

Good Theories in Need of Better Data: Combining Clinical and Social Psychological Approaches to Study the Mechanisms Linking Relationships and Health

Perspectives on Psychological Science
2022, Vol. 17(3) 863–883

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DOI: 10.1177/17456916211027563

www.psychologicalscience.org/PPS



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Abstract

The study of intimate relationships and health is a fast-growing discipline with numerous well-developed theories, many of which outline specific interpersonal behaviors and psychological pathways that may give rise to good or poor health. In this article, we argue that the study of relationships and health can move toward interrogating these mechanisms with greater precision and detail, but doing so will require a shift in the nature of commonly used research methods in this area. Accordingly, we draw heavily on the science of behavior change and discuss six key methodologies that may galvanize the mechanistic study of relationships and health: dismantling studies, factorial studies, experimental therapeutics, experimental mediation research, multiple assessments, and recursive modeling. We provide empirical examples for each strategy and outline new ways in which a given approach may be used to study the mechanisms linking intimate relationships and health. We conclude by discussing the key challenges and limitations for using these research strategies as well as novel ideas about how to integrate this work into existing paradigms within the field.

Keywords

intimate relationships, health, mechanisms, mediation, indirect effects, social psychology, clinical psychology, intervention science

The quantity and quality of our intimate relationships are associated with a broad range of health outcomes, including immunological functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser, 2018), cardiovascular disease (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2010), cancer (Kroenke et al., 2006; Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2019), and even mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010, 2015; Stanton, Selcuk, et al., 2019). Indeed, intimate relationships are increasingly recognized as a public-health priority akin in magnitude and scope to other social determinants of health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017). As researchers interrogate the pathways between relationship quality¹ and health, a common finding is that relationship processes do not often predict health directly; rather, elements of relationships are most frequently associated with health indirectly through a series of intermediate mechanisms. These putative mechanisms include, for example, health behaviors, chronic stress,

and access to social resources (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Farrell et al., 2018; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2014; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Robles et al., 2014).

Understanding the pathways linking intimate relationships and distal health outcomes, as well as the mechanisms underlying these pathways, is vital to designing effective interventions. Thus, theorizing and testing potential mechanisms has become a key interest for many social, health, and clinical psychologists. Yet when it comes to studying these potential mechanisms, we feel like Mark Twain, who, in paraphrasing his colleague's thoughts on the weather in New England, remarked how often it was discussed but that "no one seemed to do

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anything about it" (Johnson, 1923, p. 322). Changing how we study psychosocial mechanisms is hardly as immutable as changing the weather in New England, but perhaps one reason we are better at theorizing about the mechanisms than we are about studying said mechanisms is that key methodological advances (that allow us to do so) emerge in the literature quite slowly. We have a surplus of theoretical models that propose mechanistic pathways between relationships and health but very little data that adequately fulfill all the criteria necessary to truly warrant identification of a specific behavior or psychosocial experience as a *mechanism of action*. To be sure, the field is ripe with experimental studies showing that variation in the ways in which people think about and behave in relationships are associated with health-relevant outcomes (Bourassa et al., 2019a; T. W. Smith, Ruiz, & Uchino, 2004). That said, experimental effects are necessary but not sufficient to identify health-relevant mechanisms of action. In this article, we discuss commonalities across the existing theoretical accounts of the mechanisms explaining associations between intimate relationships and health outcomes, highlight the evidence that is needed for a deeper understanding of these potential mechanisms, and illustrate how distinct methodologies in the fields of social and clinical psychology can inform each other to propel this body of knowledge forward and help design targeted interventions.

We begin by reviewing theoretical models that specify potential mechanistic pathways between intimate relationships and health outcomes. In this analysis, we distill common themes among extant theoretical models. The focus of our analysis is on adult intimate relationships (i.e., romantic pair bonds, marriage or marriage-like relationships), including relationship functioning (e.g., high vs. low relationship quality) and status (e.g., whether people are married, separated/divorced, or widowed). Intimate relationships represent a subset of all close relationships but may be particularly potent in the health domain. Worldwide, nearly all people form intimate relationships at some point in adulthood (Copen et al., 2012). Despite the ubiquity of intimate relationships, however, there is quite a range in the extent to which people maintain stable pair bonds. Nearly 40% of all first marriages end in divorce (Smock & Schwartz, 2020) and, according to taxometric analyses, approximately three of 10 marriages can be described as highly discordant—so much so that this discordance represents a true taxon, one that is different in kind rather than quantity (Whisman et al., 2008). Although we limit our analysis to intimate relationships, we draw on research from relevant neighboring fields to make critical points, including research on loneliness/isolation, social support, parent-child relationships, and

caregiving. We also describe and reference work that may provide a good illustration of the ways in which the literature on relationships and health can import novel advances from other parts of the field. In this sense, although this article is ultimately aimed at advancing the study of intimate relationships and health, we are hopeful it can inform other areas within psychological science that undoubtedly struggle with many of the same challenges.

After discussing relevant theories, we turn to the types of evidence necessary for distinguishing true mechanisms from derivative mediators, and we describe the current state of empirical evidence for some of the mechanisms proposed to underlie relationship-health pathways. The literature defining mechanisms of action and distinguishing mechanisms from mediators, indirect effects, and proxy variables is well developed (Kraemer et al., 2001), and we are not making novel claims about how biopsychosocial mechanisms operate to connect relationships and health. Our contribution rests in understanding how the basic elements of this literature can be used to galvanize the empirical study of intimate relationships and health. To do so, we focus mostly on a variety of robust methodologies used in social and clinical psychology, and we evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each for providing evidence for causal mechanisms and explaining how these methods can (and likely should) be combined to more completely understand mechanistic puzzles in the area of relationships and health. We discuss the implications of robust mechanistic research for intervention development throughout.

Review of Extant Theory on Mechanisms Linking Relationships and Health

As our title implies, the key proposition of this article is that when it comes to the mechanistic study of intimate relationships and health, we have more theories than data. Although the existing theories are distinct, there is quite a degree of overlap as well. In many ways, the review of these theories is a critical setup for exploring new empirical ways of testing mechanisms in the association between relationships and health. To begin with this end in mind, our assessment of the literature in this area is relatively straightforward: The study of intimate relationships and health will benefit most from a deeper empirical focus on mechanisms of action. Theoretical advances are certainly important, and we are not calling for a moratorium on theory but instead for a reinvigorated empirical focus on the ways in which the putative mechanistic effects are conveyed. In other words, we argue that, with the advent of rigorous methods and interdisciplinary

initiatives, researchers are now in an exciting position to empirically test the various theoretical models specifying links between intimate relationships and health.

The existing theoretical writing on relationships and health maps directly onto the subtopics within the field. We have unique—but definitely interrelated—mechanistic models of the ways in which marriage and relationship quality (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001); social integration, isolation, and loneliness (J. T. Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008); social support and stress buffering (Uchino, 2009); partner responsiveness (Stanton, Slatcher, & Reis, 2019); social networks (K. P. Smith & Christakis, 2008); social-evaluative threat (Dickerson et al., 2004); social ambivalence (Holt-Lunstad & Uchino, 2019); and both divorce (Sbarra et al., 2011) and bereavement (Shor et al., 2012) may shape health-relevant psychology, behavior, and physiology, all of which are related to disease incidence, progression, and endpoint outcomes (see also Farrell & Simpson, 2017; Slatcher & Selcuk, 2017).

