

PART 8

Capstone



## The Waving of the Relationship Flag

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When we planned this volume, our goal was to showcase some of the best, most interesting, and most important classical and contemporary work in the blossoming field of close relationships. As editors, we could not be more pleased with the highly thoughtful, scholarly, and future-oriented chapters that our stellar cast of authors delivered. Collectively, the thirty-five chapters in this volume not only define the history and current state of our field, both theoretically and empirically, but also shed light on the paths future research should head in the next decade and beyond.

When we extended chapter invitations to authors, we requested that each chapter be organized around three basic themes: (1) the most important and foundational principles, ideas, and findings within the domain of each chapter topic, (2) the most important and novel emerging themes and issues relevant to each topic, and (3) the newest, most promising, and most fruitful directions for future research. More than anything else, we wanted

to have the leading and emerging experts on specific theories, models, and topics within different areas of relationship science identify the important directions for future work within their domain of expertise. In other words, we wanted the authors to provide a “road map” outlining the directions in which other interested scholars could most profitably and productively head in the coming years. We did this because asking the right and most critical questions in an area of research is pivotal for facilitating good, important, cutting-edge future research within that area. Thus, we encourage scholars—especially young and emerging ones—to think about and possibly pursue one or more of the many insightful road maps contained in these forward-looking chapters.

Even though the current volume covers a very broad sampling of the major theories, models, and empirical findings in the burgeoning close relationships field, you may have noticed that most of the published research reviewed in this volume focuses on heterosexual romantic relationships rather than

other important types of romantic relationships or close relationships, such as friendships, parent–child relationships, relationships with other biological relatives, or long-term coworker relationships. There are, of course, several exceptions to this trend, particularly the chapters in the section, Major Theoretical Approaches to Relationships, which discuss many important ideas and principles that extend beyond the confines of romantic relationships per se. Other exceptions to this trend can be found in the chapters by Clark and Aargon (on communal relationships), Chen and colleagues (on transference processes), Diamond (on sexuality), Molden and Winterheld (on promotion and prevention orientations), Ickes and Hodges (on empathic accuracy), Reis and Clark (on responsiveness), Overall and Simpson (on partner regulation), Banse and Imhoff (on implicit cognitive processes), English and colleagues (on emotion regulation), Knobloch and Metts (on emotions), McNulty (on personality), Gaines and Hardin (on interdependence cross-culturally), Fincham and Beach (on gratitude and forgiveness), Beckes and Coan (on neuroscience), Haydon and Roisman (on social development), and James and Ellis (on evolutionary principles).

Nevertheless, many of the studies reviewed even in these chapters focus heavily on findings from heterosexual romantic relationships instead of other important types of close relationships. This situation needs to change. Not only do we need to develop a richer descriptive understanding of how other types of close relationships operate and what they are like; we also need to determine whether some of the assumed “core” principles and processes that have been confirmed for heterosexual romantic relationships hold when other types of romantic as well as close relationships are studied. Within the next decade, we hope that more scholars will begin to test some of the major theories, ideas, models, and hypotheses discussed in the various chapters within this volume on other types of romantic and close relationships.

Many readers might also have noticed that a lot of the theoretical and empirical literature in our field still focuses on how individuals (i.e., isolated partners) think about, feel toward, and perceive their partners and relationships at one time-point rather than on how *both partners* in a relationship relate to each other in different interpersonal contexts. This situation has been compounded by the fact that, with the exception of interdependence theory, most major theories in our field provide clear and well-justified predictions about *actor effects*

(i.e., how Partner A's depression is related to Partner A's relationship satisfaction), but make few if any explicit predictions about either *partner effects* (i.e., how Partner B's depression is related to Partner A's relationship satisfaction) or *actor by partner interaction effects* (i.e., how the statistical interaction of Partner A's and Partner B's depression predicts each partner's relationship satisfaction).

