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Review

The disconnected couple: intimate relationships in the context of social isolation

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Abstract

Partners in intimate relationships, because they have each other to rely on, have generally been considered safe from the negative consequences of social isolation. Here, we question this assumption, suggesting instead that social isolation may pose a threat to couples by depriving them of the tangible and emotional support that couples are likely to need, especially when confronted by stress. After briefly reviewing theoretical frameworks relevant to this idea, this article summarizes existing research documenting (1) associations between network ties and relationship outcomes, (2) mediators of these associations, for example, support and approval, and (3) moderators of these associations, for example, relationship qualities and cultural differences. We conclude by describing a research agenda to address methodological limitations in existing research and the policy implications of this line of work.

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Introduction

Whereas feeling connected to others is critical for maintaining our physical and mental health [1], social isolation is associated with increased depressive symptoms, lower life satisfaction, and less adaptive responses to stress [2,3]. Among those at risk of suffering from social isolation, people in ongoing intimate relationships are typically considered the least vulnerable because partners have each other. Indeed, over 80% of married partners consider their spouse to be their best friend [4], and conventional wisdom holds that "Marriage implies love, intimacy, and friendship" [5], p. 262. To be sure, members of couples can still feel lonely. Relationship partners ask one another to help fulfill their deepest emotional needs [6], and partners can feel distressed when their relationships fail to meet their expectations [7]. When their relationships are satisfying, however, couples are generally considered safe from the negative consequences of social isolation.

Or are they? Can a couple be vulnerable to the adverse effects of social isolation, even if partners have a healthy relationship? From the perspective of a couple, we define isolation as the lack of connection to people outside of the relationship who are equipped to facilitate the couple's goals, that is, close, supportive others who provide some benefits to the couple. In this review, we expand on the phenomenon of social isolation and present a framework which recognizes that couples can be socially isolated with implications for the success of the relationship, just as individual isolation has implications for physical and mental health. Toward this goal, our review is organized into four parts. First, we briefly summarize existing frameworks that link relationship outcomes to qualities of the social environment. Second, we highlight studies that suggest mechanisms through which the presence or absence of social connections may act on couples and identify several factors that may buffer or exacerbate the distress that couples may feel when socially isolated. Third, we identify methodological limits to this work, highlighting directions for future research that might overcome these limitations. Finally, we discuss the potential implications of this understanding of social isolation for policies to support successful relationships.

Theoretical background

Referring to a relationship as intimate implies that it takes place in private, a process between two individuals that evolves largely independently of other people. Yet family stress theories point out that intimate relationships actually take place within contexts that can greatly affect partners' ability to connect with each other [8,9].

Practicing empathy and openness, for example, can be more challenging for couples negotiating stress at work, financial strain, or limited time together than for couples whose lives are less demanding and more comfortable [10,11]. Although most research that addresses couples' contexts focuses on sources of chronic and acute stress [12], the social elements of couples' contexts, that is, connections to family, friends, and coworkers, may be equally important [13]. Just as a network of close contacts offers reliable sources of emotional connection, validation, and material aid to individuals [14,15], the same sources may offer support to couples, allowing partners to overcome stress more quickly and effectively, leaving more time and energy for maintaining connection with each other. Thus, when supportive network members are available, couples may be more resilient, more secure, and more stable, especially when confronting stress. When these external relationships are lacking, partners in even the happiest relationships may struggle to maintain their intimacy over time.