One broad question in this literature is whether intimate relationships exert health-protective effects (via positive relationship processes such as support and physical intimacy) or whether outcomes are driven largely by the health-damaging effects of lacking intimate relationships or experiencing low-quality relationships (via negative relationship processes such as conflict or hostility). Evidence exists for both pathways (Farrell & Simpson, 2017). For example, perceived social support, partner responsiveness, and social networks of close others may buffer against stress in adulthood (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009; Manvelian & Sbarra, 2020; Slatcher et al., 2015), which is clearly health-protective. At the same time, marital separation increases risk for smoking behavior (Bourassa et al., 2019b), which is clearly health-damaging, and loneliness is associated with increased proinflammatory gene-expression motifs (Slavich & Cole, 2013). As these examples illustrate, there are distinct ways in which relationship resources may contribute positively to health, whereas social stress, hostility, and relationship discord may contribute negatively. Furthermore, changes in relationship functioning in either direction may also make unique contributions to health; for example, Stanton, Selcuk, et al. (2019) found that decreases in partner responsiveness over a 10-year period predicted mortality rates above and beyond mean levels of responsiveness. In the remainder of this section, we review three cross-cutting psychosocial and behavioral pathways that are believed to link intimate relationship quality/status with distal health: health behaviors, affect, and cognition. Nearly all of the existing theories in this area point to the critical roles of these constructs as potential

mechanistic engines linking intimate relationships and health.

Health behaviors as mechanisms

At the broadest level, any behavior that alters health-relevant physiology is a health behavior. Behaviors overtly related to health enhancement (e.g., exercise, diet) and health impairment (e.g., drug and alcohol use) are often the primary behavioral mediators in models linking relationships and health. Behavior plays a critical role—if not *the* critical role—in shaping disease incidence and outcomes; empirical estimates suggest that roughly 40% of all deaths in the United States are attributable to modifiable health behaviors (McGinnis et al., 2002). Within a mediational framework, the central questions of interest for this article are largely about the ways in which intimate relationship quality or status may organize, shape, constrain, or drive health-relevant behaviors (Skoyen et al., 2013; Umberson et al., 2006, 2010). For example, in a large sample from the Study of Women's Health Across the Nation cohort, marital happiness was associated with fewer sleep disturbances (Troxel et al., 2009), and work using the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) data set showed perceived partner responsiveness was associated with better sleep (Selcuk et al., 2017). Likewise, poor sleep in one member of a couple was associated with a lower ratio of positive to negative affect in a laboratory conflict task (Gordon & Chen, 2014). In other domains, marital separation and divorce appear to increase the risk for smoking, especially relapse among prior smokers (Bourassa et al., 2019b). Perceived support from one's partner for exercise and healthy eating is associated with lower weight, and spousal interactions involving influence, regulation, and constraint of health practices that encourage engagement in a healthy lifestyle are associated with better health practices and more health-enhancing behaviors (Skoyen et al., 2013).

There are multiple ways in which close relationships may affect health behaviors. First, relationship partners shape the way in which we think and feel about different health behaviors. The social control of health behaviors refers to efforts by one person to directly regulate the behavior of another person (by telling, reminding, or threatening another person to affect a health-behavior change) or to indirectly influence that person through a feeling of obligation and responsibility to others (Tucker, 2002; Umberson, 1992). In an extensive review of this topic, Umberson et al. (2010) discussed a life-course perspective on health behaviors and outlined a model in which many health habits are established in childhood, largely from parental

influences. These developed health behaviors are then heavily affected by peers and social norms in adolescence, organized by relationship partners within a marriage, and finally change once again for older adults, who are more likely to lose these powerful social forces in later life (Tucker et al., 2004).

Second, low-quality relationships can deplete the self-regulatory resources needed to engage in more taxing health-enhancing behaviors and avoid pleasurable but harmful behaviors. Committing to goals for changing health behaviors, creating plans for achieving those goals, and avoiding distractions and obstacles all require ample self-regulatory resources (Mann et al., 2013), and low-quality relationships characterized by high levels of conflict and hostility use up self-regulatory resources (Smith et al., 2011). However, higher-quality relationships can allow for greater resources to be shared across partners to achieve health behavior-related goals (Fitzsimons et al., 2015; vanDellen et al., 2018).

It is beyond the scope of this article to cover all conceivable ways in which intimate relationship quality and status are associated with health behaviors; nevertheless, even our brief review highlights the breadth of this literature—health behaviors unfold in a social context and are strongly associated with relationship quality and status.

Affective processes as mechanisms

It is now widely recognized that affect—the valenced experience of whether something is good or bad and the general term used for a variety of emotion-relevant concepts—plays a direct role in shaping critical health outcomes (DeSteno et al., 2013; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2002). The experience of psychological stress itself, including concomitant physiological changes involving the autonomic and neuroendocrine systems, is believed to be an affective process (DeSteno et al., 2013). Farrell et al. (2018) reviewed the literature suggesting emotions experienced and expressed, emotion-regulation strategy use, and affective reactivity to stress all serve as mediators linking intimate relationship functioning and health. Likewise, Sbarra and Coan (2018) posited that what appear to be direct effects from relationships to health and health-relevant physiology may be better understood as effects that occur via affective responding; in this way, intimate relationships provide a social context that organizes many of our affective experiences.

Psychological distress, for example, is unambiguously linked to a range of negative health outcomes (Segerstrom & Miller, 2004), and in many instances relational conflict contributes directly to more exaggerated cardiovascular reactivity. For instance, greater hostility during marital interactions is associated with

higher blood pressure and heart rate (T. W. Smith, Glazer, et al., 2004; T. W. Smith, Ruiz, & Uchino, 2004). Moreover, vigilance to threat is a negatively valenced affective state of high arousal, and evidence suggests that vigilance for threat is associated with exaggerated cardiovascular responses in social situations (Ruiz et al., 2017). Social vigilance is proposed to be a key mediator of links between attachment anxiety and health—it is believed that anxiously attached individuals are constantly monitoring their partners' emotions and reactions, and this high state of arousal is one that contributes negatively to health (Jaremka et al., 2013; Stanton & Campbell, 2014a); we return to this topic later when discussing experimental mediation approaches for identifying mechanisms of action. In other domains, exaggerated emotional responding is also associated with health outcomes. For example, using data from the national MIDUS study, Stanton, Selcuk, et al. (2019) reported that negative-affect reactivity to daily stressors mediated the association between change in perceived partner responsiveness in marriage or marriage-like relationships and mortality across 20 years.

Affect and emotion regulation—that is, what people do to manage their emotional experiences—are centrally related to health as well (DeSteno et al., 2013). Perhaps the best example from research on intimate relationships centers on attachment insecurity. Individual differences in attachment anxiety and avoidance fundamentally involve relative predispositions to engage in specific emotion-regulatory strategies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). People high in attachment anxiety tend to favor other-oriented *hyperactivating* strategies, which are defined as exaggerated social responses to relational threat that often involve repetitive efforts to engage the threatening content (e.g., romantic pursuit in the context of jealousy). In contrast, people high in attachment avoidance engage in self-reliant *deactivating* strategies in which they minimize or suppress their emotional experiences. A growing body of research now links both of these processes to health-relevant outcomes (Ehrlich, 2019; Stanton & Campbell, 2014b), and Pietromonaco and Beck (2019) outlined a dyadic model of attachment and health in which each person's reactions and responses relate to and drive those of their partner. This idea is consistent with prior theorizing in the literature on marriage and health—one person's disposition is their partner's social context (Ruiz et al., 2006).

