “hang on to.” In contrast, *closeness in a relationship* reflects the idea that closeness ebbs and flows with the changing needs of those in a relationship. This idea positions love as more like a never-ending slalom that continues to have poles and standards to navigate, rather than a few challenges to conquer before “gliding” to the finish line of a close relationship.

Attaining and maintaining relationship closeness is a task that takes persistent and continuous effort. We drop in and out of closeness with others and must constantly communicate with one another to create balance. When we lose closeness, we must re-negotiate our wants and needs to re-acquire intimate connections. While the successful development of relationship closeness requires skill in choosing with whom to begin, we suggest that it depends to an even greater extent on how well we handle relationship endings and what we learn about ourselves and how we relate during that process.

Based on this conception of ever-changing levels of closeness, we assume any long-lasting relationship in which we experience closeness will have not one, but a series of endings, as well as new choices, beginnings, and deepenings, leading up to endings. While this conception suggests attaining and maintaining successful relationships may require more work than we realize, the good news is that every time we end, we are presented with a new opportunity to learn from the relationship in its entirety. When we allow ourselves to acknowledge relationship endings, we grant ourselves the birds-eye view to see not only where we are, but where we’ve been and how we got from there to here. We can view the relationship from its early beginnings and remind ourselves of how our interactions lead or didn’t lead to closeness. At the same time, we experience what is happening now as the relationship draws to a close. In this conception of how relationships operate, ending is an extraordinarily crucial time for us, filled with emotions and stressors but also rich with possibilities of learning what we are good at and what we may lack in relating well to others.

Nowicki–Duke Four-Phase Relationship Model (4-PRM)

Emphasizing relationship endings aligns with the theoretical structure of the four-phase model or 4-PRM (Duke & Nowicki, 1982; Nowicki & Duke, 2012, 2016) that places relationship ending at the very core of functioning successfully with others. The 4-PRM provides a framework for describing and understanding how closeness develops across the “lifetime” of a relationship. In this model, dyadic intimacy develops as part of a dynamic interpersonal process in which relationships move through the four phases of choosing, beginning, deepening, and ending. Meaningful relationships that continue over the years will experience a number of these sequences.

The origins of the 4-PRM are found in the writings of interpersonal theorists beginning with Harry Stack Sullivan (1953, 1954), who was among the first to suggest there was more to human behaviour than the interplay of intrapsychic id, ego, and superego processes described by Freud (1936). Emphasizing the importance of non-verbal communication, Sullivan theorized that who we are and how we behave is a consequence of our interpersonal rather than intrapsychic interactions.

To understand how we navigate towards closeness as adults, it is helpful to examine how our ability to connect with others develops. Interpersonal communication begins in infancy, where we use the reflected non-verbal appraisals of significant others to begin forming a rudimentary self-concept. When parents or caregivers largely relate to us through encouraging non-verbal messages in the form of reassuring touch, smile, warm tone of voice, we are likely to view ourselves more positively. If, on the other hand, the non-verbal messages we perceive are primarily disapproving in tone, in the form of rigid touch, frowns, angry voices, then we are likely to develop a largely negative self-concept. Our self-concept develops in the presence of the anxiety we experience early in life. Sullivan believed that a major way we reduced anxiety was to interact with others whose interpersonal messages agreed with how we perceived ourselves to be, our self-concept. As we grow older, anxiety reduction continues to motivate our social behaviour, and our self-concept will

become more stable and more resistant to change as verbal reflections are added to non-verbal input from others.

For Sullivan, interacting with someone whose behaviour confirms how we see ourselves reduces anxiety. As in Sternberg's love as a story model, we are motivated to interact more often and more deeply with those who behave in ways to confirm how we view ourselves and to avoid the anxiety generated by interacting with those who don't. According to Sullivan, we learn to develop personality styles to "pull" reactions from others that confirm our self-concepts. While open to modification at any age, the personality style we develop at a young age lays the groundwork for how we navigate relationships throughout our life.

