

Relationship Stages: A Communication Perspective

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Relationships are not static; they change and shift slightly or greatly over the years. An intense relationship may become more distant; a superficial relationship may deepen. In this chapter, Knapp and Vangelisti create a stage model for developing, maintaining, and terminating relationships. Although some of the stage characteristics could apply to three persons (a triad) simultaneously developing a relationship, this model focuses primarily on a two person (dyadic) relationship.

This model assumes that the relationship is built extensively through face-to-face interactions. A recent study of Facebook use on campus (Haspels, 2008) reveals that Facebook helps to build and promote face-to-face relationships. According to one student, Facebook can serve as a first meeting because, "You can get over initial insecurity. You can get the meeting-someone stage out of the way all on the tidbits of information" (p. 48). Some of you may have met your freshman roommate on Facebook before school opened, or you may have stumbled upon your lab partner's profile and learned about their "interests" before you ever even met face-to-face. Consider the role of online interactions as you read the about the stage model.

Remember that movement through these stages is somewhat predictable and that it occurs over time. The following generalizations will help you see the underlying assumptions of such a stage model.

1. **Movement through stages is generally systematic and sequential.** This is true, according to Knapp and Vangelisti, because each stage contains groundwork for the following stage. Progressing in sequence makes predicting behavior in the next stage easier, and skipping steps is an uncertain gamble caused by a lack of information that would have been learned in the skipped step. Sometimes it is easier to think about the stages as points on a continuum so you can imagine the early intensifying point and the late intensifying point.
2. **Movement may be forward.** As people "come together," they evaluate the rewards and costs in moving the relationship forward. Any movement toward greater intimacy is a move forward within the coming together stages.
3. **Movement may be backward.** A movement toward less intimacy is a movement backward. Two people might decide to "step back" from

intensifying to experimenting, such as when one person gets involved with an all-consuming interest that the other does not share.

4. **Movement is always to a new place.** Once something has been talked through, the relationship is different. The continuous nature of communication implies that friends or partners cannot go back to the way they were. This is because communication is a process—irreversible and unrepeatable. This concept is best represented by the helical model of communication that you found in the Part 1 introduction.
5. **Movement may be rapid or slow.** If there is daily positive interaction with a new person the relationship's movement will be more rapid than if there is weekly or monthly contact. In addition, movement is usually faster during the early stages or when time is short (for example, summer romances or week-long retreats). Movement will be slower when only one person desires to move forward.
6. **Dialectical tensions serve as background to each stage.** At all times ongoing tensions or struggles between goals, such as autonomy-connection or openness-closedness, will be present in each stage.

The ideas presented in this chapter are based upon the notion that there are separate stages in the development and decline of relationships. Authors Knapp and Vangelisti elaborate upon 5 stages of relationship growth: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating and bonding; and within each description, they site examples for the types of communication behavior expected. (In Chapter 29 you will encounter their stages of decline). As you read this chapter consider the question: At what stage would you locate a highly significant relationship in your life and how does your relationship display characteristics of that stage?

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A MODEL OF INTERACTION STAGES IN RELATIONSHIPS

Scientists are forever seeking to bring order to a seemingly chaotic world of overlapping, interdependent, dynamic, and intricate processes. Frequently, the process of systematizing our life and environment is discussed in terms of stages of growth, stages of deterioration, and the forces that shape and act on this movement through stages. For instance, developmental psychologists recount regularized patterns of behavior accompanying stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, maturity, and old age. Anthropologists and geologists plot the evolutionary stages of human beings and human environments. Biologists note similarities in the life processes of such seemingly diverse organisms as trees and fish. Physical and social scientists talk about affinity and attraction, weak and strong interactions, friction, repulsion, and splitting-up as basic forces acting on matter and people. Rhetorical critics often dissect spoken messages by noting patterns regularly occurring during the introduction, development toward the main points, transitions, and conclusion.

The idea that there are stages in the development of relationships that are characterized by certain patterns of communication is not new.¹ We tried to synthesize as well as expand on this previous work in the development of the model presented in Table 15-1.

Before each stage is described in greater detail, several preliminary remarks about the model are in order. First, we should resist the normal temptation to perceive the stages of coming together as "good" and those of coming apart as "bad." It is not "bad" to terminate relationships nor is it necessarily "good" to become more intimate with someone. The model is descriptive of what seems to happen—not what should happen.