Cognitive processes as mechanisms

In reality, it is often difficult to separate affective and cognitive processes. For example, situational appraisals (a cognitive process) may drive psychological stress (an

affective experience), but the experience of stress itself shapes cognitive evaluation of the social world (Neff & Karney, 2004). Furthermore, relative to affective responses and health behaviors, it is often difficult to determine whether cognitive processes are themselves the key predictors of outcomes or the intervening variables that explain the outcome. Put in the language of statistical mediation, are cognitive processes the *X* variables (e.g., perceived social support, perceived partner responsiveness, marital attributions, or loneliness) or the mediating *M* variables that follow from specific relational circumstances (e.g., depression or anxiety symptoms)? This distinction ultimately matters for the study of mechanistic effects. As we discuss later, if an experiment or intervention intends to target a specific mechanism (to determine whether altering that variable alters a health-relevant outcome), we need a very clear idea about which mechanisms to target. In other words, which variables may ultimately exert a direct effect on key outcomes?

Some prospective longitudinal studies point to the role of cognitive factors as mediators of pathways between relationship experiences and health outcomes. Farrell and colleagues (2019) tested the mediating role of two different aspects of the Adult Attachment Interview in explaining links between observations of maternal sensitivity in the first few years of life and cardiometabolic risk in middle adulthood: *secure-base script knowledge*, which assesses the extent to which individuals seek and expect effective support from attachment figures during stressful situations; and *coherence of mind*, which reflects the ability to produce a consistent, open, and detailed narrative and is believed to reflect attentional strategies implemented during distress. They found that secure-base script knowledge, but not coherence of mind, partially mediated paths between maternal sensitivity in infancy and cardiometabolic risk in adulthood. This suggests that the awareness and engagement of cognitive scripts for successful support seeking may be one way in which previous relationship experiences translate into long-term health. Cognition is the least studied category of mediating variables in the literature on relationships and health, but findings such as these suggest a cognitive approach may be a fruitful direction for future research.

All mechanisms can be moderated

Within the broad literature on relationships and health, many of the existing mechanistic models and theories focus not only on the intervening processes but also on the ways in which these processes may be moderated by sociodemographic or individual differences across a range of psychological domains. For instance,

in their model linking marital quality to health, Robles and colleagues (2014) clearly noted that gender- and individual-difference variables may differentially affect the processes of interest. On the basis of a thorough meta-analysis, however, these authors also noted that empirical evidence for their proposed moderators (i.e., gender and age) is quite limited. In their study of marital status and health, Sbarra and colleagues (2015) suggested that the association between divorce and health is likely moderated by individual differences that contribute to the likelihood of becoming overinvolved in one's psychological experiences (cf. Kross & Ayduk, 2011). For example, self-reported attachment anxiety, conceptualized as the trait-like tendency to engage in maladaptive emotion regulation, is associated with a stronger relationship between linguistic markers of emotional overinvolvement and blood-pressure reactivity after a marital separation (Lee et al., 2011), highlighting how a specific mediational process (hypothesized to be associated with poor health outcomes after marital separation) may be moderated by individual differences.

Beyond gender- or individual-difference variables, there is increasing awareness that stressful environmental contexts may also affect relationship dynamics, especially the stress conferred by lower socioeconomic standing (Neff & Karney, 2017; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). The normative developmental course of most marriages is one of relational decline, but considerable evidence indicates that this decline accelerates among people who are economically disadvantaged (Neff & Karney, 2017). Economic disadvantage is a broad term that can encompass multiple stressors, including unemployment, neighborhood risks, inconsistent transportation, and limited network support, that presumably affect reserve capacity to respond to these stressors (Gallo et al., 2009). Neff and Karney (2017) suggested two routes through which these external stressors may affect relationship satisfaction—via the creation of additional marital problems (e.g., conflict over escalating debt) and as hindrances to constructive problem-solving (e.g., multiple job requirements make solving childcare problems increasingly difficult). To our knowledge, no studies on relationship and health have used this framework, but it is clear that external stressors alter relationship processes in a manner that may have a direct impact on the mediational processes discussed above (Lavner & Bradbury, 2017). Central to this issue is the need to collect diverse and representative samples in all corners of the discipline (Rad et al., 2018). As with other subfields (e.g., developmental psychology; see M. Nielsen et al., 2017), there is little doubt that the study of intimate relationships and health suffers from considerable sampling bias; all endeavors to study mechanisms should be built on efforts to collect more

diverse and representative samples across the spectrum of relationship types, gender representation, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and race.

Biological intermediaries link mechanistic variables to health

Many of the broad “pathway models” in studies on relationships and health focus on the biological mechanisms that may give rise to distal physical-health outcomes (e.g., Robles et al., 2014; Slatcher & Selcuk, 2017). The basic idea underpinning these models is that some relational circumstance or experience alters how people think, feel, and/or behave, and these changes have physiological correlates, including changes in endocrine, autonomic, and immune system functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser, 2018). Sustained dysregulation of multiple physical systems can result in allostatic load (McEwen, 1998), which is believed to reflect sustained wear and tear on the body, and the basic conception here is that maintained physiological dysregulation of these systems poses a direct risk for long-term health outcomes. This pathway perspective is consistent with classic models in health psychology (Miller et al., 2009), which highlight the need to study *biologically plausible intermediaries* that ultimately link psychosocial experiences with endpoint physical health.

There are two important corollaries related to this point. First, risks accumulate over time (see Kuh et al., 2003), and the accumulation of health-damaging effects may take decades to alter disease incidence. Thus, it is critical that any study of these intermediaries at least attempts to speak to long-term health risks in a manner that is consistent with the slow accumulation of effects. Second, most studies on relationships and health represent only a snapshot into this larger window of accumulation. The intensity and timing of the risk exposure or stress-buffering are hypothesized to represent a process that would be health-damaging or health-protective if maintained over time. Consider, for example, a month-long daily study of stressful interactions, ratings of perceived partner responsiveness, and ambulatory blood pressure; this study observes that greater perceptions of responsiveness across daily stressful interactions are associated with reduced ambulatory blood-pressure reactivity. Are these effects health-relevant? Many articles in the literature gloss over the fact that a study such as this provides only snapshot from a lifetime of social interactions. As our mechanistic studies advance, these points must become front and center. We encourage scientists working in this area to make the assumptions in their methodology explicit; for example, for responsiveness to be considered health-protective, we may need to assume that couples who report greater responsiveness over

the course of many years also experience less chronic stress and, by extension, potentially less blood-pressure reactivity.

As we consider the relevance of relationship processes to clinical endpoints, it is also important to reverse engineer the pathways that may link disease incidence, progression, and morbidity to social risk factors via changes in basic disease pathogenesis, gene expression and inflammation, and autonomic nervous system (ANS) and neuroendocrine activity. In the relationships and health domain, the number of studies on ANS, neuroendocrine, and immune outcomes has grown, but it will be increasingly important to connect functioning in these systems to clinical endpoints. It is no longer enough to demonstrate, for example, that marital quality is associated with blood-pressure reactivity during emotionally sensitive conversations; rather, the field needs to show that this reactivity does, in fact, explain the association between marital quality and a more distal health mediator (e.g., intermedial thickness of the coronary artery) en route toward risk for clinical dysfunction (e.g., coronary heart disease).

