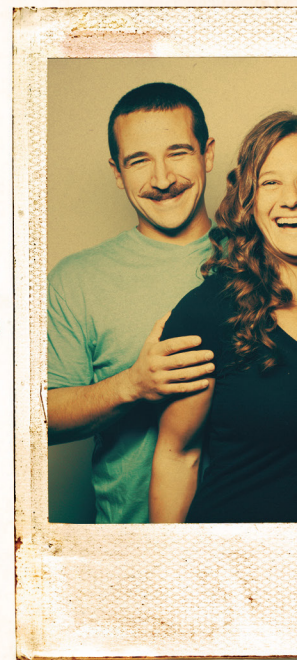




# Intimate Relationships

— SECOND EDITION —

Thomas N. Bradbury  
Benjamin R. Karney



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*The scientific study of intimate relationships  
would not exist without the visionary work of*

*John Bowlby*

*Urie Bronfenbrenner*

*Reuben Hill*

*Neil Jacobson*

*Harold Kelley*

*With gratitude, we dedicate this book to them.*

## about the authors



**THOMAS N. BRADBURY** earned his BA in psychobiology from Hamilton College, his MA in general psychology from Wake Forest University, and his PhD in clinical psychology from the University of Illinois. A professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles since 1990, Bradbury specializes in using observational and longitudinal methods to examine how newlywed marriages develop and change. The recipient of the American Psychology Association's Distinguished Early Career Award, Bradbury has edited two books: *The Psychology of Marriage* (with Frank Fincham) and *The Developmental Course of Marital Dysfunction*. Each year he teaches a large undergraduate class and small honors seminars on intimate relationships, and in 2000 he was awarded the Distinguished Teaching Award from the UCLA Department of Psychology. Tom lives in Los Angeles with Cindy, his wife of 25 years, their two children, Timothy and Nicholas, and two very large and affectionate Bernese mountain dogs.



**BENJAMIN R. KARNEY** earned his BA in psychology from Harvard University and his MA and PhD in social psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles. Before joining the faculty in the Department of Psychology at UCLA in 2007, Karney was a professor at the University of Florida, where he received numerous awards for his teaching, including the Teacher of the Year Award in 2003. At UCLA, he offers graduate and undergraduate classes on intimate relationships, and received the Distinguished Teaching Award from the UCLA Department of Psychology in 2011. Honored for Early Career Achievement by the International Association for Relationship Research, Karney has directed research funded by the National Institutes of Health, the Administration on Children and Families, and the Department of Defense. He has published extensively on the various ways that intimate partners interpret the events of their relationships, and the effects of stress on lower-income and military marriages. Ben lives north of Los Angeles, is the proud parent of two children, Daniella and Gabriel, and owns far too many books.

Together, Bradbury and Karney founded and co-direct the Relationship Institute at UCLA, a center dedicated to disseminating the results of relationship science to the public. In the more than 20 years they have been collaborating, their work has twice received the National Council on Family Relations Reuben Hill Research and Theory Award for outstanding contributions to family science.



## brief contents

- 1 Why Study Intimate Relationships? 1
- 2 Tools of Relationship Science 33
- 3 Theoretical Frameworks 82
- 4 Men and Women, Gay and Straight 131
- 5 Attraction and Mate Selection 171
- 6 Personality and Personal History 211
- 7 Communicating Closeness 237
- 8 Managing Differences 262
- 9 Beliefs and Values 298
- 10 Understanding Each Other 336
- 11 Relationships in Context 373
- 12 Improving Relationships 416
- 13 Relationships Across the Lifespan 453

## a letter to students

If you are reading this book, chances are good that we have something in common. Maybe you've wondered how two people who began the day as strangers can fall deeply in love, and why two other similar people may not. Perhaps you have wondered, as we have, how two completely committed partners can declare their undying love for each other, but then grow unhappy and distant. Maybe you've felt frustrated or confused with your own relationship but mystified about how to strengthen it or move it forward. Or perhaps you have been so overjoyed that you wanted to know every possible way to make your relationship last forever.

We think constantly about questions like these, and we are lucky to be in a profession where we can try to answer them. The scientific study of human intimacy and relationships has grown rapidly over the past several decades, with scholars in various fields, including psychology, family studies, sociology, communications, social work, economics, and anthropology, all wondering: How do intimate relationships work? What makes them succeed or fail? How can we make them better? We wrote this book to give you the most up-to-date answers to these and many other relevant questions. In doing so, we highlight research studies and ideas that are particularly insightful, and then pull them together in ways that reveal important truths about human intimacy.

We love to read books that make us smarter about compelling subjects, and we kept this goal—making you smarter about intimate relationships—in the forefront of our minds as we wrote these chapters. Simply presenting research studies and interesting examples is a great way to accomplish this goal, but more than anything else, we wrote this book to help you become more critical, analytical, and thoughtful, when it comes to topics like attraction, love, closeness, and effective communication. Our goal is not simply to present you with this information but to show you how to critique it, evaluate it, and apply it to your life.

If you are a curious person who likes an occasional challenge or puzzle, then this is a book that will draw you in, keep you captivated, and help you see why we and so many others are fascinated by intimate relationships. If you have ideas for improving the next edition, please let us know.

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## Scope, Purpose, and Approach

Welcome to the second edition of *Intimate Relationships*. Before the first edition was published, we had each been teaching classes and seminars on human intimacy and relationships for several years. Even then, we could not believe our good fortune at having such rich material and such enthusiastic audiences, and we were eager to showcase all the remarkable theories and new discoveries in this rapidly changing field. The books available at the time brought us reasonably close to this goal, but we wanted something different for our students: a fresh and up-to-date introduction to all the key facets of intimate relationships, combining surprising insights from research with critical analysis of influential theories and studies. Conversations with colleagues confirmed the need for a lively but tightly organized text that would sharpen and deepen students' grasp of human intimacy. Equally apparent was the need for an ancillary package that would give instructors tools they could use to be more effective and efficient in the classroom.

We wrote the book to address these needs, but our agenda was even broader. We wanted to give our undergraduates a book they could not wait to read. We wanted to cover topics that other books had only glossed over, topics like gender and sexual orientation, the biological basis of intimacy, stressful circumstances, cultural influences on relationships, couples therapy, and the role of intimacy across the lifespan. We wanted to produce video clips featuring students and leading scholars discussing their ideas about intimate relationships, so that instructors could teach and spark discussions in new ways. We wanted to show our colleagues that the study of intimate relationships is now a well-established topic of profound importance in the social sciences, as well as a topic long overdue for a scholarly text with an ancillary package coordinated by active researchers. Above all, we set out to capture the excitement we felt after reading a well-crafted journal article, hearing a great talk or lecture, interviewing couples in our research studies and after our workshops, or watching a good movie or reading a good novel: Intimate relationships are fascinating! Look at the diverse forms they take; how much they've changed over the years and how much they remain the same. That excitement naturally led to inquiries: How do they work? Why are relationships so hard sometimes? What are the principles that guide them? How can we use what we know to make improvements?