The Circumplex Theory

Timothy Leary (1957) undertook the first large-scale scientific study of Sullivan's concepts, analysing thousands of therapeutic interactions of individuals involved in a Kaiser Permanente mental health project. Leary's research produced scientific support for Sullivan's clinical and theoretical ideas. His analysis suggested two major orthogonal dimensions described the messages being sent between people when they interacted. The first, *Status*, is anchored at one end by Dominance and at the other by Submission. The second independent dimension, *Affiliation*, has Friendliness at one end and Hostility at the other. Carson (1969) accepted the idea of two independent dimensions of Status and Affiliation and went a step further to suggest it would be helpful to cross the two dimensions to form a Circumplex Model of Interpersonal Behaviour. The resulting quadrants reflected four major interpersonal styles: *friendly/dominant (FD)*, *friendly/submissive (FS)*, *hostile/dominant (HD)*, and *hostile/submissive (HS)*. Consistent with Sullivan's theory, Carson reported evidence that interpersonal styles are learned modified through interactions with important people in our lives and are calculated to pull behaviours from others to confirm self-concept, reducing anxiety and motivating us to stay connected in relationships that do so.

In the circumplex model, the Status dimension is governed by the *rule of opposites*; that is, dominance pulls for submission and submission pulls

for dominance. In contrast, the Affiliation dimension follows the *rule of similarity*; that is, friendliness begets friendliness and hostility begets hostility. Applying the “rules” governing the interpersonal effect of each style helps us understand what behaviours are being solicited from others to confirm our self-concept. Individuals behaving in a friendly dominant manner are asking others to be similar in affiliation but opposite in status, in other words, act in a friendly submissive manner.

When two people conform to what each is “asking” for interpersonally they are in a **complementary** interaction. In complementary relationships self-concept is validated and anxiety is reduced, leading to a comfort conducive to producing intimate relationships. There is significant support for the positive impact of complementary relationships. (see Altenstein et al., 2013; Dermody et al., 2017; Estroff & Nowicki, 1992; Hopwood et al., 2020; Kiesler, 1999; Pincus, 2005; Pincus & Ansell, 2013; Rosen et al., 2012).

When we interact with someone who does not agree with us on the friendly dimension, but instead presents as hostile, yet is similar to us on the status dimension by being dominant, we find ourselves in an **anti-complementary** relationship. Because the other person’s interpersonal style does not offer any confirmation of our own self-concept on either dimension, it produces uncomfortable feelings of anxiety and our relationship will likely terminate as soon as possible.

Between these two extremes lie those relationships described as **mixed complementarity**, in which there is agreement on one of the two dimensions, but disagreement on the other. For example, if we offer our friendly dominant style in an interpersonal situation and find the other person to be either friendly dominant or hostile submissive, we are left with a decision as to be influenced more by the positive confirmation on one dimension or the negative confirmation on the other. Often individuals who are in mixed complementary relationships will stay for a while, to see if they can negotiate change to produce complementarity and increase opportunities for closeness to develop.

The dynamics of complementarity operate the same way on the hostile side of the circumplex as they do on the friendly side. That is, the complement for hostile dominance is hostile submissive. Hostile complementary dyads also tend to continue even though they are governed by hostile

affect. Hostile complements are most often found to be effective in promoting positive outcomes in competitive but not cooperative situations whereas friendly complements seem to be more effective in cooperative situations (Estroff & Nowicki, 1992; Nowicki et al., 1997). Non-verbal communication plays a significant role in the expression of interpersonal styles described in the circumplex model, especially when verbal and non-verbal messages differ and are incongruent.

Non-verbal Communication

Non-verbal social behaviour includes all human responses which are not overly manifested in words (either spoken or written) and that convey meaning (Hall & Bernieri, 2001), including facial expressions, paralanguage or prosody, body movement or kinetics, gestures/postures, touch, and proxemics (Harper et al., 1978). Non-verbal social skills “include ... abilities to encode and decode cues of emotion ... to control and regulate emotional displays, as well as the management of conversations (Riggio, 1992, p. 3).

Kiesler (1999) emphasized that “The vehicle for human transactions is communication; the verbal and nonverbal. ... Since nonverbal messages predominate in emotional and relational communication, understanding of interpersonal behavior requires simultaneous study of both the linguistic and nonverbal levels of human communication” (p. 5). Simply put, we should place more emphasis on the experience of what we see, what we feel, and the way in which words are communicated than on the words themselves.

Interest in the role non-verbal communication plays in our relationships is nothing new. Over 50 years ago, Ekman and Friesen (1969) described non-verbal communication as a “relationship language” with unique characteristics that could be depended on to “signal” changes in ongoing interpersonal interactions. They speculated that non-verbal behaviour represented the most valid type of communication, providing more reliable indicators of “unconscious” attitudes and beliefs than words. The view that non-verbal is predominant over verbal communication in relationships continues to be widely held (Kiesler, 1999).