Studying health intermediaries that have a causal connection with distal health (i.e., distinguishing between risk markers and causal risk factors) is equally important to advance in this area. A classic example in the biomedical literature is the study of C-reactive protein (CRP), a marker of systemic inflammation that was long believed to play a unique causal role in the development of atherosclerosis. However, recent studies have established CRP as a risk marker rather than as a causal agent in the development of cardiovascular disease (see Pingault et al., 2018). To the extent that the literature on relationships and health has relied on CRP as a critical health intermediary, some of the putative pathways toward disease endpoints may need deeper consideration.

The mechanisms of action are reciprocal

A final point about the broad theoretical literature on relationships and health is that the putative mechanisms of action are likely reciprocal and highly interdependent (T. W. Smith & Weihs, 2019). We see recursive cycles between behaviors such as sleep and hostility between partners: Poor sleep quality predicts more negative partner interactions the next day, which, in turn, predicts worse sleep the following night (Hasler & Troxel, 2010). Psychological and behavioral processes also affect one another. Emotional processes, for instance, are linked to eating behavior in several different ways, including eating to cope with negative affect or suppressing food intake after intense emotional experiences (Macht, 2008). However, for individuals who develop disordered

eating problems, negative affect tends to increase further after bingeing episodes (Haedt-Matt & Keel, 2011). There are even recursive cycles between psychological and health-relevant biological processes; for example, depression and stress promote pathogenic gut bacteria survival and replication, and these bacteria can also affect vagus nerve and neurotransmitter responsivity to influence stress reactivity and mood (Madison & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2019).

These illustrations are broadly consistent with Butler's (2011) model of temporal interpersonal emotional systems (TIES), in which the time-based organization of emotional experience in one person is directly connected to the emotional experience of another person, and the interpersonal nature of these emotional processes can be understood as a dynamic system (Sbarra & Coan, 2018). As we discuss later, the conceptual promise of understanding relationships and health in terms of reciprocal or recursive systems awaits realization, perhaps largely, we contend, because the field has not yet embraced statistical methods that are well suited to capturing these processes (Butler & Barnard, 2019). Moreover, to the extent that these approaches are computationally demanding, the field will benefit enormously through enhanced multidisciplinary collaborations with computer scientists, engineers, biologists, and ecologists.

Summary of extant theories

Existing theoretical models highlight that the pathways between intimate relationships and physical health are most often explained by a relatively common set of underlying mechanisms. Although individual theoretical models make unique contributions to our understanding of relationships and health, our review of the literature has distilled several common themes and arguments across different models. First, many theoretical models propose that the psychosocial mechanisms underlying associations between relationships and health fall into the broad categories of health behaviors (e.g., eating patterns), affective processes (e.g., emotion regulation), and cognitive processes (e.g., mental representations of relationships). Second, the vast majority of theoretical models of relationships and health include at least one of the following tenets: (a) Any given mechanism explaining a link between relationships and health can be moderated by person- and situation-level variables (e.g., gender, individual differences, socioeconomic status); (b) psychosocial mechanisms themselves are linked to health outcomes via biological intermediaries (e.g., cortisol, immunological markers); and (c) the pathways between predictor, mechanism, and outcome variables are reciprocal and interdependent.

Searching for Mechanisms: The State of the Science

Given the many models outlining the mechanistic processes linking intimate relationships to physical-health outcomes, we might expect many of the key tenets to be supported by data as well. In reviewing the existing literature, we see several constructs frequently arising in empirical work as mediators, particularly affective processes such as emotional expression and regulation (Farrell et al., 2018; Sbarra & Coan, 2018), attachment orientations, sleep, and substance use (Farrell & Stanton, 2019). However, a mediating variable and an underlying mechanism are not necessarily the same, and the terms should not be used interchangeably. Is the evidence strong enough to consider mediating variables such as affective processes and sleep fully established mechanisms?

Establishing a causal mechanism can be a challenging task. According to Kazdin (2007, 2014), there are five² criteria that must be fulfilled for a mediating variable to be a true mechanism: plausibility, strong associations, consistency, experimental manipulation, and time line (see Table 1). In a recent review, Farrell and Stanton (2019) applied these criteria to four established mediators (affective processes, attachment orientations, sleep quality, and substance use) in the literature on relationships and health. The results were humbling. Although all four potential mechanisms met Kazdin's plausibility and strong-associations criteria, only a few met the consistency criterion (affective processes, attachment orientations, and sleep quality), and none met the experimental manipulation and time-line criteria. In this sense, given that we currently lack fully convincing evidence for the variables that should be targeted as mechanisms, it may be premature to design relationship-level interventions to improve health outcomes (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009; cf. S. Cacioppo et al., 2015).

One illustration of the ways in which well-intentioned interventions may fall short comes from the Enhancing Recovery in Coronary Heart Disease (ENRICHD) study, which was a large-scale ($N = 2,481$) randomized control trial designed to test the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral treatment on reducing early mortality after a myocardial infarction (MI) via two common comorbid issues, high depression and low social support (ENRICHD Investigators, 2001). Drawing on literature showing that low social support was associated with morbidity and mortality in patients with heart disease, the researchers included modules designed to improve behavioral skills related to building social connection and seeking support, reduce cognitive biases that contributed to the perception and maintenance of

Table 1. Kazdin's (2007, 2014) Five Criteria for Establishing a Mechanism of Change Applied to the Study of Close Relationships and Health

Criterion	Definition
Plausibility	Plausible and coherent explanation (e.g., a theoretical account) for why the causal path from $X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$ should exist and how it should operate
Strong associations	Evidence demonstrating robust associations between X and M , M and Y , or all three
Consistency	Evidence demonstrating consistency in the associations between X , M , and Y across different samples and paradigms (i.e., replicability)
Experimental manipulation	Causal evidence demonstrating that altering X changes M and altering M changes Y
Time line	Temporal evidence demonstrating that change in X precedes change in M , which then precedes change in Y

Note: X = predictor/independent relationship variable; M = the mechanism of change; Y = outcome/dependent physical-health variable.

unsatisfying social support, and encourage network development through social outreach (ENRICHD Investigators, 2001).

Unfortunately, the results of this randomized control trial were underwhelming. Although the intervention did modestly increase perceptions of social support and reduce symptoms of depression, there was no difference in event-free survival rates after 6 months between intervention and control participants. The lack of results may have partly resulted from notable improvements in depression and social support in patients in the control group who received no therapy (ENRICHD Investigators, 2001). Although the authors could not conclude why their intervention was only slightly more effective than the control, many of their suggested explanations dealt with mechanistic pathways, including medications for depression or heart disease also targeting the biological pathways that link depression and social support to cardiovascular disease; the intervention not having a large enough effect on social support to lead to biological changes; and the duration and timing of the intervention not including key causal windows. A larger empirical base that includes evidence for all five mechanistic criteria may have allowed the ENRICHD researchers to design a more effective intervention, or at least a more effective critical test. The field needs to move from relying on broad-based epidemiological findings to inform interventions (e.g., low social support is associated with post-MI complications; therefore, treatments should improve social support) to considering which mechanistic levers of change have the greatest likelihood of exerting a causal effect on the target outcome. The work of the ENRICHD trial is almost 30 years old at this point; our illustration is not intended to slight the efforts of this important work

but instead to emphasize that the field should learn from past efforts and aspire to build future intervention studies from more firmly established mechanistic work. Much of the work required to do so, however, remains to be completed.

