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New Directions in the Psychology of Close Relationships

Edited by DOMINIK SCHOEBI
and BELINDA CAMPOS

NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

What makes for strong and enduring relationships? It is a question of increasing scientific and popular interest as it has become clear that relationships can make life happier, healthier, and longer. In this collection, the reader will find an overview of state-of-the-art research on this question and a glimpse of the new directions that will define the future of this field of study.

With contributions from leading scholars in the field, the book offers cutting-edge perspectives on the factors and processes that contribute to strong, thriving, and resilient close relationships. Split into three parts, the first part discusses important influences that contribute to strong relational bonds in the form of different types of relationships. The second part spotlights contexts such as culture and gender as domains for future advances in this area of research. Finally, the last part covers data analytic techniques and future directions. Offering a unique perspective on each topic covered, the authors highlight the promising next steps which will inspire advances in the field in the years to come.

Bringing together important trends from different areas of research, we expect that this text will make a significant contribution to social psychology and be essential for students and academics interested in the psychology of relationships.

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*Edited by Dominik Schoebi and
Belinda Campos*

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We dedicate this book to the saints of our lives – our partners in life, Brigitte and Sean, our parents, and our siblings.



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ABOUT THE BOOK

Dominik Schoebi and Belinda Campos

The study of factors and processes that make for strong and enduring relationships has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent years. This shift has been accompanied by important advances in understanding different relationship contexts as well as a growing awareness of the diversity that characterizes relationships within and across societies. *New Directions in the Psychology of Close Relationships* brings together leading scholars in this area of research who wrote chapters that offer a state-of-the-art overview of current directions and point readers toward the important novel directions that are the future of this field. As such, this volume has much to offer for both novice relationship researchers and the older hands among us.

We have organized this book to offer three parts. The first part summarizes cutting-edge understanding of important factors and processes that are essential for the development of strong relational bonds among couples at different stages across the life span and it ends with a chapter on close friendships, a literature that is closely related and complementary but poorly integrated with romantic relationship research. The second part spotlights selected contexts for future advances in close relationships research. This includes chapters on culture and gender as exemplars of contexts that richly contribute to diversity in relationships and its processes as well as chapters on health and sexuality as exemplars of domains with complex multi-directional links to relationship functioning. In the third part, a chapter on state of the art analytic possibilities in relationship research complements the first two parts, recognizing that insight and advances in the study of close relationship are fueled by data visibilized through the lens of data analytic techniques. A final synthesis of the book chapters highlights the promising next steps that we foresee will inspire advances in the field in the years to come.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Dominik Schoebi and Belinda Campos

Many people skip reading a book's introduction. We want you to read this one and this is why: context. This introduction provides readers with the context needed to appreciate the trajectory of the study of relationships in psychology that brings our group of authors to the current directions they write about in this book. Context is also a key conceptual theme of this book. Humans, and their relationships, occupy specific contexts and relationship researchers are increasingly starting to rise to the challenge of understanding relationships within their contexts.

Let's begin by setting the stage. The centrality of close relationships to psychology hinges on two considerations. First, it is what matters most to people. If you ask people what is most important in their lives, close relationships top the list. Second, all empirical evidence indicates that this priority has a sound basis – close relationships are crucial to survival, happiness, and health. Despite this, the study of close relationships has been a subtle weave only lightly visible on psychology's rich tapestry of subfields and specific areas of study for much of the history of the field. That tapestry includes the ground-breaking insights of John Bowlby's studies of attachment bonds, Harry Harlow's studies of the necessity of love, and Ellen Berscheid's studies of romantic attraction (to name a few), but the prominence of close relationships as an area of study in its own right is relatively recent. Today, close relationship scholars study couples, friends, and families with research programs that focus on factors and processes spanning cognition, emotion, and behavior, as found within the person, within relationships, and within larger societal structures. A common thread binding the past, present, and possible future is the question: *what makes relationships work?* In this book, we sought to unite perspectives on state of the art knowledge that provide answers to this question, and also to foreshadow promising future directions that will help provide ever more comprehensive answers to this question.