As with verbal skills, we have both receptive and expressive non-verbal processing abilities, although research results suggest they are not highly correlated (Elfenbein et al., 2010). That is, we can be skilled in identifying nonverbal cues in others, but relatively unskilled in sending our own nonverbal messages and vice versa. Receptive skills are learned earlier than expressive ones (Feldman et al., 1991; Johnson & Myklebust, 1967). Non-verbal communication, like its verbal counterpart, develops with age and is assumed to mature into a learned organized sign system relied on in social interaction. That is, like words are signs and signals of meaning, so too are non-verbal cues. Some suggest there are pre-wired connections enabling the use of nonverbal behaviours that have evolved phylogenetically because of their usefulness for survival of the individual and the species (Wellman et al., 1995). Others, however, emphasize that though the rudimentary aspects of non-verbal communication may be biologically present and required, it is primarily cultural and social experiences that shape this skill for our everyday use (Manstead, 1995). We believe it is likely that both biological factors and social experiences contribute to the maturing of our non-verbal language system.

Challenges in Non-verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication differs from its verbal counterpart, in ways that make it particularly relevant for social competence and successful relating (Duke et al., 1996; Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Nowicki & Duke, 2012). First, non-verbal communication is more continuous than its verbal partner. Individuals may stop talking when in proximity to others, but they cannot stop sending emotional cues in their facial expressions, gestures, postures, personal space, and the like. Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) summarized this difference in the now classic statement, “You cannot not communicate nonverbally.”

Next, non-verbal communication is more likely to take place out of awareness. Because we are less aware of what is transpiring non-verbally, we are also more likely to be unaware of our non-verbal communication’s strengths and weaknesses (Friedman, 1979). Ammirati (2013) found, for example, that participants lacked awareness of their own skill in

recognizing emotions in the facial expressions of others, overestimating their accuracy by an average of 25%, even after being given empirical feedback of their strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to differing from verbal communication in terms of continuousness and awareness, non-verbal messages are more likely have a negative emotional rather than a negative intellectual impact (Nowicki & Duke, 2012). Standing too close to someone who is a stranger will likely make that person uncomfortable and perhaps even anxious, while using the wrong grammar when speaking to them may leave an impression of intellectual shortcomings, but not generate much of an emotional response. Humans tend to be more tolerant of intellectual rather than emotional shortcomings.

Nowicki and Duke (1994) have suggested that these three characteristics of non-verbal communication create a difficult social scenario for those who lack non-verbal skills and highlighted the negative interpersonal impact of what they term “dyssemia” (dys = inability, semia = signs: an inability to process non-verbal signs). Because of the very nature of non-verbal communication, those with non-verbal skill deficits are likely to produce negative emotional impacts on others continuously, leading to ongoing challenges in forming and maintaining relationships. Those who are dyssemic typically are unaware of the negative impact of their erroneous non-verbal messages and their significant role in creating social difficulties. Dyssemias have the potential to be detrimental during any phase of the relationship process be it at choosing, beginning, deepening, or ending.

Non-verbal communication is learned differently than how we usually become skilled with words. Non-verbal skills are learned indirectly and informally while verbal skills are directly taught, first at home, and then later at school. We learn non-verbal cues primarily by observing others and modelling their behaviour (Johnson & Myklebust, 1967). Unfortunately, in this kind of learning, we receive little direct feedback about the “correctness” of our learning which stands in stark contrast to the clear, direct, and continuous feedback we receive about our verbal skills both at home and at all levels of education.

Because non-verbal behaviour is the primary vehicle for communicating emotions in social interactions it should be no surprise that it is

associated with social competence (Hall & Bernieri, 2001; Saarni 1999). The association between social competence and non-verbal skills exists, at least in part, because non-verbal cues provide information regarding emotions necessary for effective and successful social regulation and interaction. Non-verbal communication has greater power to convey emotional messages, overriding verbal messages when they differ. When our non-verbal and verbal emotional communications are in opposition, described by Kiesler as “incongruence,” we are more likely to believe the non-verbal message (Bugenthal et al., 1970). For example, when interacting with others who “say” they are not anxious their words will not carry nearly as much weight as how they present themselves non-verbally. Shaking hands, wavering voice, and tapping feet override the words, “I’m not worried about this at all.”

The 4-PRM Process

Choice

We don’t have much freedom in deciding with whom to interact when it comes to family or preordained social situations such as office parties. However, when we do have the flexibility to choose with whom to interact, our choice can take place in seconds. Because the decision takes place so quickly, in fact before we or others utter a word, it is primarily determined by what is being communicated in the non-verbal cues especially facial expressions. Psychology Today (2019) reported we only take about seven seconds to form an opinion about another person using only their posture, facial expression, and perhaps tone of voice. Although our evaluations can sometimes be wrong, we tend to stick to them even when evidence to the contrary is presented.