Combining Social and Clinical Psychological Methods to Study Mechanisms of Action

Determining how to gather the evidence needed to establish causal mechanisms and to separate them from derivative mediators is complicated. Many different applied fields wrestle with the issues of studying mechanisms. For example, the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of psychotherapy in improving mental health are notoriously difficult to identify. By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, there was ample evidence that behavioral interventions for several clinical disorders were highly effective (Kazdin, 2007). However, there were also several concerns stemming from researchers and therapists who did not understand why these interventions were effective. First, there were major gaps in effectiveness and efficiency. Some therapies were shown to be highly effective in controlled research settings but, when disseminated to community practitioners, proved too complicated to be carried out with fidelity (Onken et al., 2014). Without convincing insights into the mechanisms and key ingredients of these complicated interventions, it was difficult to streamline them effectively (Kazdin, 2001). Second, for each disorder, there were a plethora of different interventions that were difficult to group and organize. Identifying common mechanistic pathways would allow for the grouping and organization of these interventions,

making it easier to draw comparisons and broad conclusions. Some potential mechanisms were proposed, including change in cognitive tendencies after cognitive therapy and a strong therapeutic alliance between patient and therapist, but, as Kazdin (2007) discussed, the evidence for these mechanisms was weak, and the theoretical basis for these and other commonly proposed mechanisms was lacking.

In wrestling with these issues, clinical research and intervention science have developed several methodological tools for identifying mechanisms of action, many of which are now organized under the National Institutes of Health's (NIH's) Science of Behavior Change (SOBC) initiative (Haedt-Matt & Keel, 2011). The goals of the SOBC initiative (see <https://scienceofbehaviorchange.org/about/>) center on identifying the "active ingredients"—the how and why—of successful behavior change. In the context of intimate relationships and health, we know that relationship quality (vs. quantity) is a key correlate of health outcomes (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Robles et al., 2014). Nonetheless, experimentally manipulating "relationship quality" as a global construct would be quite arduous and must therefore rely on a series of more basic SOBC-style questions, such as which element(s) of relationship quality should be enhanced and which should be diminished, whether there are some elements of relationship quality that are more influential than others, and how intervention design can be optimized for downstream beneficial effects on multiple distinct elements of relationship quality, given that there is unlikely to be a "one-size-fits-all" intervention method. Investigating and attempting to manipulate specific relationship-level active ingredients known to play a role in the health domain (e.g., hostile communication patterns, perceived responsiveness; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005; Stanton, Slatcher, & Reis, 2019) is more feasible, which will advance our understanding of potential mechanisms more rapidly and allow researchers to design more targeted and effective interventions.

In the following sections, we describe six methodological techniques drawn from clinical/intervention science and social psychology that can best fill the gaps in our mechanistic understanding of the pathways between intimate relationships and physical health. These techniques fall into three major categories. First, dismantling studies and full factorial designs take existing broad interventions and break them down to determine the most important components for affecting the outcome(s) of interest. Second, targeted experimental techniques, such as experimental therapeutics and experimental mediation, develop and test relatively simpler, theory-based interventions experimentally to study

mechanisms. Third, intensive longitudinal approaches, such as using multiple assessments and recursive modeling techniques, allow researchers to better study mechanistic processes with observational studies. We selected these six techniques to require differing levels of investment (in terms of both time and resources) and to cover different portions of the existing mechanistic gaps in the literature on relationships and health. For each, we describe the technique, identify which of the five types of mechanistic evidence it supports, provide examples of previous studies that have successfully used this technique to study mechanisms (in various domains), and discuss the unique strengths and challenges of each type of design for studying pathways between close relationships and physical health. Our discussion is summarized in Table 2.

Factorial Designs

Single factorial designs: dismantling studies to identify "active ingredients"

In clinical psychology, there is increasing attention and concern paid to the idea that although the field has a number of empirically supported treatments that work to alleviate emotional distress, often there is little sense of precisely why these treatments work (Kazdin, 2007). Dismantling or component experimental designs seek to distill the most essential elements of any given intervention into their constituent parts and then test the efficacy of the specific elements alone or in combination (Papa & Follette, 2015). In a multisession manualized intervention, dismantling studies allow researchers to identify the key "active ingredients" that may drive overall change. The broad approach to distilling active ingredients is consistent with efforts toward therapeutic optimization: How can we deliver the most potent, trimmed-down behavioral intervention programs in a scalable way?

A classic example of dismantling work is Jacobson and colleagues' (1996) efforts to distill the activity ingredients in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for depression. The first empirical study on this topic separated the behavioral-activation and automatic-thought components from the core schema change and full CBT treatment package to treat 150 outpatients with major depression and found no evidence that that the full treatment package improved outcomes over the combination of behavioral-activation and automatic-thought restructuring. In a follow-up randomized trial with 241 individuals with depression, Dimidjian and colleagues (2006) compared behavioral activation alone to cognitive therapy and antidepressant medication and found

Table 2. Summary of Six Methodological Techniques Suited to Investigating and Establishing Mechanisms Underlying Pathways Between Close Relationships and Health

	Factorial designs		Targeted experimental techniques		Intensive longitudinal approaches	
	Single (dismantling studies)	Full	Experimental therapeutics (experimental medicine)	Experimental mediation	Multiple assessments	Recursive modeling
Top down or bottom up	Top down	Top down	Bottom up	Bottom up	Bottom up	Bottom up or top down
Mechanism criteria fulfilled	Plausibility, strong associations, consistency	Plausibility, strong associations, consistency	Plausibility, strong associations, experimental manipulation	Plausibility, strong associations, experimental manipulation	Plausibility, strong associations, consistency, time line	Plausibility, strong associations, consistency, time line
Time investment (low, moderate, high)	Moderate	High	High	Low	High	Moderate
Resource investment (low, moderate, high)	High	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate

that behavioral activation alone was comparable with antidepressant medication and outperformed cognitive therapy, especially among people with more severe mood disturbances. In a more recent example, Lindsay and colleagues (2018) dismantled a mindfulness intervention for stress management into the components of (a) monitoring and (b) accepting present moment experiences. Across two studies, this work showed that the inclusion of acceptance skills (toward present-moment experiences) is critical for improving daily positive emotional experiences.

The examples above provide a few illustrations of the ways in which dismantling designs can inform mechanisms of action. There are a variety of ways in which we can apply this approach to understanding intimate relationships and health. Couple-based interventions have clearly established efficacy for treating depressive illness (Whisman et al., 2012), and a recent review suggested that intimate relationship functioning is a causal risk factor contributing to depressive illness (Whisman et al., 2021). To the extent that major depression may shape health behaviors, cognitive/affective processes, or plausible biological intermediaries that ultimately affect distal health outcomes (DeSteno et al., 2013), targeting mood disorders in the context of couple interventions may be useful for altering health intermediaries or outcomes. When thinking about dismantling these interventions, it will be critical for investigators to consider the basic relationship processes that may improve the outcomes in question (see Barbato & D'Avanzo, 2020). For example, we might seek to separate classic

ideas about behavioral exchange, problem-solving, and constructive communication from those that involve promoting relational closeness and emotional intimacy, including, conceivably, perceived partner responsiveness (Greenman et al., 2019; Stanton, Slatcher, & Reis, 2019). Ultimately, however, the question is not whether specific elements of these interventions can improve relationship functioning and emotional- and mental-health outcomes, but whether changes in the specific relational targets yield positive experimental effects on health-relevant intermediaries (e.g., blood pressure, inflammation, heart rate variability, sleep disturbances, and/or subjective symptoms). There is a growing experimental literature examining couple interventions for chronic health conditions (e.g., Badr & Krebs, 2013; Berry et al., 2017; Martire et al., 2010; Shields et al., 2012), and beginning to dismantle some of the effective interventions in this area may help pinpoint mechanisms of action.

