THIRD EDITION

INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Issues, Theories, and Research

Ralph Erber and Maureen Wang Erber

Intimate Relationships

Intimate Relationships covers both classic and current material in a concise yet thorough and rigorous manner. Chapters range from attraction to love, attachment to jealousy, sexuality to conflict—all written in a warm, personal, and engaging voice. Topics are viewed from an interdisciplinary perspective firmly grounded in research. Examples and stories from everyday life lead into each chapter to stir a student's engagement with the material, and critical thinking prompts throughout the text aid his or her reflection on the issues and theories presented. Each chapter is organized around major relationship issues and relevant theories, in addition to a critical evaluation of the research. When appropriate, the authors discuss and evaluate popular ideas about intimate relationships in the context of scientific research.

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Ralph Erber is professor of psychology at DePaul University. He received his Ph.D. in psychology from Carnegie Mellon University. His work has been published in a number of places, including the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, and the *European Journal of Social Psychology*. He is also the author and editor of several books, including *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust* and *Social Psychology: A Story-Telling Approach* (with Len Newman).

Maureen Wang Erber is professor of psychology at Northeastern Illinois University. She received her Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Greensborough. Her work has been published in a number of places, including the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. Her research interests include trust and conflict in intimate relationships and mate-choice copying.

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1 Strangers, Friends, and Lovers

Why Is Life So Complicated?

> Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. . . . Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.
>
> —Aristotle

Aristotle wrote these words a long time ago. Chances are he intended his insights to apply to men and women alike. In any event, the idea that humans, by nature, are social creatures is as old as or older than civilization itself, and it permeates the social sciences to this very day (e.g., Aronson, 2011). And it's likely that our social nature compels us toward activities that require the presence and cooperation of others to make them enjoyable or even possible. Dancing, playing ball, or going on a date are practically impossible to do if not for the presence of at least one other person. At the same time, the enjoyment from going out to dinner or taking a vacation is often diminished when not shared with others.

More importantly, there is reason to believe that most humans will not do well when they are deprived of contact with others. In the pilot episode of Rod Serling's popular (shall we say, iconic?) 1960s TV show, *The Twilight Zone*, fittingly entitled "Where Is Everybody?" the protagonist found himself alone in a small town somewhere in America. Everywhere he went, he found tangible signs that other people had been there—a lighted cigarette in an ashtray, a steaming cup of coffee on a kitchen table, the receiver of a phone off the hook, and a partially eaten breakfast on the counter of a diner. Faced with all these traces of human existence, he developed the singular preoccupation of trying to find somebody—anybody, for that matter—to the point where he appeared to be losing his mind. Fortunately for the protagonist, the situation in which he found himself was an experiment conducted by the space program designed to test how prospective space travelers would fare in social isolation. In light of their observations, the researchers decided to terminate the experiment and concluded that prolonged social isolation was simply too much for any human to bear.

Interestingly, the idea of being completely isolated was intriguing and outrageous enough to resurface as the theme in at least one other episode of *The Twilight Zone*. In that particular episode, Archibald Beachcroft, a misanthropic office worker, was given the power to make anything happen by merely wishing for it. Granted such powers, his first wish (after making his landlady disappear) was for everyone to go away. And while the resulting situation was not one that was thrust upon him as part of a cruel experiment, he

quickly came to realize the difficulties of living a life of complete solitude. He was soon faced with the utter pointlessness of such seemingly trivial activities as shaving and going to work. Moreover, the elimination of the nuisance previously created by the presence of others came at the price of complete boredom. To alleviate it, he wished for diversions, such as an earthquake, which he found too exciting, and an electrical storm, which he found too dull. Another wish for everybody to come back and be just like him created a situation he quickly found intolerable, and thus, with his final wish, he asked for everything to be the way it used to be.