Although choosing takes place quickly, it is by no means a simple task. It turns out we have to sift through a vast number of non-verbal cues in making our choices. In fact, Pei (2015) suggests there are well over 75,000 different discriminable non-verbal signs. Some non-verbal cues are hard-wired and physically determined, such as the shape of our head and face,

which may make us look more masculine or feminine (Hobgood, 2017) or more or less mature (Gorvett, 2016). While we can't change physical aspects rooted in biology, we can become more aware of their potential impact on our interactions during the early stages of relating to others.

In contrast, although many non-verbal signals are under our control, including posture, gestures, appearance, and facial expressions, most of the time we usually are unaware of the subtle and quick non-verbal calculations being made to decide whether to begin a relationship with someone. Despite research suggesting otherwise, we tend to think we are accurate in reading non-verbal cues (Ammirati, 2013). As mentioned earlier, we tend to overrate our accuracy, which can make our beginnings more problematic. Future interpersonal difficulties brought about by our unfounded confidence in our non-verbal abilities can be even greater in those with dyssemia (Nowicki & Duke, 2012; Nowicki et al., 2009), individuals who already are more prone to make more mistakes reading or expressing non-verbal cues; mistakes that can stop a relationship before it even starts.

Love Is a Garden: An Application of the 4-PRM

A popular story provided by Sternberg's theory is the Garden story, embracing the "view that relationships need to be continually nurtured and tended to" (Sternberg, 2019). Let's examine the role non-verbal behaviour plays within this narrative as it develops in the Choice, Beginning, Deepening, and Ending phases of the Nowicki–Duke model, through the lens of our gardeners, "Joe" and "Joan," imaginary characters drawn from our own personal and professional experiences.

Joan greeted Joe at the door wearing a red soft terry cloth dress, the same one that had caught his eye earlier that day between high school classes. She hadn't been sure he'd be coming by that day, but Joe had asked her at school if he could stop by sometime and confirmed her address. Just in case, Joan was ready – the curls of her 1980's perm unbrushed and lip gloss applied at a lower level to create an illusion of casualness. Tilting her head and dropping one shoulder she smiled encouragingly from the doorway. Shy Joe had a way of blinking rapidly when attracted to someone – and his long-lashed brown

eyes began blinking now. When he asked her for a date, she reached up to twirl a curl and said, "yes."

In the Choice phase, our gardener/lovers survey the landscape, seeking a fertile and welcoming plot of land to tend. The garden of love is perhaps viewed as a third entity, with the gardeners focusing not only on each other but on the relationship as something to be tended by both of them. Visual cues are critical in the choice phase, including frequent and increasingly prolonged gaze, appearance including dress and use of color as tools to signal interest (Pazda et al., 2012; Wen et al., 2014) and gestures such as tilting heads or leaning forward with interest. Physical appearance is important in this phase, as are facial expressions and openness of posture.

Beginning

While typically anecdotal or informal advice is offered when *choosing* someone with whom to begin, we receive more structured and direct help in what to do when *beginning* with another once we have made our choice. From childhood on we are taught how to begin by using a widely accepted and overlearned set of rules called "manners" (Nowicki et al., 2009, Nowicki & Duke, 2012). Manners include verbal and non-verbal skills. We smile, we offer our hand for a handshake, and we say something polite about being pleased to meet the person. We offer similar behaviours to everyone we meet. This partnership of verbal and non-verbal communication typically is followed by what is colloquially called "small talk," conversation about some innocuous topic like the weather.

Because of the overlearned and reflexive nature of beginnings, neither complementarity nor incongruence is thought to play a major role in the success or failure of a relationship in this phase. From Kiesler (1999) and Duke and Nowicki's (1982) perspective, "the negotiation of relationship definition is not essential in the earliest stages of a relationship but becomes more important as the interaction continues over time. ... Complementary transactions ought to determine relationship valence only when interactions continue past the initial stage" (Kiesler, p. 50).