In the first edition of our textbook, we drew on hundreds of research reports and dozens of scholarly books to answer these questions. In the years since that edition was published, the science of intimate relationships has continued to grow and mature. With this fully updated and revised second edition, we have kept our eyes on the cutting edge, building on the accumulated wisdom of researchers, while describing the most exciting new developments. We have done something else as well. Feedback from more than a thousand of our own students, along with comments from expert reviews by our colleagues in the field, have allowed us to build upon the strengths of the first edition, while listening and responding to the occasional constructive criticism. Some users of the first edition noted that, in our enthusiasm, we occasionally used several words when one or two might have been sufficient. Those readers will be pleased to find the second edition more streamlined and focused.

Our excitement for the field—and for teaching this class—has only grown. We hope students will sense our enthusiasm on every page, and we hope you will find this book and the supporting resources essential to your success in teaching this material.

## Organization of the Book

One of our greatest challenges in developing this book was to impose an intuitive but incisive organizational structure on the wealth of available material. After considering several alternatives, we settled on 13 chapters that we believe mirror the distinctions people naturally make when discussing and investigating intimate relationships. Although we believe there are some advantages to presenting the material to students in the sequence we chose (particularly starting with Chapters 1, 2, and 3), we wrote the chapters so they can be taught in any order. While giving instructors flexibility in how they move through the various topics, we've also included cross-references between chapters to give students a sense of continuity, as well as opportunities to see familiar ideas extended to new areas.

From foundations to elements and processes to changes in intimate relationships, we believe that these 13 chapters provide students with an introduction to this complex and fascinating subject that is at once broad and deep, classic and contemporary, rigorous and relevant. Arguably, though, the most important part of this book is not in the chapters, but in the roughly 2,000 published works we cite in the reference section. These publications span an incredible array of topics and academic disciplines, and a disproportionate number were published in just the last 10 years—clear evidence that rapid advances are continuing to be made in our understanding of intimate relationships. This work is the driving force behind our desire to provide our students and yours with a timely new perspective on this vital field.



## Special Features

Although the topics covered in the chapters are diverse and varied, they are unified by a clear design and consistent format. The first page of each chapter presents students with a Chapter Outline listing the major section headings that organize the material. Every chapter starts with an opening vignette taken from movies, television shows, books, and real life, each one designed to draw students in and highlight a different side of intimate relationships. Here are some examples:

- The relationships of Albert Einstein, the smartest man in the world (Chapter 1)
- Insight from comedians on the truth about men and women (Chapter 4)
- The enduring business of matchmaking (Chapter 5)
- Intimacy and aggression in the marriage of Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe (Chapter 8)
- The experience of a bisexual college student coming out to her Indian parents in the 1980s (Chapter 9)
- Intimate relationships in the wake of 9/11 (Chapter 11)

Each vignette prompts a series of specific questions that encourage students to read more deeply, while familiarizing them with asking critical questions and thinking about the evidence they need to answer them. The key questions that will be addressed later in the chapter are also presented here.

The chapters are populated with graphs that illustrate important concepts and research findings, tables that summarize or sample widely used measurement tools, and case studies. The text is also enriched with many kinds of other materials—poems, songs, cartoons, photographs, and actual dialogue from couples—to show how so many of the ideas connect with everyday experiences. Every main section within each chapter is anchored by a list of Main Points that provide quick and effective reviews of all the key ideas.

At least once in each chapter, we shine a Spotlight on an idea from the text and then develop it in a new or controversial direction. Our students enjoy these spotlights and in fact have suggested a few. In each case, we identify a provocative, well-defined question or problem, explain its significance, and give students a focused briefing on that issue. Here are some examples:

- The surprising complexity of measuring relationship satisfaction (Chapter 2)
- Why people sometimes remain in physically abusive relationships (Chapter 3)
- Men and women looking for love online (Chapter 4)
- Changing places and gender roles (Chapter 4)
- Hooking up and its prevalence among college students (Chapter 5)

- The science and the politics of divorce (Chapter 6)
- Arranged marriages compared to those in which spouses select each other (Chapter 9)

Though the chapters are independent enough to be taught in any order, a goal of ours was to write a book with a strong narrative flow from chapter to chapter, which we saw as an improvement over the more typical topic-by-topic organization. At the end of each chapter, we reinforce this flow with Conclusions that relate back to the opening vignette and forward to the chapter that follows. For example, Chapter 7 begins with an uplifting letter a soldier wrote to his wife back home, setting us up to discuss the various ways partners create and maintain intimacy. The chapter ends by noting that, as powerful as they are for keeping two people connected, these experiences of closeness must coexist alongside partners' disagreements and differences of opinion. How do partners navigate these differences? What does relationship science have to say about the effective management of the differing agendas that are inevitable in relationships? Chapter 8, on verbal conflict and aggression, gives students some clues, and in the process builds a logical bridge between these two domains of interpersonal interaction.

## New to the Second Edition

As we considered how to update and improve *Intimate Relationships* for this second edition, we solicited feedback not only from the thousands of students who have used the book in our own classes, but also from colleagues who have been teaching from the book at other universities. We received lots of praise for some of the features that we were especially excited about in the first edition: the way our chapters organize the field, our emphasis on identifying the key questions of this field and the progress we've made in answering them, our extensive ancillary package, and the book's inviting graphic design. All these features have been preserved in this second edition.

We also received a number of requests for new features and material that users of the book hoped to see in a next edition. This second edition responds to these requests in a number of ways:

- The text has been streamlined and more sharply focused throughout.
- Each chapter includes updated references, reflecting the latest developments in relationship science.
- Each main section of every chapter ends with a list of Main Points that clearly capture and summarize the key ideas.
- Throughout the new edition, we have included new examples and references to research on ethnically diverse and same-sex relationships.
- Chapter 2 features a new Spotlight box on the Actor-Partner-Interdependence Model.

- The treatment of attachment theory in Chapter 3 has been rewritten and updated.
- In addition to updating Chapter 4 on gender and sexual orientation, increased attention is paid to same-sex relationships throughout the book, including a new vignette in Chapter 9 about the experience of coming out.
- Chapter 5 on attraction and mate selection features an extended discussion of online dating and social networks.
- Chapter 12 discusses the latest results of national experiments on the effectiveness of relationship education in low-income populations.

