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Current Directions in Psychological Science 2013 22: 461
DOI: 10.1177/0963721413498892

aps ASSOCIATION FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

Current Directions in Psychological Science
22(6) 461–465

DOI: 10.1177/0963721413498892
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Abstract
We review the emerging evidence suggesting that the largely separate research areas of romantic relationships and judgment and decision making (JDM) can usefully inform each other. First, we present evidence that decisions in more traditional JDM domains (e.g., consumerism, economics) share important features with romantic-relationship decisions, including the use of formal decision strategies (e.g., the investment model), intuitive shortcuts (e.g., the availability heuristic), and anticipated emotions (e.g., affective forecasting). In turn, we present evidence suggesting that incorporating key concepts from the field of relationships (e.g., need to belong, attachment style) can enrich traditional JDM domains. These largely unrecognized overlaps between relationship decisions and decisions made in more traditional decision-making domains suggest that the fields of relationship science and JDM—each of which contains a wealth of existing theory, findings, and research tools—could be used to illuminate one another for mutual benefit.

Keywords
romantic relationships, judgment and decision making, close relationships, belonging

Romantic relationship decisions—such as whether to initiate a first date, propose marriage, or end a relationship—hold important long-term consequences. Indeed, unsuccessful romantic decisions are one of the most commonly mentioned life regrets (e.g., Morrison & Roese, 2011). In what ways are these decisions similar to—and different from—other decisions, such as consumer choices? In this article, we present evidence that construing romantic relationships as judgment and decision-making (JDM) domains holds promise to open the relationships literature to exciting new methods and novel insights about process. Conversely, we propose that traditional JDM topics such as consumer, career, and health decisions are not made in a social vacuum; research on such decisions can benefit greatly from consideration of variables associated with romantic relationships. More broadly, we argue that romantic relationships provide an important context in which to test the boundary conditions of decision theory. Consequently, integrating these two fields will help to further our understanding of the generality versus domain specificity of decision processes.

Relationship Choices From a JDM Perspective

The field of JDM is concerned with the cognitive processes that lead one to arrive at a decision. Rooted in economics, JDM is typically associated with such topics as financial choices and has traditionally not been strongly concerned with romantic-relationship decisions. In recent years, however, researchers have developed an increasing interest in harnessing JDM tools to examine relationship decisions. Accumulated evidence suggests that people use many of the same decision strategies in their romantic lives that they do in other JDM domains.

Formal decision strategies

Interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), one of the most generative theories in relationship science, was originally developed by using economic principles. At its core, the theory assumes that (a) people strive to maximize rewards and minimize costs in their relationships and (b) relationship rewards and costs can be assessed against measurable standards. In other words, by taking advantage of relatively simple JDM concepts, Thibaut and Kelley created a rubric for understanding interdependence between romantic partners. Rusbult (1980) built on these principles to construct the investment model,

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which is currently the model that best accounts for how people decide whether to continue their relationships (Le & Agnew, 2003).

There are many JDM principles—beyond interdependence theory—that may improve our understanding of relationship decisions. For example, JDM researchers would classify the decision to continue a relationship as a *multiattribute choice*: There are two options—stay or leave—each with its own set of advantages and disadvantages. By conceptualizing relationship continuation as a multiattribute choice and examining the pros and cons of these options independently, researchers could further explore feelings of *conflict* over the decision. Having strong reasons to both stay and leave should lead to ambivalence, which should be psychologically quite distinct from the indifference associated with weak reasons to both stay and leave. Many key relationship decisions could be helpfully conceptualized as multiattribute choices; for example, a multiattribute choice approach could help us better understand uncertainty about the decision to get married. Such uncertainty predicts subsequent marital distress and divorce (Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012).

Heuristics

Evidence suggests that when people make judgments and decisions about their romantic relationships, they often rely on classic JDM heuristics such as satisficing (Simon, 1956) and the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). For example, people do not exhaustively compare and contrast every possible romantic partner but instead use stopping rules to decide whether a potential mate is of sufficiently high quality (Saad, Eba, & Sejean, 2009). Moreover, once in a relationship, couples often "slide" into relationship transitions, such as moving in together (e.g., Manning & Smock, 2005), with little deliberative thought (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Relationship decisions are also constrained by cognitive resources. For example, the more dating options a person has, the less cognitive effort he or she is able to allocate to each one, leading to greater reliance on more superficial information (e.g., Lenton & Francesconi, 2010). Further, people making decisions about relationships are susceptible to the availability heuristic (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), whereby relationship events that are more cognitively accessible are perceived as being more likely to occur (Broemer, 2001; Spielmann, MacDonald, & Wilson, 2009).