Full factorial designs

Another way of breaking down complex interventions is using full factorial designs. Interventions should be as efficient as possible, and no inactive components should take up resources. However, the effectiveness of components may depend on one another: For example, a social-support training intervention may not be effective unless partners improve their responsiveness as well (Selcuk & Ong, 2013). To assess what components are most critical to a treatment's efficacy, factorial

designs break down a large intervention into component parts and create versions that test different combinations (e.g., only A, only B, only C; A and B, B and C, A and C; A, B, and C) while considering the level of investment required for each (Collins et al., 2016; Onken et al., 2014). Factorial designs are conceptually similar to dismantling studies, but instead of trying to disentangle two competing elements, these designs compare and contrast the merits of different combinations of possible mechanisms within a broader treatment. Researchers then reassess the remaining components to develop new factorial designs to further break down the new and improved intervention until it is as streamlined and effective as possible.

As with dismantling studies, this approach requires there to be existing multifaceted interventions that can be broken down into different components, and such interventions are somewhat lacking thus far in the literature on relationships and health. There are well-validated interventions for parenting that appear to affect health outcomes (e.g., Dozier et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2014), but the experimental literature on couples and health is scant. We are aware of one small study (with 20 couples) that randomly assigned participants and their partners to communication training or an assessment-only control (Ewart et al., 1984); couples in the communication-training condition showed less blood-pressure reactivity at posttest. In another study of 68 couples, a support intervention (vs. control) involving “warm-touch” enhancement reduced α -amylase and systolic blood pressure (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008). With the exception of this work and the research on couple therapy and depression, we are unaware of intervention and experimental studies showing that altering relationship functioning shows a concomitant change in a health-relevant biomarker or physiological intermediary. Furthermore, these types of designs require fairly large samples to have reasonable representation in each cell, which can be difficult when recruiting couples or families. However, combining groups to make comparisons can make required sample sizes more feasible (e.g., all conditions containing B vs. all conditions without B).

One example of the full factorial design comes from Yousafzai et al. (2014), who studied an intervention for child health and well-being consisting of two parts: an enhanced-nutrition component (which included nutrition education and supplying participants with micronutrient powders) and a responsive-stimulation component (which presented mothers with a variety of play and communication activities and taught them to use play and communication to strengthen responsiveness to child cues). The researchers recruited 1,302 four-year-old children and their mothers in Pakistan and randomized them into four groups: a control group

(no intervention), a group receiving only an enhanced-nutrition component, a group receiving only a responsive-stimulation component, and a groups receiving both an enhanced-nutrition component and a responsive-stimulation component. In general, the responsive-stimulation component had positive effects on child outcomes regardless of the presence of the enhanced-nutrition component, suggesting this is the more critically important component of this intervention. However, individuals who received both components showed especially high levels of prosocial behavior, suggesting that in some cases addressing both features together is especially beneficial (Yousafzai et al., 2014). Although this study was not focused on intimate relationships and health, it is a compelling example of how specific relationship processes—derived either from the theoretical or empirical literature—can be studied in combination with other intervention components. From our perspective, a study like this holds great value for the future investigation of the mechanisms linking intimate relationships and health.

Targeted Experimental Techniques

Experimental therapeutics/medicine

As noted above, a key element of the NIH’s SOBC program is a call to action for increased research identifying and quantifying specific mechanisms of action that drive lasting behavior change (L. Nielsen et al., 2018; Sumner et al., 2018). In the growing field of experimental medicine, *targets of change* represent variables that maintain poor health and, when altered, can initiate and/or support positive behavior change. The basic approach of experimental medicine has two elements: *target engagement* and *target validation*. Target engagement provides evidence that the intervention of interest alters the putative target mechanism of action, and target validation shows that change in the target is causally related to changes in the outcomes. Thus, experimental medicine takes a highly focused approach to target specific putative mechanisms directly. This differs from randomized controlled trials of behavior-change programs, which historically focus on the relative efficacy of different treatment packages or a given treatment package relative to a control condition. As explained in the section on dismantling and factorial designs, these treatment packages can be bloated and may not be optimized to target mechanisms directly.

Following the basic principles of the SOBC movement, we argue that interpersonal and social processes are an expansive class of potential and generally understudied targets of behavior change, and the existing literature provides some relatively straightforward,

theoretically based “wise interventions” (Walton, 2014; Walton & Wilson, 2018) that could be especially useful in an experimental medicine framework. We obviously cannot randomly assign people to stressful or hostile relational situations, and we certainly cannot randomly assign people to divorce or to experience greater loneliness in the context of marriage. The way around this obstacle is to prioritize interventions or experiments that have the potential to improve functioning in these different spheres rather than increase negative aspects of relationships.

Although not explicitly framed as an experimental medicine study, Finkel and colleagues’ (2013) “marriage-hack” prevention program illustrates many of the basic principles involved in the direct targeting of mechanisms. Drawing from literature indicating that negative marital attributions contribute to the normative decline in marital satisfaction over time (Bradbury et al., 1996), Finkel et al. reasoned that an intervention designed to help adults reappraise interactions with their partner in a more benign light—as a third-party observer might see the interaction—and to maintain this perspective when they interacted with their partner would forestall the decline in relationship quality over a 2-year period. This is exactly what they found, and the unique promise of this preventive intervention is that it is relatively brief and potentially—if replicable—quite scalable. Adding health measures to designs such as this would provide convincing evidence for the causal role of mechanisms linking relationships and health. For example, among the couples that engage in the mechanistically focused reappraisal prevention program, does this maintain perceived partner responsiveness, which, in turn, explains a distal health-relevant outcome (e.g., resting blood pressure, actigraphy-derived measures of sleep quality)?

When it comes to targeting the mechanisms that shape the link between intimate relationships and health, we must return to a point we raised earlier: For studies in experimental medicine to be successful, they must ultimately be designed with some clear insights into the timescale of how the causal mechanism unfolds, and this hinges on both the timing of assessments as well as the outcomes in question. If assessments are too narrowly focused or too widely spaced, effects will be missed, and the insights these studies could provide will be limited (Farrell & Stanton, 2019). Moreover, clinical disease endpoints take decades to emerge (Kuh et al., 2003), but a focus on, say, health-behavior intermediaries (e.g., smoking or sleep quality) or health-relevant biomarkers (resting blood pressure or heart rate variability, or glucocorticoid resistance) can be studied from weeks to months after the experimental interventions.