## The Ancillary Package

We know from teaching large-market courses, such as introductory psychology, social psychology, and abnormal psychology, that students benefit when instructors have excellent supplemental resources, and we were surprised that few of the existing texts on intimate relationships offered instructors much ancillary support. We received a lot of gratified responses to the extensive ancillary package that accompanied the first edition of *Intimate Relationships*, and all of those features have been updated for the second edition.

The ancillary feature that we are perhaps the most excited about is *The Norton Intimate Relationships Videos*, a collection of video clips that we created to accompany each chapter. Because the scientific study of intimate relationships is still relatively new as a discipline, many highly influential scholars are alive today and can share their insights with us. To capitalize on this fact, we worked with filmmakers David Lederman and Trisha Solyn to interview several of the most prominent relationship scholars working today. These interviews of scholars sharing their wisdom and perspectives, along with young adults and couples giving their opinions and relating their experiences, have been edited together to create fascinating and entertaining video material relevant to each chapter in the book. In several videos, we also present extended case studies. These include a young gay man discussing his experience with coming out, a young woman talking about how her early difficulties with a stepfather affected her later relationships, a young woman talking about conflict and aggression in her relationships, and a middle-aged couple talking about how chronic financial stress affected their relationship and the husband's health. At 10 minutes in length or less per clip, the individual videos can easily be shown during class.

Instructors can access the videos through the Interactive Instructor's Guide (IIG), a repository of lecture and teaching materials for instructors accessible through the Norton website. Teaching materials can be easily sorted by either the textbook chapter/headings or key phrases. The videos are accompanied by teaching tips and suggested discussion questions, which can be used either in the classroom or as homework. The IIG also offers chapter

summaries, additional teaching suggestions, discussion questions, and suggested additional resources to help instructors plan their courses.

The ancillary package also includes student study resources which instructors can make available through their Learning Management System (Blackboard, Moodle, etc.). Free to instructors and students, these packaged materials (course packs) include the Intimate Relationships Videos, including additional “Thinking About Intimate Relationships” clips, with related critical-thinking questions; chapter summaries; quizzes which can be assigned or made available for self-guided study; and flashcards to help students study.

Several other instructor resources are available to enhance student learning. These include:

- PowerPoint Slides for each chapter, which include all the photographs and illustrations from the text along with lecture suggestions from instructors who have taught the course for many years.
- A Test Bank, featuring concept outlines and approximately 50 multiple-choice and 15 short-answer/essay questions per chapter, available in Word RTF and through the ExamView Assessment Suite (which can be downloaded free of charge from the Norton website by instructors using *Intimate Relationships*). The Test Bank contains a flexible pool of questions for each chapter that allows instructors to create a quiz or test that meets their individual requirements. Questions can be easily sorted by difficulty or question type, making it easy to construct tests that are meaningful and diagnostic.

## Acknowledgments

Many people contributed to this book, and we are indebted to all of them for their efforts and fine work. First and foremost, we are so grateful to Sheri Snavely, our editor at W. W. Norton, for her constant enthusiasm and commitment to this book. Over the years that we have been fortunate enough to work with her, Sheri has always given us the latitude to write what we wanted to write, while at the same time pushing us to meet the highest standards and make this book the very best it could be. Sheri has brought out the best in us.

And we are not alone. In preparing the first edition and again in developing this new edition, Sheri has collected and wrangled a tremendous team of talented individuals. Sarah England deserves special mention for her role as Associate Editor when we were developing the first edition of this text. Sarah’s close reading of our initial drafts of these chapters powerfully shaped the final product, and her influence over this text is still felt throughout. In revising and updating this book for the second edition, we had the great fortune to work with Betsy Dilernia, the most careful, insightful, and rigorous developmental editor and copyeditor. Betsy is the taskmaster we needed to

rein in our natural exuberance, and this book is leaner and much better as a result of her excellent judgment.

Through the production process, project editor Melissa Atkin managed the flow of chapters and somehow got everyone to do their jobs while she remained unfailingly calm and pleasant. Production manager Ashley Horna kept us on schedule and ensured that the book came out on time. Proofreader Lynne Cannon Menges brought the text to a fine polish. Photo editors Evan Luberger and Trish Marx and photo researcher Jane Sanders Miller dug into the deepest recesses of the Internet to find photographs illustrating ideas we could only vaguely articulate. Media/ancillary editor Callinda Taylor helped create a support package that is second to none. Shira Averbuch provided enthusiastic, cheerful, and invaluable editorial assistance throughout the lengthy revision process. If you like the cover of this book (and we adore it), then you have the brilliant Debra Morton Hoyt, Corporate Art Director, to thank for it. Design director Rubina Yeh and book designer Lissi Sigillo designed this beautiful book you hold in your hands. And last but not least, we thank Jenni Fiederer, our capable administrative assistant, for coordinating our efforts with W. W. Norton and for helping us to keep this project moving forward.

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Other aspects of the ancillary package were produced by equally industrious and talented people. Nancy Frye at Long Island University created the PowerPoint lectures and student study materials, Jennifer Gonyea at the University of Georgia authored the *Interactive Instructor's Guide*, and Katherine Regan at Vancouver Island University co-authored and revised the Test Bank.

About the Authors iv  
A Letter to Students vi  
Preface vii

---

# 1

## Why Study Intimate Relationships? 1

### CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP 3

Interdependence as the Cornerstone of Relationships 3  
From Impersonal Relationships to Personal Relationships 5  
From Personal Relationships to Close Relationships 5  
From Close Relationships to Intimate Relationships 6

### WHY INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT 8

Intimate Relationships Determine the Survival of Our Species 10  
Intimate Relationships Are a Universal Human Experience 12  
Intimate Relationships Expand Our Range of Emotional Experience 17  
**1.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Talking About Love in Different Cultures** 18  
Intimate Relationships Affect Our Mental and Physical Health 19  
Intimate Relationships Influence the Well-Being of Children 24  
Intimate Relationships Form the Fabric of Society 26  
**1.2 SPOTLIGHT ON: Intimate Relationships and Social Conformity** 29