So, what makes relationships work? In answering this question, the field has focused on factors (e.g., commitment), then processes (e.g., emotion exchanges within interpersonal interactions), and, toward the end of the 1990s, there started to be a more explicit focus on context (e.g., relationship type, life stage, culture). Currently, the field is starting to see research that brings it all together – studying factors and processes within contexts. At the same time, scholars and laypeople alike want to understand how relationships work in ways that go *right*. Historically, research on the ways in which relationships can go wrong seemed most urgent and thus received the most scholarly attention, but it is now widely recognized that understanding how relationships can go wrong requires a deep understanding of how relationships can go right. For all of these good reasons, interest in factors, processes, and contexts that make for strong, thriving, and enduring relationships is greater than ever before.

The chapters of the current volume highlight a variety of tasks that individuals face in making their relationships work, particularly with respect to their romantic relational life at different stages of the life course. This includes first romantic experiences, attraction, and establishing intimate bonds. Notably, these bonds may or may not be meant to last for life. If intended to last, they may or not involve established social contracts (e.g., marriage). This also includes the longer-term perspectives on relationships that are adopted once partners build firmly established intimate relationships. Inescapably for most relationships, however, the satisfaction and stability of a bond is challenged by internal and external factors, and partners need to actively engage in efforts to maintain a happy and stable relationship. This engagement, termed relationship maintenance, includes building resources that render a relationship strong and resilient, that allow relationships to thrive, and that support relationship repair when needed. Finally, these processes do not happen in a social vacuum, but go along with cultivating other close adult relationships, such as close friendships. The study of close friendships highlights several important parallels with romantic relationships, and offers an opportunity for a comparative perspective that can synergistically inform theorizing and research on both types of close relationships.

One important goal of this volume was to widen the focus on romantic relationships, acknowledging the many spaces and life stages in which they can exist and thrive. The necessity and promise to do so has been increasingly recognized in the past years, but often, nevertheless, theorizing and the empirical study of romantic relationships has – intentionally or unintentionally, and explicitly or inexplicitly – oriented itself towards a more narrow range of relationships. For example, we aimed at broadening the view of relationships across the lifetime, including chapters that center more strongly on early adulthood alongside others that examine the developmental course from young adulthood into the middle-aged years, and the changes and shifts of relationships into older age. Furthermore, the chapters on friendships and cultural variation aim at providing a perspective that acknowledges the broader context. Besides different life stages, another area where diversity has been increasingly recognized by relationship scholars is sexual orientation.

In many Western societies, the recognition of non-heterosexual romantic bonds is slowly but steadily making ground in explicit and implicit legal and social norms; this progress is also evident in the science of romantic relationships. A key to full inclusion of non-heterosexual relationships into generalized or generalizable theory and empirical work is to appreciate the relevance or irrelevance of gender, and Chapter 6 offers an up-to-date discussion on the topic.

It is also fascinating to see that some aspects of romantic relationships are unique and defining, remaining powerful features that affect whether romantic relationships flourish or perish across time and relationships types. We include two of the most important of these into this volume: sexuality and interpersonal responsiveness. Both are factors that are often at the core of the processes that cause relationships to falter or thrive, and have long-lasting effects on the well-being and health of partners. Although the importance of factors and processes such as these may generalize beyond cultures, the norms and meaning individuals assign to their experiences, and the strategies they use to fulfill social norms and individual or relational need, can be highly variant across cultural contexts. The study of cultural context and its importance for shaping relational processes and outcomes has been a relatively neglected area for a long time. Yet it is a necessary requisite for the field's ability to recognize and incorporate variation in romantic relationship functioning into general theorizing, not only across the life span and relationship types, but also across regions, borders, and other social layers.

Finally, progress in empirically founded theoretical work is difficult to achieve without analytic tools that allow for the statistical modeling of the defining properties of the theoretical models. The data analytic tools that are readily available to researchers represent a bottle-neck for progress in the field. Those who study close romantic relationships, like that of other dyads or multi-member systems, face particular challenges, as they have to deal with assumptions about more than one individual, engaging in interdependent processes across time and situations, while incorporating the possibility that effects and associations vary across relationship types and contexts. For this reason, this volume includes a chapter that offers an accessible introduction to dyadic data analysis and building upon basic model types, calls attentions to important questions to ask and decisions to make. The chapter also outlines important advanced analytic directions for tackling different types of research questions.

Incorporating research on what makes relationships strong, for multiple genders in multiple types of relationships, at different stages of the life course, and in various socio-cultural contexts, within broad frameworks of flexible, generalizable theory, is a tall order. It is also a necessary one that stands to advance our understanding of the diverse paths that individuals take on their way to establishing and maintaining relational bonds that provide them with safety and security.