We should also remember that in the interest of clarity the model simplifies a complex process. For instance, the model shows each stage adjacent to the next—as if it was clear when a communicating couple left one stage and entered another. To the contrary. Each stage contains some behavior from other stages. So *stage identification becomes a matter of emphasis*. Stages are identified by the

Table 15-1
A Model of Interactive Stages

Process	Stage	Representative Dialogue
Coming Together	Initiating	"Hi, how ya doin" "Fine. You?"
	Experimenting	"Oh, so you like to ski . . . So do I!" "You do? Great, where do you go?"
	Intensifying	"I . . . I think I love you." "I love you too."
	Integrating	"I feel so much a part of you." "Yeah, we are like one person. What happens to you happens to me."
	Bonding	"I want to be with you always." "Let's get married."
Coming Apart	Differentiating	"I just don't like big social gatherings." "Sometimes I just don't understand you. This is one area where I'm certainly not like you at all."
	Circumscribing	"Did you have a good time on your trip?" "What time will dinner be ready?"
	Stagnating	"What's there to talk about?" "Right, I know what you're going to say and you know what I'm going to say."
	Avoiding	"I'm so busy, I just don't know when I'll be able to see you." "If I'm not around when you try, you'll understand!"
	Terminating	"I'm leaving you . . . and don't bother trying to contact me" "Don't worry."

proportion of one type of communication behavior to another. This proportion may be the frequency with which certain communication acts occur, or proportion may be determined by the relative weight given to certain acts by the participants. For example, a couple at the Intensifying Stage may exhibit behaviors that occur at any of the other stages, but their arrival at the Intensifying Stage is because: (1) the most frequent communication exchanges are typical of the Intensifying Stage and/or (2) the exchanges that are crucial in defining the couple's relationship are statements of an intensifying nature. The act of sexual intercourse is commonly associated with male-female romantic couples at the Intensifying or Integrating Stages, but it may occur as an isolated act for couples at the Experimenting Stage. Or it may occur regularly for a couple at the Experimenting Stage, but remain relatively unimportant for the couple in defining the closeness of their relationship. Thus, interaction stages involve both overt behavior and the perceptions of behavior in the minds of the parties involved. During the formation of a romantic relationship, the couple's overt behavior (to each other

and in front of others) may be a good marker of their developmental stage. During periods of attempted rejuvenation of a relationship, we may find that the overt behavior is an effective marker of the stage *desired*. However, in stable or long-established relationships, overt behavior may not be a very accurate indicator of closeness. Instead it is the occasional behavior or memories of past behaviors that are perceived by the couple as crucial in defining their relationship. For example, the married couple of fifteen years may spend much of their interaction time engaging in small talk—behavior typical of an early developmental stage. And even though the small talk does play an important role in maintaining the relationship, it is the less frequent but more heavily weighted behavior that the couple uses to define their relationship, as at the Integrating Stage. Similarly, close friends may not engage in a lot of talk that outside observers would associate with closeness. In some cases, friends are separated for long periods of time and make very little contact with one another. But through specific occasional acts and the memory of past acts, the intimacy of the friendship is maintained.

The dialogue in the model is heavily oriented toward mixed-gender pairs. This does not mean the model is irrelevant for same-gender pairs. Even at the highest level of commitment, the model may apply to same-gender pairs. The bonding ceremony, for instance, need not be marriage. It could be an act of becoming "blood brothers" by placing open wounds on each other to achieve oneness. Granted, American cultural sanctions against the direct expression of high-level intimacy between same-sexed pairs often serve to inhibit, slow down, or stop the growth of relationships between same-sexed pairs. But when such relationships do develop, similar patterns are reported.²

The model... also focuses primarily on relationships where people voluntarily seek contact with, or disengagement from, one another. But the model is not limited to such relationships. All people drawn into, or pulled out of, relationships by forces seemingly outside their control will like or not like such an event and communicate accordingly. For instance, a child's relationship with his or her parent (involuntary) may, at some point, be very close and loving, at another time be cold and distant, and at another time be similar to relationships with other friends.

Our model of relationship development is primarily focused on the interaction patterns of the relationship partners. Nevertheless, we should not forget that these relationships are nested within a network of other social relationships which affect communication patterns manifested by the partners.³ Friends, co-workers, and/or kin make up the larger social system which influences and is influenced by any single relationship. Sometimes these networks are small, sometimes large; sometimes they are influential on one issue or at one point in time and not so on other issues or at another point in time; sometimes these other relationships tend to serve one relationship partner, and at other times they serve both. What role do social networks play as we develop and maintain a relationship? The people who comprise these networks give us feedback, advice, and support; they act as a sounding board; they help mediate problems; they offer consultation and

engage in persuasion. They may, of course, fail to provide these things when they are expected. In short, social networks are comprised of coaches who can dramatically affect our communicative performance as relationship partner. In addition, they are sources of a social identity which extends beyond the pair bond.