### THE CRITICAL QUESTION: WHY DO RELATIONSHIPS SOMETIMES THRIVE AND SOMETIMES FALTER? 30

CONCLUSION 31

---

# 2

## Tools of Relationship Science 33

### ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS 35

Three Kinds of Questions 36  
Theories and Hypotheses 37

**CHOOSING A MEASUREMENT STRATEGY 39**

Self-Report Measures 42

Pros and Cons 45

Observational Measures 49

**2.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Measuring Relationship Satisfaction 50**

Pros and Cons 53

Which Measurement Strategy Is Best? 54

**DESIGNING THE STUDY 56**

Correlational Research 56

Pros and Cons 57

Longitudinal Research 60

Pros and Cons 61

**2.2 SPOTLIGHT ON: The Case of the Disappearing Curve 62**

Experimental Research 64

Pros and Cons 66

Archival Research 68

Pros and Cons 70

Which Research Design Is Best? 70

**CHOOSING STUDY PARTICIPANTS 71****2.3 SPOTLIGHT ON: The Challenges of Studying Couples 72****DRAWING CONCLUSIONS 75**

The Importance of Disconfirmation 75

Statistical Analysis 76

**ETHICAL ISSUES 78****CONCLUSION 81****3****Theoretical Frameworks 82****INFLUENTIAL THEORIES OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS 84****THE EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE 85**

Fundamental Assumptions 86

How the Evolutionary Perspective Guides Research 90

**3.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: The Scent of a Man 91**

Evaluating the Evolutionary Perspective 92

**ATTACHMENT THEORY 94**

Fundamental Assumptions 94

How Attachment Theory Guides Research 100

Evaluating Attachment Theory 102



<b>SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY</b>	<b>103</b>	
Fundamental Assumptions	105	
<b>3.2 SPOTLIGHT ON: The Endurance of Abusive Relationships</b>	<b>109</b>	
How Social Exchange Theory Guides Research	110	
Evaluating Social Exchange Theory	111	
<b>SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY</b>	<b>112</b>	
Fundamental Assumptions	114	
How Social Learning Theory Guides Research	116	
Evaluating Social Learning Theory	118	
<b>SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL MODELS</b>	<b>120</b>	
Fundamental Assumptions	122	
How Social Ecological Models Guide Research	124	
Evaluating Social Ecological Models	126	
<b>UNDERLYING THEMES IN THEORIES OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>127</b>	
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>130</b>	
<b>4</b>	<b>Men and Women, Gay and Straight</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>SEX AND GENDER</b>	<b>132</b>	
<b>4.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Thinking Outside the Boxes</b>	<b>135</b>	
Sex Differences, Sex Similarities	136	
The “Nature” Explanation: Sex Differences from the Inside Out	139	
The “Nurture” Explanation: Sex Differences from the Outside In	142	
<b>4.2 SPOTLIGHT ON: Beliefs About Gender Roles and Parenting</b>	<b>145</b>	
Joining Nature and Nurture	148	
Sex Role Identity: Finding the Individuals in the Categories	151	
<b>SEX, GENDER, AND INTIMACY</b>	<b>154</b>	
Relationship Awareness	155	
Quality of Interaction	157	
Meanings of Intimacy	158	
Sex and Physical Intimacy	159	
Relationship Dissolution and Its Aftermath	160	
<b>4.3 SPOTLIGHT ON: Changing Places</b>	<b>162</b>	
<b>SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>163</b>	
Similarities and Differences in Same-Sex and Different-Sex Relationships	164	
Context	165	
Sexual Activity and Monogamy	167	
Relationship Dissolution	168	
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>170</b>	

## 5

**Attraction and Mate Selection 171****ATTRACTION: THE BASIS FOR LIKING SOMEONE 173**

Personality: What Do We Like About Others? 173

Similarity: Liking People Who Are Like Us 175

Familiarity: Liking What We Know 177

Reciprocity: Liking People Who Like Us 178

**ROMANTIC AND SEXUAL ATTRACTION 180**

Physical Appearance: How Much Does It Matter? 180

Physical Appearance: Why Does It Matter? 185

**5.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Components of Facial Attractiveness 186**

Romantic Attraction in Long-Term vs. Short-Term Relationships 188

Romantic Attraction in Different Contexts 190

Unrequited Love 193

**MATE SELECTION: FROM CHEMISTRY TO CONNECTION 196**

Predicting Partner Choices 196

Proximity: Making Interactions Possible 199

First Moves: Signaling Availability and Interest 201

Self-Disclosure: Knowing and Being Known 204

**5.2 SPOTLIGHT ON: Hooking Up in College 204**

Courtship: Developing Commitment 208

**CONCLUSION 209**

## 6

**Personality and Personal History 211****THE EFFECT OF PERSONALITY TRAITS ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS 213**

Personality, Emotion, and Intimacy 214

Consequences of Negative Affectivity and Low Self-Esteem 217

**6.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Relationships Influencing Personality 220****THE INFLUENCE OF CHILDHOOD FAMILY EXPERIENCES 222**

The Impact of Conflict and Divorce on Relationships 222

Children of Divorce 225

**6.2 SPOTLIGHT ON: Science and the Politics of Divorce 226****EARLY EXPERIENCES WITH CAREGIVERS 229****CONCLUSION 235**

---

## 7 Communicating Closeness 237

### HOW COMMUNICATION PROMOTES INTIMACY 239

Expressions and Disclosures: The Intimacy Process Model 239

**7.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Finding Keepers** 240

Research Findings on the Process of Intimacy 245

### MAINTAINING INTIMACY 246

Shared Activities 247

Social Support 249

Capitalization 252

Forgiveness 254

**7.2 SPOTLIGHT ON: Forgiveness and Infidelity** 256

Sexual Satisfaction 258

### CONCLUSION 261

---

## 8 Managing Differences 262

### VERBAL CONFLICT 264

Conflict from the Perspective of Social Learning Theory 265

Analyzing Couple Interactions 269

**8.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Quantifying Couple Communication** 269

Partner Perceptions of Conflict 272

Broad Behavior Patterns in Arguments 274

Mismanaged Conflict as a Cause of Relationship Distress 277

**8.2 SPOTLIGHT ON: Predicting Marital Outcomes** 281

Attachment Theory and Couple Conflict 282

### PHYSICAL AGGRESSION 284

**8.3 SPOTLIGHT ON: The Cycle of Intimate Terrorism** 288

Characteristics of Situational Couple Violence 290

Explaining Situational Couple Violence 293

### CONCLUSION 297

---

## 9 Beliefs and Values 298

### WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW ABOUT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS 300

General Beliefs About Relationships 301

Specific Beliefs About Relationships 306

Attitudes, Standards, and Ideals 308

**THE EFFECT OF BELIEFS AND VALUES ON RELATIONSHIPS 312**

- Evaluating Our Relationships 312
- Interpreting Relationship Events 314
- Behavior in Relationships 316

**WHAT IS A HEALTHY WAY TO THINK ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS? 318**

- The Case for Positive Thinking 318
- The Case for Lowering Expectations 320
- Expecting the Best, Bracing for the Worst 322
- Similarity in Partners' Beliefs and Values 323