Experimental mediation

The field of intimate relationships and health will ideally pursue rigorous longitudinal, experimental studies designed to target putative mechanisms of action, but in many instances the resources needed for these studies exceed what is available to most scientists. Basic, cross-sectional research studies can also be invaluable in providing the groundwork for the predictors and mechanisms that should be targeted in subsequent large-scale longitudinal investigations (cf. Farrell & Stanton, 2019; Onken et al., 2014). Scholars in the field of social psychology (e.g., Cook & Groom, 2004; Spencer et al., 2005) have argued that establishing a causal chain can be accomplished by manipulating the constructs of interest in a series of experiments or across time points, in which each experiment or time point addresses a different path in the causal chain. This approach, often termed *experimental mediation* or *experimental causal-chain design*, is more robust than simply using mediation analysis in a single study. Researchers typically manipulate X (the predictor variable) and observe its effects on M (the mediator) in one study or at one time point. They then manipulate M and observe its effects on Y (the outcome variable) in a separate study or later time point. Some researchers follow up by testing their X - M and M - Y effects in a different sample or using different methods to establish consistency, and others conclude their investigation with a final study that manipulates X and observe its effects on Y via M (i.e., establishing mediation in a more traditional analytic manner). This approach is similar to experimental therapeutics/medicine in that both approaches are concerned with establishing causal links between the predictor, mediator, and outcome. Experimental mediation, however, is focused primarily on effecting short-term change and is arguably less intensive than experimental therapeutics/medicine; for instance, the causal paths might be established through brief experimental sessions in the lab and measure immediate changes in relationship perceptions, behavior, and physiology.

Experimental mediation approaches have been used to test questions that fall within the domains of social (e.g., Callan et al., 2011; O’Mara & Gaertner, 2017; Singh et al., 2017) and health (e.g., Jimenez et al., 2020) psychology. However, to our knowledge, there is not yet research testing the associations between intimate relationships and health using an experimental causal-chain design. Nevertheless, we can draw on an illustrative example from the literature on intimate relationships: Cortes et al. (2018) demonstrated that people who were satisfied with their current relationship (X) placed more importance on positive past relational events and less

importance on negative past relational events (Y). This association was mediated by a tendency to feel subjectively closer in time to positive events and subjectively distant from negative events (M). In Study 1, participants reported their relationship satisfaction and wrote a brief paragraph recalling a positive or negative relational event (X), after which they reported how close or far in time the memory felt (M). Study 2 used a similar procedure in which positive versus negative memory recall (X) was manipulated, and its effects were observed on subjective time distance (M) and perceived event importance (Y). In Study 3, the researchers manipulated both memory recall (X) and subjective time distance (M) and observed their effects on perceived event importance (Y) by testing mediation models with positive and negative memories tested separately. Establishing potential causal links between X , M , and Y variables across separate studies or short time frames allows researchers to identify potentially important mechanistic pathways that can inform other types of designs.

A promising experimental manipulation in the domain of intimate relationships and health that might lend itself to this type of design involves attachment security priming (Gillath et al., 2008). Attachment security priming involves experimentally activating cognitive representations of feeling secure, comfortable, and close with a person and has frequently been shown to enhance positive views of the self and others (Bryant & Chan, 2017; Pan et al., 2017; Rowe & Carnelley, 2003). There is also some evidence for attachment security priming being particularly helpful for reducing symptoms of depression (Carnelley et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2018). Researchers interested in understanding how attachment anxiety and avoidance are linked to later health and disease outcomes may be able to use attachment security priming to observe its influences on, for instance, participants' sense of vigilance in the laboratory. Psychological vigilance may be a key mediator linking the cognitive-emotional sense of security with health intermediaries (Ruiz et al., 2017). In turn, vigilance itself can be manipulated to assess its causal role in shaping cardiovascular reactivity, consistent with the steps of experimental mediation. These manipulations need not be limited to activities within the lab. With an effective mobile attachment-security-priming technique, it would be reasonable to assess vigilance via ecological momentary assessments in daily life over the course of a week or more (this would be a manipulation of a putative X variable; or "engaging the target," according to the language of the SOBC initiative). Likewise, with an effective manipulation of vigilance (the key X variable) in the laboratory, it would be reasonable to assess potential sleep disturbances (the key mediatory)

that are set in motion as a function of this heightened arousal state (a putative outcome). Ultimately, the X - M and M - Y associations would need to be organized together in a single study using established methods for evaluating X - M - Y mediation, but the ideas here illustrate the ways in which specific relational processes can be targeted and manipulated experimentally to pinpoint potential mechanisms of action in a theoretically and empirically coherent manner.

Intensive Longitudinal Approaches

Multiple assessments

One major requirement for demonstrating the mechanism is clearly establishing a causal time line and temporal precedence to show that changes in the predictor precede changes in the mechanism, which in turn precede changes in the outcome (Kazdin, 2007, 2014). If we wish to study a window into a causal process scientifically, we must understand the temporal resolution under which it unfolds (e.g., hours, days, months, years), which can often be a wildly difficult undertaking (Cole & Maxwell, 2003). Some studies do not begin measuring the mechanism or outcome of interest until after the manipulation, which makes it impossible to establish the change from baseline. It can also be easy to miss a true effect because of the sampling window: If a follow-up is too early, a change in the outcome or even the mechanism may not have occurred yet. If a follow-up is too late, changes in both the mechanism and the outcome may have occurred between assessments, leaving researchers unable to establish the order of changes, or the effect may have occurred and dissipated before they attempted to measure it. To increase the likelihood of being able to identify the temporal order of change, we recommend that study designs include multiple assessments before, during, and after the intervention. Including multiple assessments on the shorter end of where the causal windows are expected and sampling beyond the expected time line increase the likelihood of being able to capture the order of changes occurring in the mechanistic pathway of interest. Materially, once we identify the correct window of temporal causal processes, we need the resources to study people over the entire window. We could easily envision a timescale of several months for a study on whether sleep quality mediates links between relational distress and blood pressure, and this would require a considerable longitudinal study with significant financial support.

There are some examples of multiple assessment designs in the literature on relationships and health that illustrate their utility, although most are not focused on

intimate relationships specifically. For example, Deković et al. (2012) investigated the temporal order of mechanisms linking multisystemic therapy (MST) to improved parenting and reduced externalizing problems. They followed families of adolescents with antisocial behavior issues receiving MST versus a control therapy for 6 months. By including five monthly assessments during therapy, as well as a pretest and 6-month posttherapy follow-up of all variables, Deković and colleagues were able to determine that MST produced improvements in parental perceptions of competence, which then predicted greater use of positive discipline practices, which in turn predicted reductions in adolescent externalizing problems. These findings rule out alternative pathways (e.g., the use of positive discipline promoting greater perceptions of parenting competence); provide evidence for two variables in a causal chain, and not just an association; and highlight promoting competence as a key first step in this pipeline that this and other parenting interventions should be sure to maintain.

Combining multiple assessment designs with experimental research illustrates ways in which the recursive processes implicit in many of the existing theoretical accounts linking relationships and health may be studied. For example, Kok et al. (2013) showed that increased positive emotions, increased social connections, and vagal tone build on one another to create an upward spiral toward improved well-being by using a 9-week daily-diary design. Unlike the previous example, these pathways were shown to be bidirectional, suggesting that changing either positive emotions, social connections, or vagal tone may lead to changes in the other interconnected outcomes. Studies with multiple assessments—either observation or experimental in nature—over time are ideal for establishing the time line of a mechanistic process and consistency of an effect over time.