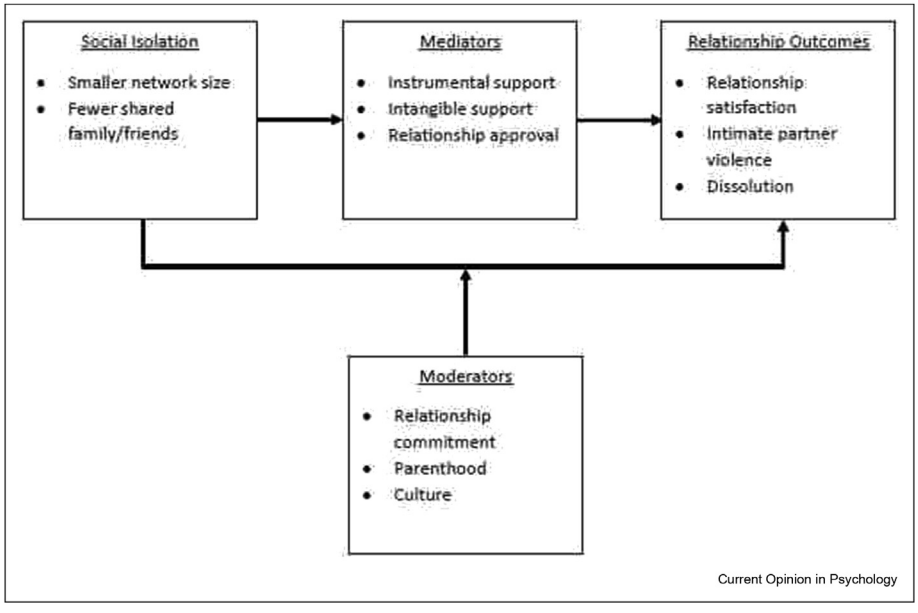
Effects of social isolation on couples

Compared to couples with larger social networks, couples with smaller networks do tend to experience poorer outcomes. For example, Figure 1 illustrates how relationship partners who report greater social isolation can experience lower relationship satisfaction [16–18] and higher rates of intimate partner violence [for a review, see Ref. [19**]]. The fewer friends that partners have, the greater a married couple's risk of divorce [20,21**]. In a uniquely dyadic form of disconnection, couples are also at higher risk for poor relationship outcomes when each partner lacks relationships with members of the other partner's network. Among husbands and wives, for example, having fewer shared friends is associated with lower relationship satisfaction [22] and an increased risk of divorce [20]. Similarly, partners with weaker ties to each other's family and friends are more likely to experience infidelity [23]. Together, these studies suggest that, in addition to their connections to each other, couples are more satisfied and stable when both partners maintain their connections with other members of their social networks.

Mediating the effect of isolation on outcomes

How might relationships outside a couple come to be associated with the quality and stability of their intimate relationship? Answers to this question have focused on the types of support that network members can provide and the benefits of having that support available during periods of stress. For example, as described in Figure 1, family and friends tend to be critical sources of instrumental support, that is, tangible aid such as financial assistance or help with projects at work [24]. Lacking network members who can provide financial support has been associated with poorer mental health outcomes [25], and lacking supportive coworkers who are willing to assist with tasks at work is associated with greater work–family conflict [26*]. Network members also provide intangible support in the form of information, advice, and emotional validation [24]. Perceiving a lack of this form of support may threaten relationship quality and indeed has been associated with greater rates of dissolution [27–30]. The support and approval of network members may be particularly important for reinforcing partners' identity as a couple, creating

Figure 1



How social isolation affects couples.

additional barriers to exiting the relationship [29]. Collectively, these results suggest that social isolation, by reducing the availability of the tangible and intangible resources that networks provide, may make relationships susceptible to distress and dissolution.

Moderators of the effects of social isolation

Although social isolation is associated with poorer relationship outcomes on average, Figure 1 showcases that variability within and outside intimate relationships may ameliorate or exacerbate these effects. Within the couple, associations between social isolation and relationship outcomes may be moderated by the quality of the relationship between partners. For example, a lack of available support outside the relationship should be less threatening to couples who support each other effectively. Consistent with this idea, couples who are lower in commitment (that is, less satisfied, less invested, and with more perceived alternatives) suffer when they perceive a lack of supportiveness in their social networks, but more committed partnerships do not [31*]. A couple's social connections may also play different roles at different stages of the relationship. Among couples in the early years of marriage, support from parents is positively associated with relationship quality; among couples in longer relationships, these associations are significantly attenuated [32]. To the extent that the early years of marriage are a time of flux (e.g. living together for the first time, transitioning to parenthood, and establishing a joint financial commitment), the availability of outside support may help couples while they navigate these transitions. After couples have established their family routines and require less guidance and assistance, it makes sense that their outcomes become less dependent on these external relationships.

Social isolation may also mean different things for couples who do and do not have children. Parenthood changes the structure of parents' lives, demanding time and energy that might previously have gone toward maintaining the intimate relationship. To the extent that the presence or absence of supportive networks affects how these new demands affect the couple, social isolation may be worse for parents than for nonparents [33,34]. Among parents, moreover, couples who receive less social support [35,36] and less support from their parenting group [35] have lower marital adjustment in the years after the birth of a child.