**ORIGINS OF BELIEFS AND VALUES 325**

- Culture 326
- 9.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Arranged Marriages 328**
- Media Influences 330
- Personal Experience 333

**CONCLUSION 335****10****Understanding Each Other 336****INFORMATION PROCESSING 338****MOTIVATED REASONING 343**

- Enhancement: Believing the Best 344
- Accuracy: Knowing and Being Known 345
- 10.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Depressed People in Relationships 347**
- Justification: Being Right 347

**REACHING AN UNDERSTANDING 351**

- Keeping Negative Information Out of Awareness 353
  - Selective Attention 353
  - Memory Bias 355
- Minimizing the Impact of Negative Information 356
  - Adaptive Attributions 357
  - Flexible Standards 359
  - Cognitive Restructuring 360
  - Downward Social Comparisons 362

**ABILITY AND MOTIVE: THE LIMITS OF MOTIVATED REASONING 364**

- The Ability to Protect the Relationship 365
- The Motive to Protect the Relationship 368

**CONCLUSION 371**

**11****Relationships in Context 373****MAPPING THE CONTEXT OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS 375**

From Direct to Indirect Effects 375

Stressors and Resources 377

Chronic Conditions and Acute Effects 379

Controllable, Predictable vs. Uncontrollable, Unpredictable Conditions 381

**STRESS: WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD RELATIONSHIPS 383**

Concrete Effects of Stress 383

Physiological Effects of Stress 385

Behavioral and Cognitive Effects of Stress 386

Stress Spillover and Stress Crossover 389

**11.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Long-Distance Relationships 390**

Noticing a Stressor Changes Its Effects 391

Gender Differences 394

The Benefits of Crises 395

**SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS 399**

Do the Poor Value Marriage Less? 401

Obstacles to Marriage for Low-Income Mothers 403

Relationship Challenges in Low-Income Communities 405

Helping Low-Income Couples 407

**SOCIAL NETWORKS: THE TIES THAT BIND 408**

Attributes of Social Networks 409

How Social Networks Benefit Relationships 411

How Social Networks Can Challenge Relationships 413

**CONCLUSION 414****12****Improving Relationships 416****EXPERIENCING DISTRESS AND SEEKING HELP 418****COUPLES THERAPY: INTERVENTIONS FOR DISTRESSED RELATIONSHIPS 419**

Psychodynamic Models 421

Systems Models 424

Behavioral Models 427

Behavioral Couples Therapy 427

**12.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: How Partners Reward and Punish Each Other 428**

Cognitive-Behavioral Couples Therapy 430

**12.2 SPOTLIGHT ON: A Therapy Session 433**

Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy 433

Emotion Models	435
Evaluating the Models of Couples Therapy	437
Laboratory Studies of Interventions	438
Field Studies of Interventions	439
<b>ENHANCING RELATIONSHIPS, PREVENTING DISTRESS</b>	<b>441</b>
Public Health Approaches	442
Strengthening Healthy Relationships	444
Dissemination and Public Policy	446
<b>SERIOUSLY, WHAT SHOULD I DO?</b>	<b>448</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>451</b>

## 13

### Relationships Across the Lifespan 453

#### **BORN INTO INTIMACY: THE EFFECTS OF ADULT RELATIONSHIPS ON CHILDREN 455**

Children as Observers of Adult Relationships	456
The Importance of Adult Relationships to Children	458

#### **THE EXPANDING SOCIAL WORLD OF CHILDHOOD 461**

Sibling Relationships and the Development of Intimacy	462
Childhood Friendships	467
Gender Differences in Children's Friendships	472

#### **ADOLESCENCE AND INITIAL STEPS INTO INTIMACY 474**

How Adolescents Think About Intimate Relationships	475
Adolescent Experiences of Intimacy	477
A Preview of Coming Attractions	479

#### **MAJOR TRANSITIONS IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS DURING ADULTHOOD 481**

Cohabitation	482
Marriage and the Transition to Parenthood	484
Change and Novelty in Long-Term Relationships	486
Divorce and Remarriage	489

#### **INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS IN LATER LIFE 491**

Varieties of Intimacy for Older Adults	492
The Quality of Intimacy in Later Life	494
The Mixed Blessing of Retirement	496
Widowhood	497

#### **13.1 SPOTLIGHT ON: Romance Among Alzheimer's Patients 498**

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES 501

CONCLUSION 504

Glossary A1

References A13

Credits A67

Name Index A71

Subject Index A81





# 1

## Why Study Intimate Relationships?

Characteristics of an Intimate Relationship p. 3

Why Intimate Relationships Are Important p. 8

The Critical Question: Why Do Relationships Sometimes Thrive and Sometimes Falter? p. 30

Conclusion p. 31

## The Relationships of the Smartest Man in the World

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While Albert Einstein's prodigious professional accomplishments are well known, the details of his private life were not fully appreciated until 2006, when much of his personal correspondence was released to the public. These and other documents reveal that Einstein's incomparable brilliance as a scientist stands in stark contrast to his turbulent personal relationships.

The most prominent figure in Einstein's intimate life was his first wife, Mileva Maric (FIGURE 1.1). They met in 1896 as students at the Zurich Polytechnic; Einstein was 17, Mileva nearly 21. Their shared passion for physics gradually became a shared passion for one another, but Mileva's unexpected pregnancy in 1901 would bring about a series of important events. Einstein rarely saw Mileva during the pregnancy; he preferred to spend summer in the Alps, and his job as a tutor took him away from Zurich. Einstein never told his family or friends about his daughter, Lieserl, nor did he ever see her himself; born in 1902, she probably died of scarlet fever in 1903. Although Einstein and Mileva married that year, he later wrote that he married her out of a sense of duty.

Several challenges cast a shadow upon Mileva and Albert's marriage, including the birth of boys in 1904 and 1910; Mileva's health problems; Einstein's regular travel to give talks around Europe; and his interest in other women. Estranged by 1914, Mileva eventually rejected Einstein's conditions for the continuation of their relationship:

You will obey the following points in your relations with me: (1) you will not expect any intimacy from me, nor will you reproach me in any way; (2) you will stop talking to me if I request it; (3) you will leave my bedroom or study immediately without protest if I request it. (Isaacson, 2007, p. 186)



**FIGURE 1.1** Albert Einstein with his first wife, Mileva Maric, in 1911.

The couple separated that year and divorced in 1918. His younger son later commented, “The worst destiny is to have no destiny, and also to be the destiny of no one else” (Overbye, 2000, p. 375). His older son would remark, “Probably the only project he ever gave up on was me” (Pais, 2005, p. 453).