This generalizability of heuristics research to the romantic domain suggests that relationship decisions may be influenced not only by information that is directly relevant to the relationship—such as relationship quality—but also by more fleeting and less directly relevant factors, such as how overloaded the decision maker feels. Furthermore, many heuristics and biases have yet to be directly tested in the relationship domain (e.g., loss aversion, anchoring, the status quo bias) that may advance our understanding of relationship decisions. For example, the decision to stay in a romantic relationship might be influenced by ambiguity avoidance (e.g., Curley, Yates, & Abrams, 1986), whereby people dislike variable outcomes. Given that choosing to stay produces a relatively certain outcome (the current romantic partner is already known), whereas choosing to leave produces a variable outcome (one could end up with a better partner, a worse partner, or no partner), ambiguity avoidance may help to explain why people sometimes persevere with unfulfilling relationships.

Anticipated emotions

People often make decisions on the basis of how they expect to feel in the future. For example, decisions can be strongly influenced by expectations of regret (e.g., Epstude & Roese, 2008). Numerous studies suggest that people make errors in anticipating their own emotions regarding their romantic relationships, just as they inaccurately anticipate their emotions in other domains. For example, just as people overestimate the emotional impact of future events in other domains (affective forecasting errors; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003), people similarly overestimate how long they will be affected by breakups (Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008). Furthermore, just as people underestimate the impact of their emotions in other domains (hot-cold empathy gap; Loewenstein, 1996), people not in a state of social pain underestimate the sting of social rejection (Nordgren, Banas, & MacDonald, 2011). These common errors in anticipating emotions may play an important role in relationship decision making. For example, underestimating social pain may help people to feel less nervous about asking out romantic partners. Likewise, overestimating the pain of breakups may discourage people from ending their relationships, even if those relationships are unfulfilling.

JDM From a Relationships Perspective

We have explored ways in which relationship choices can be influenced by general decision-making processes. Increasing evidence also suggests that many JDM domains are influenced by relationship systems and motivations. In particular, decisions in traditional JDM domains often seem to be motivated by unmet relationship needs. For example, people who are socially excluded are willing to spend money to improve their social connections (e.g., Loveland, Smeethers, & Mandel, 2010). More generally,

concerns about rejection from a romantic partner can influence people's general approach/avoidance motivations, thus affecting willingness to make risky decisions even in nonsocial domains (Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2009).

Decisions seemingly unrelated to relationships can be further influenced by the decision maker's habitual relationship tendencies. For example, attachment anxiety represents a core belief that one is unworthy of love and support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In essence, this insecure attachment style reflects trait-level concerns about social connection. A small but growing literature suggests that attachment anxiety affects decision making in consumer decision domains in ways that reflect attempts to manage needs for belonging. For example, anxiously attached people exhibit an enhanced endowment effect, meaning that they demand higher prices for their possessions (Kogut & Kogut, 2011). This seems to occur because possessions provide anxiously attached people with a higher sense of comfort or security by, in essence, symbolically substituting for other people.

Likewise, people tend to anthropomorphize consumer brands, treating brand relationships much like social relationships. For example, as with romantic partners (Aron & Aron, 1997), people tend to experience self-expansion when they form a relationship with a brand, meaning that they incorporate that brand into their sense of self (Reimann, Castãno, Zaichkowsky, & Bechara, 2012). Furthermore, distinctions between different types of social relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979) extend to brands; in particular, brand relationships can be based on either exchange norms (i.e., concerns about fairness) or communal norms (i.e., concerns about welfare), and people dislike when these norms are violated (Aggarwal, 2004).

Relationships also influence choices not related to relationships when the decision maker takes his or her partner's thoughts and feelings into consideration. Evidence suggests that many decisions unrelated to relationship decisions—such as whether to buy a particular product (e.g., Simpson, Griskevicius, & Rothman, 2012), take a particular job (e.g., Gill & Haurin, 1998), or engage in a particular health behavior (e.g., Rempel & Rempel, 2004)—are often made in consultation with significant others (Kirchler, Rodler, Hölzl, & Meier, 2001). Such research suggests that, for people in long-term romantic relationships, many decisions that have traditionally been treated as individual decisions may more accurately be considered dyadic decisions that are subject to the management of relationship concerns.

Together, this research suggests that concerns about connectedness and close others often spill over into JDM domains that, at first glance, seem to have little to do with close relationships. Thus, research that has been conducted with the goal of better understanding relationship dynamics may contribute to knowledge about decision-making principles more broadly.

