Negative Interactions in Close Relationships: Introduction to a Special Section

Margie E. Lachman

Department of Psychology, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.

The four articles included in this special section of the *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences* present cutting-edge research on the nature, causes, and consequences of negative aspects of close relationships in adulthood. There is an extensive body of research demonstrating that support from social relationships provides benefits for psychological well-being and physical health (Antonucci, 2001). Yet, there is a growing awareness that close relationships can come also with costs. Accumulating evidence shows that stress or strain from social relationships can have negative consequences for psychological (Rook, 1984; Sherman, 2003) and physical functioning (Coyne et al., 2001; Kielcolt-Glaser, Glaser, Cacioppo, & Malarkey, 1998). Although on the basis of socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995) older adults might be expected to terminate relationships with negative interactions, this is not always possible because support and strain are often derived from the same relationships (Walen & Lachman, 2000). Thus, it is important to understand the sources and ramifications of negative interactions.

Much of the research on negative aspects of relationships has focused on young adults. The following collection of articles advances the field by exploring the nature of negative interactions among adults of different ages. Akiyama, Antonucci, Takahashi, & Langfahl (2003) expand the understanding of negative interactions in close relationships by looking at age differences and cross-cultural differences between the United States and Japan. The studies by Akiyama and colleagues (2003) and Fingerman and Birditt (2003) show that the reported incidence of negative relationships is lower in late adulthood compared to early adulthood and consider several alternative theoretical frameworks for understanding these findings. Akiyama and colleagues (2003) provide evidence that the experience of fewer negative interactions is related to decreased contact frequency in later life. Fingerman and Birditt (2003) suggest that older adults may be irritated less often in their relationships because of better emotion regulation (Lang, 2001). Negative interactions were found to be relatively stable over time in a short-term longitudinal study (Krause & Rook, 2003), and also to be consistent across relationships (Akiyama et al., 2003; Krause & Rook, 2003). Thus, negative interactions may provide a chronic source of stress. As for potential antecedents, Rook (2003) found that exposure and reactivity to negative social exchanges was influenced by the personal characteristics and life circumstances of older adults.

By presenting state-of-the-art research on negative aspects of social relationships, these articles help to advance the field both theoretically and empirically. They provide alternative conceptual views that help in understanding the nature of relationships in adulthood and old age. Moreover, the findings have value for informing interventions and applied work to enhance the quality of social relationships in later life.

REFERENCES