Finally... we would expect the Initiating and Terminating Stages to be characterized by communication that is more narrow, stylized, difficult, rigid, awkward, public, hesitant, and with overt judgments suspended; the stages of Integrating, Bonding, and Differentiating should show more breadth, uniqueness, efficiency, flexibility, smoothness, personalness, spontaneity, and overt judgments given. In short, it is proposed that we communicate within a prescribed range of content, style, and language at different levels of intimacy...

INTERACTION STAGES

Initiating

This stage incorporates all those processes enacted when we first come together with other people. It may be at a cocktail party or at the beach; it may be with a stranger or with a friend. As we scan the other person we consider our own stereotypes, any prior knowledge of the other's reputation, previous interactions with this person, expectations for this situation, and so on. We are asking ourselves whether this person is "attractive" or "unattractive" and whether we should initiate communication. Next, we try to determine whether the other person is cleared for an encounter—is he or she busy, in a hurry, surrounded by others. Finally, we search for an appropriate opening line to engage the other's attention.

Typically, communicators at this stage are simply trying to display themselves as a person who is pleasant, likable, understanding and socially adept. In essence, we are saying: "I see you. I am friendly, and I want to open channels for communication to take place." In addition, we are carefully observing the other to reduce any uncertainty we might have—hoping to gain clarification of mood, interest, orientation toward

us, and aspects of the other's public personality. Our conscious awareness of these processes is sometimes very low. "Morning, Bob. How ya doin'?" "Morning, Clayton. Go to hell." "Fine, thanks."....

Experimenting

Once communication has been initiated, we begin the process of experimenting—trying to discover the unknown. Strangers trying to become acquaintances will be primarily interested in name, rank, and serial number—something akin to the sniffing ritual of animals. The exchange of demographic information is frequent and often seems controlled by a norm that says: "If you tell me your hometown, I'll tell you mine." Strangers at this stage are diligently searching for an integrating topic, an area of common interest or experience. Sometimes the strain of this search approaches the absurd: "Oh, you're from Oklahoma. Do you know...?" Obviously, the degree to which a person assists another in finding this integrating topic shows the degree of interest in continuing the interaction and the willingness to pursue a relationship....

Small talk is the *sine qua non* of experimenting. It is like exercising; we may hate it, but we may also engage in large quantities of it every day. If we hate it, why do we do it? Probably because we are vaguely aware of several important functions served by small talk:

1. It is a useful process for uncovering integrating topics and openings for more penetrating conversation.
2. It can be an audition for a future friendship or a way of increasing the scope of a current relationship.
3. It provides a safe procedure for indicating who we are and how another can come to know us better (reduction of uncertainty).
4. It allows us to maintain a sense of community with our fellow human beings.

Relationships at this stage are generally pleasant, relaxed, overtly uncritical, and casual. Commitments are limited. And, like it or not,

most of our relationships probably don't progress very far beyond this stage.

Intensifying

When people achieve a relationship known as "close friends," indicators of the relationships are intensified. Active participation and greater awareness of the process typify this stage when it begins. Initial probes toward intensification of intimacy are often exercised with caution, awaiting confirmation before proceeding. Sitting close, for instance, may precede hugging; holding hands will generally precede holding genitals. Requests for physical or psychological favors are sometimes used to validate the existence of intensity in a relationship....

The amount of personal disclosure increases at this stage, and we begin to get a glimpse of some previously withheld secrets—that my father was an alcoholic, that I masturbate, that I pretend I'm a rhino when I'm drunk, and other fears, frustrations, failures, imperfections, and prejudices. Disclosures may be related to any topic area, but those dealing most directly with the development of the relationship are crucial. These disclosures make the speaker vulnerable—almost like an animal baring its neck to an attacker.

Verbally, a lot of things may be happening in the intensifying stage:

1. Forms of address become more informal—first name, nickname, or some term of endearment.
2. Use of the first person plural becomes more common—"We should do this" or "Let's do this." One study of married couples found that the use of "we" was more likely to be associated with a relationship orientation, while the use of "I" was more likely to be associated with a task orientation or the functional requirements and accomplishments of marriage.⁴
3. Private symbols begin to develop, sometimes in the form of a special slang or jargon, sometimes using conventional language forms that have understood, private meanings.