Joe was nervous as he pulled into Joan's driveway to pick her up for the prom. Placing his trembling hands in his pockets, he stood tall and walked confidently to the door to ring the bell. At dinner before the dance, they discussed the beauty of spring weather in Atlanta, asked about each other's pets, and were careful to use the right fork for salad. They sat across from each other at the restaurant, but at the prom moved closer, standing nearer even when not dancing. By the end of the evening, Joe and Joan were holding hands. Dancing slowly, they had eyes only for each other, gazing for long stretches as Joe tried to be sure not to step on Joan's feet, and Joan kept her heels on all night. At the end of the evening, they kissed, and Joan brushed Joe's cheek gently with her hand before leaving. They kissed once more, Joe's hand sliding down Joan's back before making plans for breakfast the next morning, both impatient for 6 hours to pass quickly until they were together again.

The beginning phase in a relationship is marked by the passion of newness, akin to the joy the gardeners experience as they survey a plot of richly turned soil ripe with possibilities. The gardeners dream of colorful flowers, satisfying food, verdant trees and bushes. In this fresh beginning stage, touch plays a greater role. Just as gardeners speak a language all their own, using phrases like "testing soil ph levels" and "monitoring for invasive pests," the new lovers may develop a paralanguage all their own, marked by cooing and sighs. The first seeds of love sprout tenderly, unspoiled by disease or outside pests. In the beginning phase the gardeners are absorbed with their relationship and each other, listening carefully, acting in unity, touching frequently and excited by the possibilities. As gardeners take care to plant complementary plants the partners take care to curate their shared experiences in ways that lead to closeness and connection.

Deepening

The "real" work of getting closer to someone starts after we have made a choice of with whom to begin and moved past "small talk." Theorists and researchers are intensely interested in understanding what occurs during this time to foster successful progress toward relationship closeness. Some suggest progress is the result of an orderly progression of stages from

initial concrete observations of physical appearance to a more important evaluation of shared values (e.g., Murstein & Azar, 1986). For these investigators, the key to the development of a closer relationship resides in the ability to decipher the cues that reflect the underlying values, and if acceptable, use them to deepen the connection.

Others offer an incremental approach, suggesting that rather than movement through discrete stages, relationships gradually tend to become closer over time if intimacy also increases (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The development of closeness in this view is dependent on the success of a process of reciprocating self-disclosures to build intimacy and trust.

Regardless of our perspective on the progression of relationships we embrace, it is likely that out of the estimated 75,000 people we will meet in our lifetime (Anna Vital, Adiomia Founder, 2020), most will remain stalled at the beginning stage and characterized by culturally determined structured interactions. Only a few will progress further, deepen, and become meaningful “close” relationships.

Joe and Joan continued to spend increasing amounts of time with each other. They developed pet names that appeared silly to others, including “Fraise” (strawberry) for Joan and “Punky” for Joe. Although they came from different religious backgrounds, the values they shared led them to work together on political campaigns during college and engage in volunteer work together with Big Brothers and Big Sisters following graduation. They enjoyed spending time hiking and talking about movies they watched together on Friday nights, sitting next to one another with legs intertwined and Joan’s head on Joe’s chest. Unspoken rules and patterns of interactions emerged, with Joan often creating meals and Joe doing dishes and cleaning up afterwards. They developed the ability to signal across the room with the raise of an eyebrow and tilt of the head when one of them was ready to leave a party. All was not perfect in their relationship, and at times Joe wondered if he had made a mistake by choosing to commit to a monogamous relationship at such a young age. Still, they married the summer after graduation and moved to a town not far from extended family and friends.

As the garden grows in the deepening phase, the weeds of stressful life events and the pests of jealousy, fatigue, or boredom with the daily chores may threaten the beauty of the garden. The gardeners unite in defending their love, engaging in rituals that signal commitment and focus on their

garden to the exclusion of cultivating other plots. Like scarecrows planted in a garden to warn away the unwanted invasion of strange birds or markers indicating what flowers will soon bloom, these signals may involve the wearing of certain items (wedding rings, for example), extending gazes to each other while decreasing eye contact with others, engaging in public affection involving dance, hand holding, hugging, kissing and intimate touches to the face. Couples develop non-verbal cues easily deciphered (a raised eyebrow while talking in a group may refer to a private understanding: "See what I mean about him?"). A look across the room to a partner followed by a glance toward the door may convey, "Hey, are you ready to get out of here and go have some fun?").

Interpersonal theory suggests some possible reasons for *why* some relationships become closer and others don't, and the circumplex construct provides some promising explanations for *how* closeness develops. While similarity in age, physical appearance, activities and the like is as a basis for continuing to relate earlier in relationships, when considering deepening a relationship, the interactive process becomes more demanding and complex. With increasing closeness being the payoff, according to the 4-PRM, we undertake an evaluative search for those who will interact with us in ways to confirm our own self-concept. We use our own favoured interpersonal style that was developed to act as a bid for others to behave in ways to make us comfortable by confirming our self-concept. Leary (1957) suggested that in this manner we were responsible for creating the interpersonal world we live in. "You are mainly responsible for your life situation. You have created your own world. Your own interpersonal behavior has, more than any other factor, determined the reception you get from others. Your slowly developing pattern of reflexes has trained others and yourself to accept you as this kind of person—to be treated in this kind of way. You are the manager of your own destiny" (p. 117).