Beyond the immediate household, associations between social isolation and relationship outcomes may depend on cultural factors. Across cultures, approval from one's social network plays a varying role in how individuals find partners and develop commitment. In relatively collectivistic countries like Indonesia and Japan, for example, support from family shapes how individuals evaluate their relationships significantly more than it does in individualistic countries such as Australia and Canada [37]. To the extent that parents influence partner choice more in collectivistic cultures, parental support may play a larger role in maintaining commitment and passion within those cultures [38]. Thus, couples in collectivistic cultures may suffer more from the lack of that support than couples in individualistic cultures.

Directions for future research

Although existing research on social networks points toward the potential dangers of social isolation for couples, stronger conclusions await research that addresses several limitations that characterize the literature to date. First, because research on these topics has necessarily been correlational, plausible third variable explanations for the consistent associations between network ties and relationship outcomes have yet to be ruled out. For example, individuals who, due to parental divorce or the absence of a parent in childhood, lack positive social skills may have a more difficult time maintaining both romantic relationships and consistently supportive network connections in adulthood. As a consequence, dysfunctional family environments during childhood may predict a higher likelihood of social isolation in adulthood [39] and divorce [40], even if social isolation is not an independent source of vulnerability for couples. Certain enduring individual differences, for example, high neuroticism or low agreeableness, may also increase the likelihood of experiencing both social isolation and relationship distress [41,42], in part because more neurotic and less agreeable individuals may have more difficulty communicating and problem-solving effectively [8,43]. Attachment insecurity similarly heightens the risk of experiencing social isolation and puts intimate relationships at risk, particularly under stressful conditions [44,45]. Clarifying the unique influence of a couple's social connections requires research on couples that not only assesses their social networks but also measures and controls for the personal characteristics and prior experiences that guide couples into their networks.

Second, a nearly exclusive reliance on cross-sectional studies has prevented existing research from clarifying paths of causal influence between social isolation and relationship difficulties. Although theories of social support suggest that social isolation can make maintaining intimacy harder for couples, stigmatized relationship problems such as intimate partner violence and infidelity may also give rise to social isolation by keeping partners from disclosing their issues to others or seeking help [46,47]. Alternately, to the extent that network members are more likely to approve of happier relationships, more successful couples may attract more support from their network. Evaluating these alternative hypotheses requires longitudinal studies that capture

change in couples' relationships to each other and change in their relationships with network members over multiple assessments.

Third, restricted sampling frames have meant that research on these issues may not generalize much beyond the samples on which it has been conducted. To date, studies of social networks and relationships have relied mostly on convenience samples of college student dating couples or samples of predominately middle-class, white, educated, married couples [48]. Because racial/ethnic minority groups and those with lower socioeconomic status face economic and institutional stressors that majority groups do not face, social isolation may be particularly harmful to their relationships. Consistent with this idea, recent research suggests that social disconnection is more detrimental to family functioning among low-income as opposed to high-income groups [49,50*]. To the extent that low-income groups have been underrepresented in research on these issues to date, the demands that social isolation places on intimate relationships may have been underestimated. Future research assessing the consequences of social isolation for couples must invest in obtaining samples that include nonwhite and lower-SES couples.

Finally, because the vast majority of research on couples' social networks relies on partners' global perceptions of network characteristics, the unique roles that different members of the network may play for couples remain unclear. Assessing partners' global assessments (e.g. "To what extent do you feel connected to family and friends outside your relationship?") presumes that effects associated with couples' social connections arise from the network as a whole. In the absence of more detailed assessments of specific network members, however, it remains possible that a very limited number of people actually make a difference in the life of a couple—one or two close friends, a sibling, a parent, etc. In other words, even if social connections are proven to be crucial for successful intimacy, the social network itself may not be the appropriate level of analysis.

Implications for policy

As further research clarifies the links between couple outcomes and their social connections, efforts to improve and protect intimate relationships may benefit from directly addressing the way that partners interact with members of their own and each other's networks. Programs that encourage the development of deeper connections throughout communities, for example, may offer a promising alternative to the primarily skill-based family programs that have to date proven mostly ineffective [51]. Along these lines, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has begun documenting state and local initiatives, like the Family Independence Initiative of Detroit, in which families with lower incomes are encouraged to build connections in their community to strengthen couple, child, and economic outcomes [52,53].

The success of such programs would support the idea that, although intimate relationships are central to individual well-being [54,55], such relationships may not thrive unless couples have a network of additional relationships to draw upon. Although the prospect of life together on a deserted island may sound appealing to couples in love, stable, healthy intimacy may require strong, fulfilling connections to friends and family as well.

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Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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** of outstanding interest

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