Contributing to the demise of Einstein’s first marriage was his relationship with his first cousin, Elsa. Einstein had known Elsa since childhood, but in 1913 their relationship deepened when he visited Berlin to see Elsa, who was divorced with two daughters. Elsa eased Einstein’s day-to-day concerns by managing their apartment and his finances, while Einstein provided Elsa and her daughters with security and a link to fame and fortune. Married in 1919, Einstein and Elsa established a comfortable relationship, despite his affairs with several women. Elsa died in 1936, leaving Einstein to live out his years with his sister and stepdaughter. Before he died, he wrote a letter to the son of one of his close friends who had just passed away: “What I admired most about [your father] was the fact that he was able to live so many years with one woman, not only in peace but also in constant unity, something I have lamentably failed at twice” (Isaacson, 2007, p. 540).

Consider the paradox, the inconsistency, of Einstein’s intellect! Masterful as he was at revealing great mysteries of the cosmos, Einstein puzzled in vain over matters of the heart. Can we perhaps draw some conclusions about which is the more difficult puzzle?

### QUESTIONS

The fact that Albert Einstein, by his own admission, failed as a husband and struggled as a father suggests that success and fulfillment in intimate relationships requires something more than a shrewd intellect. What is it about intimate relationships that makes them difficult, and demanding, and desirable, and delightful—often all at once? What are the forces that operate within and upon intimate relationships to produce these varying experiences? What does it take to have a good relationship? For that matter, what *is* a good relationship?

This brief sketch about Einstein, Mileva, and Elsa demonstrates that intimate relationships—Einstein’s certainly, but yours and mine as well—are richly textured phenomena. They are complex because they involve the personalities, emotions, thoughts, passions, and goals of two individuals. When asking and answering questions about these phenomena, relationship scientists strive to serve various masters. One demands that we capture all the subtleties and nuances that make relationships special. A second impels us to impose order on these phenomena with rigorous research, to identify the principles, laws, and regularities that govern them. A third master, never far from the other two, prompts us to apply that knowledge so that social policies, educational programs, and clinical interventions are well informed and practically useful. We wrote this book to explore how the formidable tools of science can be brought to bear upon the murky and ineffable mysteries of intimate relationships.

## Characteristics of an Intimate Relationship

Somewhere, as you read this today, two people are meeting one another for the very first time. Perhaps they will share an umbrella in the rain, or their hands might touch as they both reach for the last available copy of the latest best-selling novel, or maybe they will commiserate as they wait for an English professor who has failed to show up for office hours before the first quiz. They might exchange small talk as they wait together for the rain to pass, converse about their favorite books and authors, or arrange to share notes and study together later that day; ultimately, they might exchange telephone numbers so they can meet again. No longer strangers, the two people start to talk about their mutual likes and dislikes, find out whether each is already dating someone else, arrange to spend more and more time together in a widening range of activities, and share thoughts and feelings they do not express to casual acquaintances. As time passes they think of themselves as a couple, present themselves as a couple to friends, agree to date only each other, think about one another when they are apart, experience and express sexual desire for one another, create new shared experiences, and wonder, however tentatively, about a future together.

Most of us would think of this couple as now being in an intimate relationship. But why do we think that? What specifically are these two people doing that leads us to characterize their relationship as intimate? And what changed, exactly, over the course of those several weeks that changes how we think about them and how they think of themselves? Asking these questions about this particular couple—let's call them Keith and Marina—allows us to introduce the four criteria that define an intimate relationship: The partners are interdependent, they consider each other special and unique, they influence each other across a variety of domains, and they experience some degree of mutual sexual passion.

“ Like other great forces in nature—such as gravity, electricity, and the four winds—a relationship itself is invisible; its existence can be discerned only by observing its effects.”

—Ellen Berscheid, social psychologist (1999, p. 261)

### Interdependence as the Cornerstone of Relationships

First, and most basically, you might note that Keith and Marina affect one another's behavior to a far greater degree now than when they first met. Changes in Keith's behaviors will change or constrain actions taken by Marina so that, for example, if Keith moves to another town, Marina might contemplate moving to be with him. Referred to as **interdependence**, the mutual influence that two people have over one another is the defining feature of any social relationship, intimate or otherwise.

A key aspect of interdependence is that it exists *between* two partners in a relationship. It is clear from how they think about each other and their

shared activities that Keith and Marina have formed internal representations of one another and of their relationship. By this we mean that Keith and Marina have an image of each other that they can draw upon when they are apart, and that calling up this image brings with it specific thoughts and feelings about the other person. But we can easily see that having an internal representation of another person is insufficient by itself to say that a relationship exists between two people. (Were this the case, many of us could rightly claim relationships with attractive celebrities like Matthew McConaughey and Angelina Jolie.)

In addition, for two people to be in a relationship, the interdependence that connects them must have **bidirectionality**—it has to operate in both directions. Thus, for example, changes in Marina’s behavior, such as her suggesting she move with Keith, will elicit a response from him. Likewise, Keith’s options and behaviors might change if Marina decided to take on a part-time job. Contrast these bidirectional effects with unidirectional effects, whereby only one person’s behavior is affected. For example, when you receive spam e-mails from the guy you’ve never met who wants you to know about get-rich schemes in Nigeria, only your behavior is affected: You are annoyed momentarily, and you hit the delete button. One-way influences such as these are hardly enough to constitute a relationship of any kind, until you respond to them and the interdependence grows stronger.

The interdependence between Keith and Marina is not isolated to a single exchange; it extends *over time*, with later interactions between partners gaining meaning from the earlier interactions. We would not say that Keith and Marina had any real relationship to speak of after that first brief meeting, because there was no continuing mutual influence between them. However, we can see how their later musings about their good fortune in finding one another take their significance from that meeting. As ethologist Robert Hinde notes:

“Relationship” in everyday language carries the further implication that there is some degree of continuity between the successive interactions. Each interaction is affected by interactions in the past, and may affect interactions in the future. For that reason a “relationship” between two people may continue over long periods when they do not meet or communicate with each other; the accumulated effects of past interactions will ensure that, when they next meet, they do not see each other as strangers. (1979, p. 14)

Can we conclude that the interdependence between Keith and Marina’s behaviors is the reason their relationship would be distinguished as intimate? Not entirely. Interdependence is a *necessary* condition for intimacy—you cannot have intimacy without it—but it is not a *sufficient* condition for intimacy. After all, many relationships possess interdependence without intimacy, at least as we propose to define it here. A guard and a prisoner are interdependent but not intimate, as are a shopkeeper and a regular customer, a patient

and a nurse, a grandparent and a grandchild, a mother-in-law and a son-in-law, two friends, and so on. In all of these relationships, the two individuals have enduring and bidirectional influences over one another—yet we would not say they are intimate. What do you think has to be added to an interdependent relationship to make it an intimate relationship?