When two people have moved past the beginning phase of interacting, they engage in the exchange of verbal and non-verbal information necessary in deciding whether a complementary relationship consistent with the principles of the circumplex construct is possible. This already difficult task is further complicated by the fact that the four general interpersonal styles described in the circumplex model (Friendly Dominant, Friendly Submissive, Hostile Dominant, and Hostile Submissive) are

communicated via two different languages: verbal language, which is expressed and received within our awareness, and non-verbal language, used more often out of our awareness. When both verbal and non-verbal languages deliver a similar interpersonal style message, communication is congruent; however, when they differ, the message becomes incongruent, presenting a complex interpersonal problem for us to solve. The problem is that incongruence elicits different behavioural responses from others; one in awareness using words and the other out of awareness communicating non-verbal cues. Not only are non-verbal messages more out of awareness, but they also are assumed to have more emotional impact than verbal ones and hence can pull “unexpected” responses creating relationship problems.

Shantae, a friend of Joe and Jane, has completed the “small talk” beginning phase of a new relationship and wants to find out if the person she’s met is a good candidate for a deeper relationship. Shantae believes she has a friendly dominant style and uses words reflecting that style to “pull” for a complementary friendly submissive response. Unfortunately, unknowingly, and simultaneously, she was also sending quite a different hostile submissive message non-verbally, a message asking for a complementary response of hostile dominance in return. Because past research shows the non-verbal message will have a greater emotional impact than the verbal one, rather than the hoped for friendly dominant reaction, she received a more confusing hostile dominant response.

Non-verbal Behavior Associated with Closeness

Research identifying non-verbal behaviours associated with relationship closeness has offered few surprise findings. Guerero and Floyd (2006); Guerero and Wiedmaier (2013) has identified a variety of non-verbal behaviours found with relationship closeness, which she also describes as “intimacy.” Intimacy results from interpersonal interactions using both non-verbal and verbal communications that lead us to “feel” closer to another. Although some non-verbal cues have direct and nearly universal

meaning, context is often critical in determining the meaning of the emotional message being conveyed.

Not surprisingly, touch is often used to indicate how close we feel about one another, although it is less frequently employed in the United States than elsewhere. The onset of a global pandemic in the spring of 2019 has further reduced the opportunity and experience of touch at all points along the relationship process. Lack of experience with touch during childhood and adolescence may lead to struggles in expressing our feelings through touch or difficulties interpreting touches from others in adulthood. Touch is a complex channel composed of a variety of types (pat, poke, punch), applied with different degrees of intensity on various parts of the body. Jones and Yarbrough (1985) have identified and mapped out areas of our physical bodies that are “non-vulnerable,” such as hands, arms, elbows, and “vulnerable” includes face, thigh, and waist and especially areas “inside” legs and arms. Vulnerable touching areas are usually reserved for close relationships that have moved into the deepening phase.

Personal space is also often used to convey closeness. When the decision is up to us and not predetermined by the situation (elevators and other public spaces), emotional closeness determines how close we physically choose to be with each other. Hall (1966) suggests that 0 to 18 inches of physical distance is the space for the transmission of “intimate” verbal and non-verbal communication. Physical proximity has the added benefit in that it allows for other non-verbal channels to come into play, such as facial expressions especially involving smiling and eye contact and tone of voice, to convey a greater or lesser desire to be close (Floyd & Ray, 2003).

Although less often considered, chronemics also can reflect closeness in our relationships. The amount of time we spend with others often is synonymous with our evaluation of our relationship with them, with more time indicating greater intimacy. Time provides opportunities for interactions to happen and the rhythm and flow of non-verbal information to take place.

As shown below, learning to read the nonverbal behaviour of your partner is essential to the process of drawing close in the extended deepening phase of relationships.