Studying reciprocal mechanisms and dynamic change

As alluded to above, we believe that the statistical methods used for most of our research questions severely limit the speed of understanding mechanisms in this area of study. On the one hand, relationship researchers are certainly leaders in adopting newer methods to answer questions of process (e.g., contributing to new models on the longitudinal modeling of couple-related dynamics; Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013; Sakaluk et al., 2021). On the other hand, we do not yet see many of these models capturing reciprocal and recursive mechanisms in the study of relationships and health. Here, we point to two statistical-modeling approaches that may prove promising in this regard and note that

many different models may ultimately be used to represent interdependent change in relationship and health-relevant variables (Estrada et al., 2020). First, latent change score (LCS) models (McArdle, 2009; McArdle & Hamagami, 2001) are conceptually similar to bivariate latent growth curves but are better suited to capture dynamic associations between two parallel processes; this is achieved by specifying an unmeasured, latent difference score that compounds over time. This ultimately allows for an examination of cross-lagged or coupling effects on the change process itself. These latent scores thus represent the accumulation of first-order difference scores and effectively create a nonlinear system of interdependence. A concrete example here is illustrative. Sbarra and Allen (2009) studied the interdependence of mood and sleep disturbances over six occasions and found that mood and sleep symptoms operate as two forces acting on each other depending on their specific levels; when sleep problems are relatively low, any sleep problems that occur have large effects in increasing negative mood, whereas when sleep problems are relatively high, fluctuations in sleep problems have a much smaller effect on mood. In this case, the movement of the system (i.e., the rate of change of each variable) depends on the level of the other variable.

In our opinion, the LCS specification has tremendous promise for studying relationships and health. Proulx and Snyder-Rivas (2013) applied LCS models to the study of marital happiness and self-rated health over a 20-year period (including six major assessment time points). In this study, marital happiness predicted greater changes in self-rated health, but not the other way around (although the model tested a coupling parameter from self-rated health to participants' reports of marital happiness). Although this analysis was limited in its use of self-rated health, it is instructive that the health-relevant outcome followed from higher levels of happiness and not vice versa. Future models of this nature would ideally include data from couples in which each trajectory represents a variable or construct from one partner within the relationship. Admittedly, however, repeated longitudinal assessments of health-relevant constructs in dyads are hard to come by. This consideration raises a larger point when it comes to studying dynamic mechanisms over time: The ability to do so with any degree of satisfaction depends on the available data. As longitudinal dyadic studies begin to come to fruition, the application of LCS models will continue to grow.

Another means of studying mechanisms that operate at an interpersonal level is through the use of *rties* (Butler, 2019; Butler & Barnard, 2019; Butler & Boker, 2020), a newly developed package for the R software

environment (R Core Team, 2021). A growing body of work suggests that interpersonal emotional systems play an important role in a variety of health variables (e.g., Reed et al., 2015), and the *rties* package formalizes two models researchers can use to evaluate the degree of interdependence in emotional dynamics between two people. First, the inertia-coordination model represents the interdependence in two variables assessed over time and is conceptually similar to the “stability-influence” model (Thorson et al., 2018). These can be two physiological variables or two psychological variables, or even two ratings of different constructs over time. The key parameters in this model capture the interdependence in the variables over time as a function of autoregression (within a person) and cross-regression (between people in a dyad) parameters. Second, a coupled-oscillator model characterizes the interdependent frequency of oscillation of two variables (e.g., emotional dampening or amplification). This latter model has the potential to be highly useful in testing theories about homeostatic set points within relationships. For example, the coupled-oscillator model can evaluate the hypothesis that the ability for couples to create and maintain homeostatic set points around their emotional functioning is a mechanism driving the potential health benefits of intimate relationships. The coupled-oscillatory model can characterize this process at the level of the couple, and this parameter estimate can then be associated with markers of health or well-being. This approach would be quite useful in explaining what it is that changes over, for example, the course of couple therapy and how these changes may yield health benefits.

Moving Forward

In research on the mechanisms linking intimate relationships and health, we are calling for a shift from the theoretical to the empirical and from the conceptual to the methodological. Of course, theory is invaluable for specifying potential mechanisms of action, and we are not calling for an end to theoretical developments in this area of study. Rather, we are encouraging the field to enhance its commitment to testing the hypothesized mechanisms of action that have already made their way into the literature and form the basis of most theoretical models in the field. What is the best way to make the next set of empirical advances? We have detailed six methodological strategies that have the potential to galvanize research in this field and to provide us with a better causal understanding of mechanism and clearer time frames for identifying the emergence of effects. Likewise, these approaches will help us to identify precise active ingredients within broad constructs such as

relationship quality and affective processes that have the most impact and are the most malleable.

Although each of these methods would help fill gaps in the existing literature, none of them alone can address all of Kazdin’s (2007, 2014) criteria for establishing mechanisms of action. Thus, these methods are most effective when used in conjunction within a program of research or teams of collaborators; investigators who outline and study short-term illustrations of meaningful changes complement and inform the work of those who run intensive longitudinal studies. For example, if researchers used an experimental medicine intervention to alter perceived partner responsiveness in couples and then studied ambulatory blood pressure across 2 weeks, it could be quite plausible to see illustrative causal effects that, when scaled up, would have a significant impact on health.

Capitalizing on these methodologies is no small feat, but the rewards are well worth the effort. Researchers can supplement their own empirical endeavors—particularly smaller-scale lab studies—with data from publicly available large-sample-size data sets. Studies such as MIDUS; the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP); the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA); and the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) include several measures of relationship functioning. These projects may allow researchers to pursue questions about mechanisms linking relationships and health beyond the typical resources and time frame provided by a standard grant. Furthermore, researchers will be able to gain novel, important understanding of the mechanistic pathways linking intimate relationships and health by investing in multidisciplinary initiatives and cross-research-group collaborations. We recommend that scientists who have samples with relationship and health outcomes consider submitting the data sets to the Love Consortium data-science initiative (<https://www.theloveconsortium.org>).

Another key consideration will be the diversity of samples recruited to test mechanisms linking intimate relationships and health. As we discussed, mediators may not be consistent across demographic groups (e.g., culture, race, socioeconomic status). Furthermore, the overreliance on homogeneous convenience samples for developing and testing mechanistic theory may lead us to ignore or miss important mechanisms. Because individuals who are not White, well-educated, and upper-class are often the target of health interventions, studying mechanistic processes in these groups is critical to ensuring that interventions are optimized for the populations for which they are intended. Thus, recruiting more diverse samples for testing the generalizability of basic mediational effects, as well as moderated mediation models, will be a critical task for the work in this field going forward.

The available evidence suggests that intimate relationships are one of the most potent social determinants of health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017). To initiate the next generation of advances in this field, we need to better understand precisely how these effects unfold over time; ultimately, we can harness this knowledge to help people live longer, healthier, and happier lives.

Transparency

Action Editor: June Gruber


Editor: Laura A. King

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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Notes

1. We recognize that there are many different ways to characterize and measure marital and relationship quality, and debates about the best way to do so date back over 30 years (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). In many ways, differences in measurement hinder the study of mechanisms. With no consensus “gold-standard” measurement of relationship quality, the critical predictor variable discussed throughout this article often varies between the different studies we describe. In general, we are agnostic here about best practices for measuring marital and relationship quality, but we recognize from the outset that advances in measurement and assessment in this area will be critical to advancing the mechanistic study of relationships and health.
2. Kazdin (2007, 2014) also proposed a dose-dependent response gradient for the mechanism’s effect on the outcome as a nonessential criterion and specificity of a single mechanism for a given intervention-outcome link that we think is unlikely to hold in the case of pathways between relationships and health that are probably multiply determined.

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