## From Impersonal Relationships to Personal Relationships

Intimate relationships occur not just between two interdependent people, but between two people who treat one another as *unique* individuals rather than as interchangeable occupants of particular social roles or positions (Blumstein & Kollock, 1988). Thus, the interdependence evident in the relationships involving the guard and prisoner, the shopkeeper and the regular customer, and the patient and the nurse are driven to a considerable degree by the contexts and roles in which these people find themselves. Substituting different people into these relationships does not change them much; your relationship with your hairdresser is probably pretty similar to my relationship with my hairdresser. These relatively **impersonal relationships** tend to be formal and task-oriented.

**Personal relationships** are relatively informal and engage us at a deeper emotional level. Take, for example, the personal relationships involving a grandparent and a grandchild, or a mother-in-law and a son-in-law, or two friends, or our couple Keith and Marina. Here the interdependence is likely to be longer lasting and determined less by social roles and more by the uniqueness of the individuals involved, so that swapping out one grandparent and inserting another will change the very character of the relationship. The unique character of personal versus impersonal relationships is evidenced by our very different reaction to losing a grandparent than, say, to losing our favorite Starbucks barista—no matter how good the cappuccino.

## From Personal Relationships to Close Relationships

Are all personal relationships intimate ones? Probably not, because the different sorts of personal relationships vary enough that we can still make meaningful distinctions among them. Even in relationships where people treat one another as unique individuals, their degree of *closeness* varies. Most of us would probably agree that a relationship between a mother-in-law and her son-in-law is not as close as a relationship between a grandparent and grandchild, which in turn is not as close as the relationship between Keith and Marina.

But what is closeness? Harold Kelley, a leading theoretician on interdependence and closeness, has argued that “the close relationship is one of strong, frequent, and diverse interdependence that lasts over a considerable period of time” (Kelley et al., 1983, p. 38). By considering the relationship between

Keith and Marina, we can see how closeness reflects an unusually high degree of interdependence. Compared to the relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter's husband, for example, Keith and Marina probably have far more contact with one another because they see each other nearly every day. They also are likely to have stronger influences on one another; if Marina has a bad day, her mood affects Keith a lot more than anyone else in her life. Keith and Marina also are more likely to be interdependent over a greater variety of situations. So the presence of a **close relationship** qualifies interdependent and personal relationships further, where we understand closeness to be reflected by the strength, frequency, and diversity of the influences that partners have over one another.

### From Close Relationships to Intimate Relationships

Is closeness the final ingredient, the element that makes a personal relationship truly intimate? Because a lot of variety still exists, even among close relationships, the answer is again no; we probably want to reserve the term *intimate relationship* for only a subset of the relationships we would designate as close. For example, how Einstein enjoyed high degrees of closeness with his classmates as well as with his two wives, Mileva and Elsa. The interdependence that marks all of these relationships was relatively strong, and the interactions tended to be frequent, wide-ranging, and enduring. Yet our closest friendships are not the same as our intimate relationships, nor are our relationships with family members. Consider your own relationships: Are there important distinctions between your closest friendships, your family relationships, and your relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend? If so, what would you say is the basis for these differences?

The difference between a close relationship and an intimate relationship lies, we would argue, in whether the two partners experience a mutual erotic charge, or a shared—though not necessarily articulated—feeling that they have the potential to be sexually intimate. Thus, by our definition, two people who are in a close relationship are also in an intimate relationship if they both experience a lustful, sexual passion for one another and an expectation that this passion will be consummated.

Sexual interaction without the element of closeness falls outside our definition of an intimate relationship, thus excluding “one-night stands” and sexual experiences people have when hooking up. We might say these people were physically intimate, but in the absence of “strong, frequent, and diverse interdependence that lasts over a considerable period of time,” we would not say they were in an intimate relationship. Moreover, defining an intimate relationship in this way does not imply that the two partners are necessarily happy in their relationship—thus Einstein's troubled marriage to Mileva was no less an intimate relationship than was his more fulfilling marriage to

Elsa. Though discontent is likely to change the nature of the interdependence between partners, it does not eliminate the interdependencies themselves. As long as there is the prospect of sexual interaction in the context of a close relationship, we will assume that even unhappy partners are experiencing an intimate relationship.

FIGURE 1.2 captures the essence of the different types of social relationships we have described. We can now synthesize the features we've discussed, to define an **intimate relationship** as a relationship characterized by strong, sustained, mutual influence over a broad range of interactions, with the possibility of sexual involvement.

We can now answer the question that we posed earlier in this section: Why do we consider Keith and Marina's relationship to be intimate? First, Keith and Marina are in a relationship because the things they do affect one another. Keith may notice that Marina is upset, and his behavior might change somehow—he might avoid her, or console her, or criticize her—and she might then respond to what he has done, prompting his response, and so on. As partners in a relationship, their thoughts, feelings, and actions are mutually intertwined; indeed, these bidirectional interdependencies are a defining feature of being in a relationship of any kind. We can go further and say that theirs is a personal relationship rather than an impersonal one because they respond to one another as unique individuals rather than as two individuals who happen to be filling particular social roles. Keith holds special significance for Marina, and vice versa. They matter to one another because they engage each other on a more emotional level than if they were merely in an impersonal relationship. The category of personal relationships is a broad one, and within it we can see that some relationships are closer than others. We would say that Keith and Marina's relationship is close because (a) their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors routinely affect one another (e.g., they see each other at least once almost every day, and they exchange a lot of text messages when apart); (b) these influences last over time and are evident in many of the things they do each day (e.g., they study together, snuggle together, eat together, and go out together with their friends);