In Rod Serling's fantastic explorations, the effects of objective social isolation on its protagonists resulted from an utter lack of interactions with others. It appears, however, that a lack of *quantity* doesn't tell the whole story. In fact, lacking interactions of *quality* leads to the perception of social isolation. The resulting loneliness has a number of deleterious effects on physical and mental health. They are every bit as dramatic as the effects of objective social isolation dramatized in *The Twilight Zone* and include elevated blood pressure, reduced physical activity, depression, and—over time—decreases in life satisfaction and even IQ (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). Clearly, humans need others to survive and prosper! Put a different way, others help us meet specific needs. We review these needs in the next section

The Need to Belong

One proposal (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Baumeister, 2011) suggests that our tendency to seek and maintain relationships of breadth as well as depth is caused by an underlying **need to belong** that complements our need to be different (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). According to this hypothesis, humans "have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and impactful relationships" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Although this need to belong is to some extent innate, our evolutionary history may have done its part to make it a dominant form of human motivation. Forming social bonds may have important survival and reproductive benefits. Banding together in groups helps supply mates and enables the sharing of food as well as the care of offspring. Moreover, groups have a competitive advantage over the single individual when it comes to acquiring scarce resources and defending against predatory enemies. From this perspective, evolution has provided humans with a set of internal mechanisms that predispose them toward seeking relationships with others.

There is ample evidence supporting the belongingness hypothesis. First, it appears that social bonds among humans form quite easily, even in the absence of specific circumstances that might make these bonds particularly advantageous. For example, when people are assigned to be members of a group by some arbitrary criterion, they quickly develop strong feelings of loyalty and allegiance to the point where they discriminate against nonmembers in a variety of ways (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Sherif et al., 1961; Tajfel, 1970). Similarly, infants develop attachments to their caregivers long before they are able to figure out the benefits (Bowlby, 1969). People with a high need to belong are particularly attentive to social cues, such as another's vocal tone and facial emotion (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). And there is evidence that the use of online social network sites, such as Facebook, is strongly motivated by the need to belong (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012).

Ostracism

At the same time that humans form social bonds easily, they react to the loss of such bonds with a measure of distress. People often have a hard time leaving family, neighbors, and friends behind in order to go to college or move to a new city. Interestingly, they experience distress even when the separation has no practical or instrumental ramifications (e.g., the loss of neighbors). We feel bad when others ostracize us, that is, ignore or exclude us from membership in a group. In fact, as far as our brain is concerned, the pain stemming from rejection is experienced the same way as physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; McDonald & Leary, 2005). Just as important, being ostracized threatens a number of human needs—the need to belong prominently among them (Williams, 2007, 2009). And we don't need to be rejected by an actual person or group to experience a threat to our belongingness need. Being excluded by a computer can lower levels of belonging (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004), and so can simply watching someone else being excluded (Graupmann, Pfundmair, Matsoukas, & Erber, 2016; Wesselman, Williams, & Hales, 2013). And finally, being rejected by a group we despise and don't want anything to do with produces the same result (Gonsakorale & Williams, 2006).

The belongingness hypothesis is appealing for a couple of reasons. For one thing, the need to belong can explain a variety of important psychological phenomena. For another, the need to belong explains our tendency both to seek and maintain relationships of breadth as well as depth.

Distinct Relationship Needs

However, people may be attracted to relationships because they meet multiple psychological needs. And different relationships may meet different sets of needs. Weiss (1969) and Drigotas and Rusbult (1992) proposed five important needs that can be met only through close relationships with others. Table 1.1 provides a side-by-side comparison.

Table 1.1 Needs Met by Close Relationships

Weiss (1969)	*Drigotas and Rusbult (1992)*
1. The need for *intimacy* compels us to share our feelings with another.	1. *Intimacy needs* are related to confiding in another and sharing thoughts and disclosing feelings to one's partner.
2. The need for *social integration* requires someone with whom to share our concerns and worries.	2. *Companionship needs* are related to spending time and engaging in activities together.
3. The need for being *nurturant* is best met by being with another whom we can take care of.	3. *Sexual needs* include the full range of physical activities from hand-holding to sexual intercourse.
4. The need for *assistance* involves another who will help us in times of need.	4. *Security needs* pertain to the stability of a relationship and the extent to which one can rely on the relationship to make life more secure.
5. The need for *reassurance* of our own worth requires that we are with someone who will tell us that we are important.	5. *Emotional involvement needs* involve the extent to which partners' moods and emotions overlap and one partner's affect influences the other's emotional experience.