Places they've been together, events and times they've shared; and physical objects they've purchased or exchanged; all become important symbols in defining the nature of developing closeness.⁵ Such items or memories may be especially devastating and repulsive reminders if the relationship begins to come apart unless the symbols are reinterpreted ("I like this diamond ring because it is beautiful, not because he gave it to me.") or put in a different perspective ("It really was fun when we did _____, but in so many other ways he was a jerk.").

4. Verbal shortcuts built on a backlog of accumulated and shared assumptions, expectations, interests, knowledge, interactions, and experiences appear more often; one may request a newspaper be passed by simply saying, "paper."
5. More direct expressions of commitment may appear—"We really have a good thing going" or "I don't know who I'd talk to if you weren't around." Sometimes such expressions receive an echo—"I really like you a lot." "I really like you, too, Elmer."
6. Increasingly, one's partner will act as a helper in the daily process of understanding what you're all about—"In other words, you mean you're..." or "But yesterday, you said you were..."

Sophistication in nonverbal message transmission also increases. A long verbalization may be replaced by a single touch; postural congruence may be seen; clothing styles may become more coordinated; possessions and personal space may be more permeable.

As the relationship intensifies, each person is unfolding his or her uniqueness while simultaneously blending his or her personality with the other's.

Integrating

The relationship has now reached a point where the two individual personalities almost seem to fuse or coalesce, certainly more than at any previous

stage. Davis discusses this concept, which he calls *coupling*

The extent to which each intimate tries to give the other his own self-symbols or to correct the other's self-symbols measures the degree to which he wants to increase their communion.⁶

...Verbal and nonverbal manifestations of integrating may take many forms:

1. Attitudes, opinions, interests, and tastes that clearly distinguish the pair from others are vigorously cultivated—"We have something special; we are unique."
2. Social circles merge and others begin to treat the two individuals as a common package—one present, one letter, one invitation.
3. Intimacy "trophies" are exchanged so each can "wear" the other's identity—pictures, pins, rings.
4. Similarities in manner, dress, and verbal behavior may also accentuate the oneness.
5. Actual physical penetration of various body parts contributes to the perceived unification.
6. Sometimes common property is designated—"our song," a joint bank account, or a co-authored book.
7. Empathic processes seem to peak so that explanation and prediction of behavior are much easier.⁷
8. Body rhythms and routines achieve heightened synchrony.⁸
9. Sometimes the love of a third person or object will serve as glue for the relationship—"Love me, love my rhinos."

Obviously, integration does not mean complete togetherness or complete loss of individuality. Maintenance of some separate and distinct selves is critical, and possible, due to the strength of the binding elements. One married woman of ten years told us: "I still hold some of myself back from John because it's the only part of me I don't share, and it's important to have something that is uniquely mine."

Thus, we can see that as we participate in the integration process we are intensifying and minimizing various aspects of our total person. Consequently, when we commit ourselves to integrating with another, we also agree to become another individual.

Bonding

Bonding is a public ritual that announces to the world that commitments have been formally contracted. It is the institutionalization of the relationship. There are many kinds of bonding rituals and they characterize several stages of the mixed-sex relationship—going steady, engagement, and ultimately marriage. American society has not sanctioned similar rituals for same-sexed romantic pairs, although some exist.

Since bonding is simply the contract for the union of the pair at any given stage of the relationship, one might question why it has been designated as a separate stage. It is because the act of bonding itself may be a powerful force in changing the nature of the relationship "for better or for worse." The institutionalization of the relationship hardens it, makes it more difficult to break out of, and probably changes the rhetoric that takes place without a contract. The contract becomes, either explicitly or implicitly, a frequent topic of conversation. Communication strategies can now be based on interpretation and execution of the commitments contained in the contract. In short, the normal ebb and flow of the informal relationship can be, and often is, viewed differently...

NOTES

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QUESTIONS/THOUGHTS

1. Choose a friendship relationship in which you find yourself currently. According to Knapp and Vangelisti's model, what stage is it in? What predictions would you make concerning movement to the next stage? Why?
2. Watch a movie such as *(500) Days of Summer*, or *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* in which two characters develop a strong relationship. Discuss the relationship development terms of Knapp and Vangelisti's stages.
3. Think about which stage into which most of your important friendship relationships fall. Are they closer to the beginning stages? Closer to the more intimate stages? How satisfied are you with the level?
4. Analyze a relationship that has relied heavily on new technologies for developing the ties between the friends or romantic pair. How closely did they mirror the model described above? How did technology aid or hinder the relational development?

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