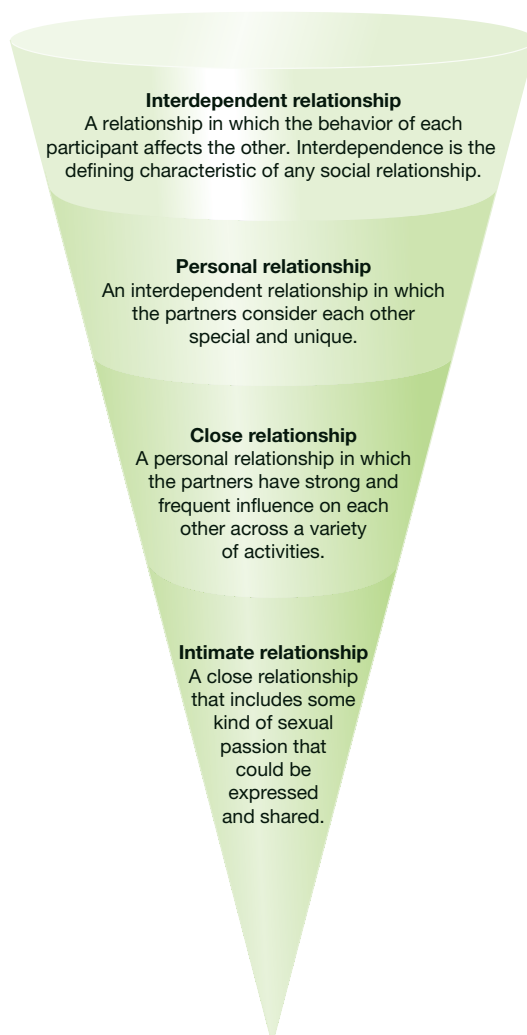


FIGURE 1.2 Distinguishing among different types of social relationships.

and (c) their effects on one another are not trivial (e.g., Marina feels good when Keith wishes her well on a quiz; Keith feels hurt when Marina chooses to spend time with her roommates instead of him). And, finally, (d) Keith and Marina are in an intimate relationship because sexual interaction is one of the possible ways they anticipate being interdependent.

### MAIN POINTS

- » Four criteria distinguish an intimate relationship from other types of social relationships.
- » An intimate relationship is interdependent; the partners' behaviors affect each other.
- » An intimate relationship is personal; the partners treat each other as special and unique, rather than as members of a generic category (e.g., classmate or neighbor).
- » An intimate relationship is close, where closeness is understood to mean strong, frequent, and diverse forms of mutual influence.
- » An intimate relationship is, or has the potential to be, sexual.

## Why Intimate Relationships Are Important

Imagine this: You are lying flat on your back in an MRI scanner, looking up at a video monitor. A technician explains that when you see a red *X*, you have

“No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own.”

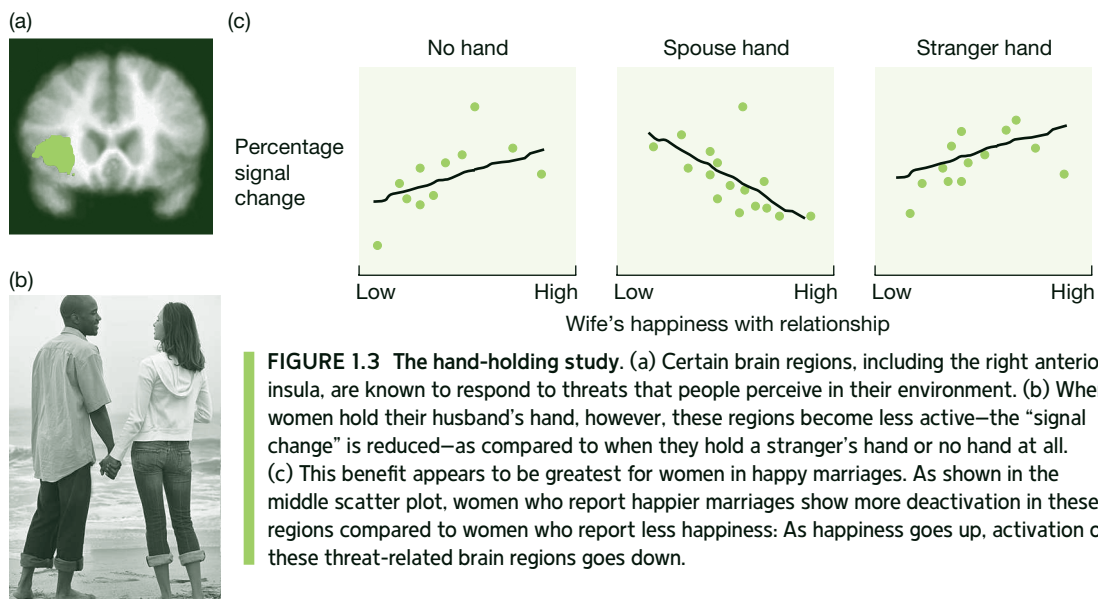
—David Hume, Scottish philosopher, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740)

a 20 percent chance of receiving a small shock via an electrode attached to your ankle. When you see a blue *O*, you have a 0 percent chance of receiving a shock. The large magnet encircling your head detects minute changes in your brain activity after you see the *X* or the *O* and translates these data into images of your brain. You are shown either an *X* or an *O* under three separate conditions: while holding your intimate partner's hand, the hand of a stranger who is the same sex as your partner, or no hand at all.

In the actual study, analysis of the brain images that were collected after a group of 16 married women were shown the dreaded *X* or the safe *O* (but before any shock actually occurred) indicated that brain regions governing emotional and behavioral threat responses were activated less when holding a partner's hand than when holding either no hand or a stranger's hand. In other words, the participants registered less threat when holding their partner's hand. Moreover, the happier the women reported being in their relationships, the less activation occurred in their threat-related brain regions (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006) (FIGURE 1.3).

In another study, researchers followed a group of 188 couples dealing with one partner's congestive heart failure. Research assistants visited the couples'





homes, where they interviewed and gave standardized questionnaires to each partner in separate rooms. At the end of the visits, the partners were videotaped for 10 minutes talking about a topic of disagreement in their relationships. The researchers examined the videotaped conversations in detail and counted the number of times the partners said positive and negative things to one another. They combined these counts with the interview and questionnaire data the partners provided about their marriages, thus producing an index of overall relationship quality; and they used public records to determine which patients died over a span of 4 years, and when those deaths occurred. Using the composite index to distinguish between couples who were higher and lower in relationship quality, the researchers demonstrated that compared to those in unhappier relationships, patients in happier relationships were less likely to die in this 4-year period (Coyne et al., 2001) (FIGURE 1.4).

Beyond yielding groundbreaking insights about the workings of human intimacy, these two studies are noteworthy because they suggest two very different reasons for the importance of intimate relationships. First, intimate relationships are important because they are a basic feature of who we are as human beings. As the hand-holding study suggests, each of us has a nervous system that responds to and equips us not simply for social interaction, but for social interaction with an intimate partner. Biologically, we appear to be uniquely attuned to the person with whom we share an intimate bond. This human capacity for intimacy—like the capacity for language, reasoning, or social perception—contributes to our ability to regulate our emotions (and our partner's emotions) and adapt to the world in which we live. Understanding intimate relationships, this basic feature of who we are, is thus essential to understanding the human condition.