Joan moved rigidly past Joe in the kitchen, gripping the orange juice bottle tightly as she opened the refrigerator door, her mouth set in a tight and silent line. "Are you mad at me because I asked if you wanted more juice and you thought that was my way of telling you to put the bottle back in the fridge?" Joan didn't answer, continuing to move about the kitchen for a few more minutes in silence. Wiping off her hands she came up behind Joe, who was washing dishes at the sink, embracing him in a tight hug. Joe looked up and saw the prescription bottle on the counter. "I'm sorry you're in so much pain," he said, turning to embrace Joan. What Joe had initially read as irritation was an expression of Joan's physical suffering. Years spent reading non-verbal cues allowed them to avoid misunderstanding and to quickly move from distance to comfort.

Just as gardeners carefully examine plant leaves for health and look closely at buds for indications of the prized fruit to come, the deepening phase involves a willingness to examine the relationship more closely and attend to the needs found, even if that nurturing involves hard work. Commitment is a critical component of the deepening phase, creating a safe garden space, and intimacy grows with shared experiences, feelings of connection, dependability, and bondedness. Just as gardeners make peace with the lack of perfection in their greener world, couples in the deepening phase acknowledge the lack of perfection in their relationship while communicating love through physical presence, use of time, daily and yearly rituals, tangible gifts, and touch.

Ending

Relationships end for many reasons. Whether we describe the ending as positive or negative, when a relationship has run its course, we have an opportunity to look back to examine, and evaluate the "life" of that relationship. Non-verbal behaviour not only plays a significant role in determining whether relationships deepen into closeness or stop at the acquaintance level but also contributes to how well we end our relationships.

Because it often operates without our awareness, special effort is required to examine how non-verbal communication affected all aspects

of our relationship when we end with someone. Although we don't like goodbyes, and tend to shy away from self-examination that can be painful at this time, we can gain valuable relationship information by looking back that can be used to increase our chances of success in our future choosing, beginning, and most importantly, deepening and ending.

While touch, personal space, tone of voice, and time can be relatively direct indicators of closeness in the deepening phase of relating to others, their meaning becomes more complex to interpret as we end our relationships. We need to know more than we do about how non-verbal communication operates in determining a "good" or "bad" ending. While we clearly want to get "closer" to others in the deepening phase, emotions can be more mixed about ending with them. We may wish to stay or regain closeness while also experiencing a desire to end the current relationship. This dynamic may produce incongruent communications between what we say and what we do. Take the example of chronemics. Our tendency to get "busy" with other activities when we face endings, means we take time away from the very relationships we have valued. More research is needed to further our understanding of why this occurs, as it is unclear whether the tendency to avoid the anxiety and pain often associated with ending leads to spending less time or if our allocation of time to this phase suggests a disconnect between the value we placed on the relationship and our non-verbal behaviour.

People report facing a relationship ending is like getting a root canal. "Pain" and "painful" are often used words to describe endings. We so dislike endings we will avoid them if we can. More than one out of two surveyed in a study admitted to breaking up with someone using a text message (*Bustle* magazine). If ending by texting is too personal, we can even hire someone to end for us. The "Breakup Shop" proudly proclaims it is as easy to end a relationship in the age of Tinder as it is to begin one with a first date. And for a fee, they will take care of both for us (as presented on NPR, 2015).

While endings are typically characterized by psychological and emotional loss, Bridges and Bridges (2017) suggest they can also be a positive experience. They describe a three-stage transitional process in which we must first acknowledge an ending is taking place before we can move into a "neutral" zone. We spend time in the "neutral zone" disconnecting

ourselves from past people and events so that we can be free to consider what comes next by “reorienting” ourselves. According to Bridges and Bridges, if done correctly, reorientation transitions into a third stage, a “new beginning,” where we apply what we learned about ourselves during the time we spent in the neutral zone.

Others also believe endings can be positive. Van Gennep (1960, 2019) suggests that we can learn much about ourselves during “liminality,” a period he identified lying between ending and beginning anew. Liminality is defined as a transitional period or a rite of passage where past social status and/or rank are no longer important. While in this period of liminality, we can explore who we have been, who we are, and who we want to be. Van Gennep describes three states, beginning with separation from past relationships, followed by the liminality period for self-exploration, and finally a re-assimilation back to reality with what was learned during the liminality time.

Although not yet supported by empirical research, the ending theories of Bridges and van Gennep are relevant for gaining a better understanding of the “life” of a relationship from an interpersonal theory perspective because they emphasize the possibility of growth resulting from a well-handled ending transition. However, their emphasis is on what follows endings rather than what precedes them. In contrast, the 4-PRM model suggests that better relating in the future springs from greater awareness of every aspect of our endings, including the interactions across each phase prior to saying goodbye.