While distinct, the two proposals share some features, the need for intimacy being the most obvious. Regardless of which we draw upon, partners in a relationship generally experience a preponderance of positive emotions when they feel that their needs are being met. (Le & Agnew, 2001). We discuss the importance of partners meeting each other's needs for the success of their relationship in Chapter 6.

The Inevitability of Social Relationships

Although need-based explanations for close relationships can be compelling, they are also somewhat problematic. To some extent, need-based theories often observe a behavior, such as people's tendency to seek out others. They *explain* it as being caused by an underlying need, such as a need to belong, and then go on to *predict* the behavior based on the corresponding need. In other words, the argument takes on a somewhat circular nature, which detracts from its explanatory power. Of course, if we conveyed such reservations to someone who subscribes to theories that explain human behavior as being caused by needs, we would probably be asked what the alternatives are. This is not an easy task. However, one possibility would be to point out that interactions with others, and perhaps relationships as well, are an almost inevitable outcome not so much of human nature but human existence. Planet Earth is, after all, a heavily populated place, which makes a life of complete solitude almost impossible. Even if we built ourselves a log cabin in the most remote wilderness, it would be impossible to escape interacting with others entirely, if for no other reason than to buy food, clothing, and supplies.

In reality, most people spend their lives in a heavily populated social context. We are raised by one or more parents in a home that is part of a neighborhood and a larger community. We may have siblings and an extended family that descends upon us on holidays. And even before our proud parents bring us home from the hospital, we have been checked, assessed, measured, and poked by pediatricians and nurses. In due time, we go to school with other children and eventually are employed in a setting that usually features superiors, underlings, and coworkers. The point is that, whether we want it or not, relationships with others cannot easily be avoided, and it may be that this inevitability holds an important piece in solving the puzzle of why and how people initiate and maintain social relationships.

Some time ago, sociologist George Caspar Homans (1961) proposed a number of fairly straightforward principles with regard to the connection between social interaction and relationships. The first principle states that people with equal status are more likely to interact. Students, for example, are more likely to interact with other students than with their professors. Clerks are more likely to interact with other clerks than with their managers. Of course, if equal status were the only basis for interacting with others, there would be a copious number of possibilities. However, over time, we end up interacting with others who are similar to us, like students who have the same major or share a similar taste in music. This is the second principle. The third principle states that the more frequently we interact with others, the more we will like them. And finally, the fourth principle stipulates that frequent interaction and increased liking will result in increased sentiments of friendship.

Homans' (1961) four principles do a decent job of explaining why people interact more, and perhaps form relationships more, with some but not others. They also

explain a variety of phenomena without adding the flavor of a circular argument. However, by focusing almost exclusively on the situational context of social interactions and relationships, the principles fail to take into account individual differences in the level with which people desire to initiate and maintain close relationships. As is often the case, the truth may lie somewhere in the middle. Needs for intimacy and belonging may predispose people to desire relationships with others to varying degrees. The rewardingness of interactions with others because of equality of status or similarity may help determine with whom we form relationships marked by sentiments of friendship or love.

Thinking Critically About Relationship Issues, Theories, and Research

- How might the need to belong interact with Homans' (1961) principles of exchange? Can you think of situations in which it might compel you to seek the company of a dissimilar other?