Ironically, the development of new dyadic methods and statistical techniques, such as the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) and conceptually parallel couple-based structural equation modeling techniques (Woody & Sadler, 2005), have permitted both relationship partners to be included and modeled in contemporary data sets. This has been particularly true of studies that have used diary or longitudinal data collection methods that involve both relationship partners and of lab studies in which couples have been videotaped while discussing specific issues. What has happened, however, is that our theoretical understanding of relationship findings (e.g., partner effects and actor–partner interaction effects) now lags well behind the corpus of couple-based data that many researchers currently possess. For instance, we have clear theoretical guidance about how and why an actor's level of attachment anxiety or self-esteem should predict his or her relationship conflict behavior, but we have much less guidance about how or why his or her *partner's* level of anxiety or self-esteem should predict the actor's conflict behavior, or how or why each person's anxiety or self-esteem scores may statistically *interact* to uniquely predict each person's conflict behavior. During the next decade, greater theoretical attention needs to be devoted to formulating and testing the fundamental partner as well as actor–partner predictions that ostensibly underlie different relationship theories and models in our field. In doing so, future research also needs to derive and test predictions that involve the *combination* of principles from different major theories or models (e.g., attachment theory and interdependence theory, evolutionary models that focus on different life tasks).

As a field, however, we also need to remain focused on what constitutes a relationship, and on what makes a relationship close versus less close. In their path-breaking book *Close Relationships* (Kelley, Berscheid, Christensen, Harvey, Huston, Levinger, et al., 1983; see Chapter 2 in particular), Kelley and his colleagues proposed that a relationship exists when partners influence how each other thinks, feels, or behaves over time in different social

contexts. Closer relationships are those in which partners exert stronger, more frequent, and more diverse impacts on one another's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors across very long periods of time. Therefore, in order to determine whether a given relationship is close, one must at some point observe and document these interchain (i.e., between partner) causal connections while partners interact with each other in meaningful interpersonal contexts. This explains why couples data is so important to collect; it allows researchers to determine or confirm whether and the degree to which two people display the defining features of what constitutes a close relationship. We hope the accelerating trend toward collecting more dyadic data continues, particularly the collection of dyadic (or family) data in relationally "diagnostic" contexts, such as when partners are undergoing a major life transition, making important plans about their future, having disagreements or conflicts, giving or receiving support in response to some stressful event, capitalizing on each other's good or happy news, attempting to recover emotionally from relationship problems, and so on. This empirical approach is more challenging than collecting data from one partner at a single time point, but the methods we use to study relationships must reflect the fact that relationships exist between people over time.

Several areas in relationship science have really blossomed since Ellen Berscheid delivered her landmark "greening of relationship science" address to the *American Psychological Association* in 1999. As showcased in the chapters in this volume, there have been tremendous, research program-altering developments in how researchers can analyze and model dyadic and larger group-based data (see West, chapter 33, this volume). Several of our grand theories—particularly attachment theory and interdependence theory—have now been tested much more extensively and rigorously, with some recent findings producing important theoretical qualifications or refinements (see chapters 3 and 4 this volume). Several relationship models have been tested and occasionally pitted against each other to clarify how certain interpersonal processes operate in most relationships (e.g., relationship idealization versus accuracy models, the potential for positive relationship outcomes from "negative" interpersonal behaviors). And many new areas of research have popped up, ranging from Internet dating, to electronic communication (e.g., instant messaging), to the "darker side" of relationships, to how early life experiences affect adult relationship functioning.

In her American Psychological Association Distinguished Scientist Award address, Ellen Berscheid (1999) concluded her talk with the following observation:

In summary, the emergence of relationship science is a salutary event for psychology. In addition to its potential to unite psychological scholars with other social, behavioral, and biological scientists, to help integrate many sub-disciplines within psychology, to narrow the gap between psychological researchers and practitioners, and to extend our knowledge of human behavior to people's daily lives and natural surroundings, it also has the potential to inform many issues of national concern. The emergence of relationship science represents the flag of a higher truth that has now been planted in the individualistic soul of our discipline. Whether that flag will continue to stand or even someday wave over a new synthesis in psychology depends on whether future generations of scholars can conquer the daunting problems relationship science presents . . . (p. 265)

The fine chapters in this volume clearly indicate that the "relationship flag" not only is standing over the field of psychology today but also is beginning to wave in several other vibrant fields in the social, behavioral, and even a few of the biological sciences. We have made significant advances toward solving some of the daunting problems associated with studying the fundamental essence of our lives—our close relationships with people who matter the most to us. Mind you, we still have a long way to travel. More still needs to be accomplished in terms of uniting and integrating scholars who were trained in different disciplines; narrowing the chasm between psychological researchers, practitioners, and policy makers; and informing issues of national and societal concern. However, our field has definitely blossomed since Berscheid's watershed address, and the relationship flag now waves on significantly firmer, more fertile, and broader intellectual terrain than was true just a decade ago.

## References

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