Schworer, Krott, and Oettingen (2019) provided empirical support for the idea that effectively using the time before ending or what they called “well rounded” endings, will lead to more positive future outcomes. Using a variety of methodologies including self-report, observation, and controlled experiments, they found that the more individuals reported they had done everything they could to end well, the “happier,” the less regretful they were afterwards. What the researchers called a “well-rounded” ending appeared to provide a foundation for future positive emotional, interpersonal, and professional growth.

We continually experience endings throughout our lives. Some are unpredictable, such as injuries or accidents which bring an end to activities we have previously been able to do. We can’t do much to prepare for

them, but that's not the case for the many predictable endings we will experience. Graduations from preschool to graduate school represent the ending of a distinct phase, involving rituals that include certain costumes (kindergarten cap and gown, doctoral robes and hoods), ceremonies with special music and marches, and the conveying of a "transitional object" in the form of a "diploma." Marriage, the birth of a child, and retirement also fall into the category of predictable endings, each representing an opportunity to end well enough to increase chances of better future relationships.

Joe and Joan gazed down the red and wrinkled newborn, their son cradled against Joan's chest. Joe had climbed up into the hospital bed of the delivery room to lie next to Joan. They couldn't take their eyes off of the sleeping seven-pound miracle, their synchronized breath punctuated by occasional sighs of joy and fatigue, Joe reached over to brush a damp strand of hair out of Joan's eyes, thinking "This changes everything." An hour earlier Joan had been holding his hands with vice-like strength, eyes locked with focused connection as he panted through a contraction with her. Joe's eye contact with Joan was unwavering, even when she vomited on his shirt midway through labour. Now their gaze was directed at the sleeping infant. Immersed in the early stages of infant infatuation washing over them like a tidal wave, Joe and Joan would spend hours looking at little Antonio, not giving much thought, if any, to how their gaze had shifted. It would be weeks before they came up for air.

Even with endings that we know are coming, we aren't very good at taking the time to attend to the past relationship we've had and what can be learned from it. Instead, more of our attention is on the future and thinking about the next relationship or phase will bring. Endings and new beginnings like graduations or marriages are characterized by speeches and predictions about what is to come next, with only brief reflections on the past. Good endings take time and involve a process rather than a single event. The perfect wedding or graduation day does not predict relationship success. Spending time examining what we did right or wrong interpersonally leading up to the moment of ending and comparing our verbal and non-verbal behaviour to what we have exhibited in previous relationships is more likely to set the stage for learning what is needed to develop closeness.

Some predictable endings are determined by age. Developmental psychology has broadened in recent years to include research on adult development, providing greater understanding of how adults continue to grow and change. Levinson (1986, 1989) provides research to suggest we go through a somewhat orderly process of stability and change as we age, the stable times more often occurring between the decimal markers of decades; with transitions at 20, 30, 40, 50, and so on and stability more likely to be present between the two-decade markers such as 22–28, or 52–58.

Implications of Adult Life Development for Relationships

As we continue to develop and change throughout our life, so will our relationships. The relationship we choose at 20 may be different from what we want and need at 50. For our relationships to be satisfying across our lifetime, we must be open to changing ourselves and the way we interact. Although age transitions are part of the naturally occurring developmental process, they are often characterized by the feelings of anxiety or discomfort that are part of any transition.

Individuals who are not aware of the rhythm of adult life developmental periods may misread their diminished comfort during transitions as a sign that their current relationship is not working. Rather than staying and learning about how to end and begin again with the same person at an even better place, they may leave their partner to begin another relationship. Learning from our previous decade of interactions requires us to slow down and become more aware of how we relate, perhaps asking for feedback from people with whom we have previously been in relationship. Examining these transitions carefully positions us to experience greater closeness in relationships as we move forward into the next decade.

Rather than rushing our way through our endings, it is important to make a conscious effort to revisit what we have experienced in previous relationships. Reflection, while at times painful, brings insight that allows for behavioural changes that can lead to greater opportunities for

closeness with others. Although the conversations can be awkward, gathering feedback from partners and friends regarding the impact our behaviour, especially our non-verbal behaviour, has had on our relationships with them may increase our awareness of what we need to change in order to be more successful in the future.

Dyssemic individuals, who experience the more significant challenges because of their deficit in one or more non-verbal channels, may benefit from assessment of their abilities and supportive training to improve their non-verbal communication skills. Work with a trusted therapist can assist them in reflecting on how they engage others at each phase of their relationships, allow them to safely examine endings that may be painful, and facilitate their insight leading to better relationships in the future, with the hope of finding consummate love.

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