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Why I study...

close relationships

MY interest in the study of close relationships was partly sparked off in the 1970s by my attempt to understand what it was about psychotherapy that made it effective. At the time I had been asked to teach an undergraduate course on personality, which was not an unreasonable request as I had recently completed my PhD with Hans Eysenck on his personality theory. It seemed to me then (and still does) that many of the major theories of personality are largely concerned with explaining how psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression developed, and how they can be treated. The principles underlying the development of a disorder are generally similar to those underlying their treatment.

So, for example, the person-centred theory of Carl Rogers proposed that psychological disorders result from receiving conditional approval from significant people in our lives (such as our parents), which prevents us from being conscious of what we really feel. To become aware of our own true feelings, we need to have a relationship with someone whom we see as approving of us unconditionally. In other words, according to Rogers, the lack of unconditional approval produces psychological disorders, whereas its presence alleviates it.

A relatively crude way of comparing the validity of different personality theories is in terms of the effectiveness of the treatments based on them. For instance, person-centred theory may be a more promising perspective on personality than behaviour theory if person-centred therapy has been found to be more effective than behaviour therapy.

However, studies have generally shown that there is little or no difference in the effectiveness of different forms of psychotherapy. So, this line of research did not enable me to favour one theory over another. It seemed more informative to try to evaluate the processes that might underlie effective psychotherapy than to simply compare different approaches.

One interpretation of the finding that

different forms of therapy may be equally effective is that effectiveness is due to factors that are not specific to any one treatment, but are common to many of them. Such factors may include sharing one's concerns with another person, being able to explore one's problems more fully, and receiving sympathetic attention from someone else. Psychotherapy clients have been shown to mention these kinds of



non-specific factors when asked what they had found helpful about their treatment.

A study carried out by a student of mine noted that in clients who were primarily receiving cognitive behavioural therapy, therapeutic improvement was attributed to talking to an understanding person and being given advice. While being given advice was not consistent with person-centred theory, talking to an understanding person was. This encouraged me to pay more attention to this theory: in effect, a theory about close relationships and their importance.

Although there was other research suggesting that relationship factors were important in therapy, I may not have followed my interest in them at that stage had my own findings indicated otherwise. Certainly, my previous interest in Eysenck's

personality theory was discouraged by my failure to confirm his notion that extraversion was characterised by low cortical arousal (coupled, of course, by my not being able to come up with a good explanation for this failure). In a subsequent study of non-patients my finding that being offered advice by one's closest friend was unrelated to self-esteem dissuaded me from further investigating the role that advice giving may play in maintaining or enhancing well-being; although the lack of such an association still puzzles me. So the results of my own research have been instrumental in shaping its subsequent direction.

The person-centred idea that therapeutic effectiveness depends on how unconditionally accepting, understanding and genuine the patient sees the therapist as being has not really been properly tested. Moreover, evidence that these three qualities may be associated with therapeutic improvement is mixed.

Not being a clinical psychologist or a therapist, it was not easy for me to test this idea myself. Most psychotherapy research seems to have been conducted by therapists on their own clients. However, I did manage to carry out a small-scale study with the help of various clinical psychologists dotted around the country, whose co-operation I much appreciated. The results provided weak support for Rogers's notion that the client's perception of greater unconditional acceptance, understanding and genuineness in their therapist should temporally precede psychological improvement. This was found only for self-esteem, not for anxiety or depression.

While an understanding of what makes psychotherapy work is important, most people with psychological problems turn initially, and often solely, to their close relationships for help and not to psychotherapists. So it is useful to know what it is that may be beneficial about the help they receive. Indeed, there is a large and growing body of research showing that the social support people receive is related to their well-being, including how long they

live. Clearly this is an impressive measure because it is not based on self-report!

However, there are at least three important questions that still need to be answered about the association between social support and well-being, which I have been working on and continue to do.

First, what is the causal direction of this link? It seems to have been generally assumed that social support leads to psychological well-being. However, it is equally plausible that people who feel good about themselves also feel good about their relationships or make it easier for other people to be supportive.

There is evidence from psychotherapy studies to show that while increasing marital satisfaction reduces depression, reducing depression does not increase marital satisfaction in those who are both depressed and maritally dissatisfied. While it remains unclear what exactly causes these findings, they imply that social support (in the form of a satisfactory marital relationship) leads to psychological well-being (at least in terms of depression) and that psychological well-being does not lead to social support. However, this alternative causal direction has been suggested by more naturalistic longitudinal studies. The reason for these conflicting findings needs attention.

A second important question, or rather set of related questions, is what aspects of a close relationship improve well-being? For example, is emotional support more important than engaging in pleasurable activities together? Are these aspects the same for differing facets of well-being, and how do these aspects bring about their beneficial effects?

A third question is under what conditions are the effects of these aspects maximised? For instance, the belief that disagreement between partners may be destructive to having a satisfactory relationship should only come into play in relationships where a certain level of disagreement exists. We really know very little about these issues.

So, one of my reasons for studying close relationships is that they seem to affect our well-being. Another is the large number of intriguing questions that remain unanswered. I should point out that my primary interest in relationships in this context is the understanding of psychological distress rather than close relationships as

such, although the two are necessarily intertwined. However, if there had been evidence to suggest that factors other than close relationships were more strongly implicated in producing psychological distress, my attention would have shifted to at least those that could be feasibly studied.

More recently I have become interested in trying to understand romantic relationships for their own sake. In particular, what factors determine both how satisfied one is with one's romantic relationships and how long these relationships last? Naturally, it is more difficult to investigate the second question than the first, as couples have to be followed up over a sufficiently long period until enough of them have ended their relationship to provide an index of variability. Nonetheless,

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there is a growing number of such prospective studies and their results suggest that there are factors that have been found to predict the breakup of relationships. Most of this research has focused on the way that couples try to resolve problems in their relationship. The more negatively this is done, the less stable and satisfactory the relationship will be.

One of the attractions of working in this area is that relevant research is carried out across a wide range of disciplines, including demography, epidemiology, psychiatry, sociology, family studies and communication, exposing one to a stimulating diversity of ideas and methodological approaches.

There are a number of people researching this field in the UK. The fact that they are working in different traditions means that you are less likely to come across their research only in psychology journals, or even at conferences focused on personal relationships. This may give the impression that there is less interest than there actually is. However, while I am in the fortunate position of being able to offer an undergraduate course in close relationships at Loughborough University, I expect few other departments do this.

My current interest in romantic relationships is looking at how differences of opinion are resolved. This has been found to be one of the factors most strongly related to relationship satisfaction, and is a central concern in many forms of relationship therapy. One basic component is whether differences are discussed or avoided, and another is whether the differences are resolved. Each of these two components may be evaluated on a continuum ranging from positive to negative. There seem to be plenty of questions remaining to be answered, which should keep me busy for many years.

Once again, it is important to me to be able to justify my research interests in terms of the potential practical benefits that they may bring. This seems easy to do for this particular area in that it is obviously useful to know if and how satisfaction in romantic relationships can be achieved an enhanced, as it would be for any aspect of life. However, this cannot be a sufficient reason for my interest in this field: I would like to think that I can justify the potential practical usefulness of any topic.

So there must be other more subtle considerations at work. Why one person develops an interest in a particular activity, or indeed in another person, is a question of widespread relevance to many areas of psychology (including personality and close relationships). It is one to which we do not seem to have a very satisfactory answer. To try to explain it in terms of genetic predispositions, fixations, intermittent reinforcement, vicarious learning or construct extension is not wholly convincing. For the present, I will have to leave that question for others to explore.

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