The chapters in the current book were selected to respond to the notions outlined in the preceding paragraphs. A first section of the book includes chapters that cover important developmental stages of close relationships across the life-span. Andrea Meltzer and James McNulty describe the latest developments in

research on relationship formation and romantic relationships in early adulthood. In the following chapter, Justin Lavner and Thomas N. Bradbury identify some of the most important insights on the causes and conditions associated with success or failure to maintain satisfactory relationships in mid-life. Claudia Haase and Michelle N. Shiota recount recent advancements in research on close romantic relationships in older age, and highlight research on changes in these relationships with increasing age. Beverley Fehr and Cheryl Harasymchuk complement this section with a chapter that highlights close friendships as an important resource throughout adult life. Their chapter also offers a look on beneficial relational bonds beyond romantic relationships.

A second section of the book sets the focus on a selection of important factors and processes that emerged as broadly important for the development of strong and healthy relationships. The section includes two chapters that highlight recent insight and current trends on key moderators of relationship processes. Michael Boiger offers a perspective on culture and the importance of the cultural context for relationship functioning, a topic that was neglected for too long in research on close romantic relationships. Nathalie Meuwly and Ashley K. Randall examine another highly relevant variable, gender, trying to understand the reasons and ways that gender acts as a moderator of processes at the core of strong relationships. A unique opportunity to understand the nature of gender effects in a broader sense is offered by the integration of their treatment of gender with a discussion of the latest insights on similarities and differences between relationships involving different sexual orientations. The section also includes chapters on two examples of relationship processes that gained increased attention in the recent years. Sarah C. E. Stanton, Richard B. Slatcher and Harry T. Reis highlight promising trends in research on responsiveness, and the pathways through which this core goal and outcome of strong relational communication patterns contributes to well-being and health. Another highly intimate sphere of communication and interaction that couples need to navigate is sexuality. Emily A. Impett and Amy Muise offer an up-to-date perspective on important insights made in this area of research.

This book would be incomplete without a chapter on the data analytic requirements of quantitative empirical research on close romantic relationships. This chapter by Randi L. Garcia and Thomas Ledermann offers readers an overview of the methodological toolbox that widens the bottleneck between theory and empirical progress. Geared toward relationship scholars at the beginning of their career, the chapter clarifies key concepts and terms in dyadic data analysis. Furthermore, it identifies important questions to ask when designing an empirical study and when developing a data-analytic strategy. As such, it provides useful introductions and further directions to advanced modeling of relationships and interpersonal processes. As the reader reaches the end of this book, they will find a brief synthesis that aims to integrate some of the most promising directions for the advancement of the field that set the focus on core aspects of strong relationships while recognizing diversity across contexts and life stages.

As a whole, the current collection of chapters offers an incomplete, but rich, valuable, and well-balanced space of scientific insight and ideas. Each topical chapter offers a selective perspective on important and recent scientific progress to understand the development of strong and healthy relationships, written by scholars at the forefront of scientific research in the area. Altogether, we think this book will prove to be a fertile ground for new growth in the psychology of close adult relationships.



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PART I

Thriving relationships across the life-span

Factors and processes



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1

RELATIONSHIP FORMATION AND EARLY ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Andrea L. Meltzer and James K. McNulty

Romantic relationships are critical to well-being. Not only are they the primary source of reproduction, they strongly predict physical and mental health (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014). Indeed, whereas relationship dissolution poses significant health risks (Liu & Umberson, 2008), merely being married reduces mortality risk (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). In fact, the effect of poor relationship quality on mortality is as strong as the effects of better-known risk factors, such as smoking and alcohol use, and even stronger than other important factors, such as sedentariness and obesity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). In this chapter, we review recent research on the early stages of these important relationships.

There are many important questions one could ask regarding the early stages of relationships. What do people look for in a partner? Do such preferences affect people's mate choices? Do they affect how they feel about their choices? Relationship scientists have been addressing these and other questions for decades, and they have made substantial progress in providing some answers to them. Unfortunately, though, as this chapter will reveal, the answers are not always easy to discern, nor are they straightforward or certain. Thus, we conclude our review with suggestions for novel measures and methods for studying these issues that we hope will help offer better insights.

A historical perspective of research examining partner preferences

Much of the early work on relationships focused on issues related to initial attraction, including what factors people are attracted to and thus seek in a mate, also referred to as partner preferences. In psychology, this early work on partner preferences was guided by two rather independent perspectives: a social-psychological perspective and an evolutionary perspective.