Generalizability Versus Domain Specificity

Although we have used our space here to highlight the overlap between JDM and relationships, research on relationship decision making is also important for the theoretical aim of identifying limits to traditional JDM principles. What would it mean if a JDM phenomenon did not hold (or only held) in the relationship domain? Some evolutionary theorists argue that certain mental adaptations have evolved for the purpose of responding to specific evolutionary problems (Tooby & Cosmides, 1990, 2008). Romantic relationships have greater evolutionary significance than many of the more traditional JDM domains (e.g., consumer choices) because successfully passing on one's genes is contingent on finding not only mating opportunities but also a suitable romantic partner (see Fraley, Brumbaugh, & Marks, 2005). However, other perspectives (also based on evolutionary theory) point to neurological evidence suggesting that the brain consists largely of flexible, general-purpose structures that are functional across multiple domains (for discussion, see Panksepp & Panksepp, 2000).

Therefore, decision-making patterns that are unique to the relationship context may provide evidence of relationship-specific evolutionary adaptations (e.g., gender differences in commitment displays; Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011; gender differences in regret; Roese et al., 2006), whereas those that generalize may point to selective pressures not associated with relationships themselves (e.g., cognitive resource constraints when choosing mates; Lenton & Francesconi, 2010). Thus, incorporating relationship decisions into JDM research may provide data that help to reconcile longstanding arguments regarding the "modular" versus "all-purpose" nature of human decision-making.

Future Directions

Given the promise of uniting relationship research with JDM research, where can we most profitably move from here? The field of JDM is equipped with its own set of research paradigms that can further illuminate relationship decisions. For example, relationship researchers can make use of *process-tracing* techniques that have been specifically designed to examine decision processes (see Schulte-Mecklenbeck, Kuhberger, & Ranyard, 2011, for review). One example of a process-tracing technique is MouseLabWEB, an online program that uses computer mouse movements to assess precisely which pieces of information participants considered relevant for a

particular decision. Using this technology, researchers could present information to participants—such as partner traits, behaviors, or beliefs—and measure which pieces of information people examine, for how long, and in what order, when making choices such as whether to go on a date with a person, or invest in a new relationship. Such techniques have the advantage of providing an extremely fine-grained analysis of decision processes.

Conversely, decisions made in traditional JDM domains (e.g., finances, consumerism, health decisions, career decisions) should be considered in relationship terms. In particular, decision makers may be more attracted to choices that provide opportunities to meet relationship needs. For example, are some occupations more appealing because they offer access to potential romantic partners? Researchers should further consider the potential impact of these decisions on the decision makers' close others, particularly romantic partners. For example, people may be more willing to seek treatment for an illness if their symptoms are negatively affecting a romantic relationship. Altogether, taking a relationship perspective could help to shed further light on a wide variety of decisions.

Applying JDM principles to the relationship domain will also help to further our understanding of the generalizability versus domain specificity of decision strategies. For example, JDM research has shown that decision makers are prone to many errors and fallacies (e.g., overweighting sunk costs, Arkes & Blumer, 1985; the decoy effect; Huber, Payne, & Puto, 1982). Researchers should test not only whether these same errors are made in the romantic-relationship domain, but also whether they are indeed "errors" in the relationship context; we may find that some of these decision strategies are actually adaptive when dealing with evolutionarily old problems such as mate pursuit.

Finally, although our focus is on romantic relationships, researchers could further enrich both literatures by testing JDM concepts in other kinds of close relationships, such as family or friendships. Such research could help explore the generalizability of the phenomena described here, and possibly shed light on the role of sexual versus relationship motivation in relationship-decision tendencies.

Conclusion

Decisions such as whom to date, whether to commit, whether to marry, and whether to break up are critical in shaping one's romantic future. The existing literature suggests that when people make these deeply important choices, the processes they follow are often not so different from the processes that JDM researchers have been studying in other domains for decades. Conversely, people's desire for connectedness with others is so pervasive that close relationship theories (e.g., need to belong, attachment theory) can be used to further our understanding of decisions made in seemingly relationship-irrelevant JDM domains. Attention to similarities and differences between these fields is meaningful both for optimizing decision making and for advancing theory. Such research is likely to enhance our understanding not only of relationship processes but also of JDM processes in general.

Recommended Reading

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *117*, 497–529. A comprehensive analysis of the human drive to form close relationships.

Miller, G. F., & Todd, P. M. (1998). Mate choice turned cognitive. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *2*, 190–198. An argument for taking a cognitive approach to mate choice.

Schulte-Mecklenbeck, M., Kuhberger, A., & Ranyard, R. (2011). (See References). A user-friendly guide on how to implement process-tracing methods to examine decision processes.

Simpson, J. A., Griskevicius, V., & Rothman, A. J. (2012). (See References). A thorough analysis of the relevance of relationships for consumer choice.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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