Intimate Relationships Yesterday and Today

The Way We Were

Intimate relationships can take on many different forms, but most Americans who are asked to describe the prototypical intimate relationship will probably respond by naming the heterosexual, married couple. This may sound biased or even discriminatory to those considering alternative forms of intimate relationships, but it is not entirely surprising. In fact, some estimates hold that roughly 90 percent of adults in the United States will get married at some point in their lives (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). This certainty with which we believe we will someday get married may be traced back to a couple of factors that shape us in important ways. First, many people spend most if not all of their childhood exposed to Mom and Dad as the predominant model of adult intimate relationships. Even children who grow up in something other than the nuclear family often desire to have a more traditional relationship as adults. Moreover, there is a widespread belief that the family is an important aspect of the fabric from which our social culture is woven. During the 1980s and 1990s, politicians of all colors and backgrounds wore on their sleeves a concern with "family values."

Thinking of family values conjures up the image of the traditional family as portrayed in such TV shows as *Leave It to Beaver*, which aired on network TV from 1957–1963. For the benefit of those readers who are either too young or have better things to do than watch reruns on cable or look for it on their favorite streaming device, it (as well as others of the same era) depicted the family in a fairly stereotypical way. There was Ward Cleaver, the husband and father who sprinted off to work early each morning. Then there was June Cleaver, the wife, homemaker, and mother who took pride in what she did. Both believed that their relationship would last forever, and together they worked hard to create a happy

home life for themselves and their two children, who were basically good kids who loved, honored, and obeyed their parents as they struggled to grow up. The children, Wally and Theodore, "The Beaver," were expected to work toward starting their own families, of course modeling them after their own.

Historically, the so-called traditional American family as an institution was relatively short-lived. Its beginnings can be traced back to the industrial revolution of the 19th century. Prior to that, the home was the site of production, and every member of the family unit contributed productive labor toward tending the farm, raising cattle, or manufacturing goods. Compared to today, affection was less likely to be a basis for marriage, and relationships among family members were more formal, less companionate, and less child centered. The industrial revolution shifted the site of production to a physically separate workplace and brought about an increased specialization of husband and wife. In part because the woman has a biological advantage when it comes to rearing very young children, the husband became the provider and by necessity took on a reduced role in the family life. At the same time, the wife's economic role decreased as increased emphasis was placed on her skills as a homemaker and mother. Finally, the return of huge numbers of soldiers from World War II triggered a housing boom, which created the suburbs (in which June and Ward Cleaver raised their children) and the generation known as the baby boomers.

The Way We Are Now

In addition to being short-lived, the image of the traditional family has also been culturally bound, as it is mostly descriptive of the white middle class. But even within this confine, since the 1970s, a number of important changes have taken place that had a profound impact on the traditional American family. Perhaps most dramatically, the Cleavers are now older when they get married, as many Americans put off marriage longer than their counterparts of the 1940s and 1950s. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2009 the median age of a first marriage was 28 for men and 26 for women, compared to 23 and 20 in 1950 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011).

Today, June Cleaver is also more likely to be employed outside the home, either in pursuit of a career or to contribute to the family income. Whereas in 1940, only 27.4 percent of women worked outside the home, by 2010 almost 59 percent of all women were part of the workforce. According to data compiled by the U.S. Department of Labor, a full 73 percent of employed women had full-time jobs. Of those, 41 percent worked in management, professional, and related occupations. Women accounted for a little over half of all workers in high-paying management, professional, and related occupations, earning 81 percent of what their male counterparts earned.

At the same time, Ward Cleaver is more likely to be an active participant in the affairs of the family. He and June will have gone to childbirthing classes together, and Ward was in the delivery room when both Wally and Theodore were born. Ward changed diapers, attends PTA meetings, and coaches his boys in AYSO even though he is clueless about the game of soccer. Wally and the Beaver have friends with whom they can communicate instantly via social media. They can share experiences, thoughts, and feelings quickly and easily on handheld electronic devices that rarely leave their sight. Thanks to those same devices, their friends can be virtually present at all times. And some of their relationships with friends may exist solely in the virtual world.

Finally, the nuclear family has been modified in yet another way. The almost universal introduction of no-fault divorce laws in the 1970s made it easier to get divorced—both practically and morally—and led to a dramatic spike in divorce rates throughout that decade. Among other things, this resulted in a proliferation of stepfamilies—or blended families—where at least one parent has children that are not genetically related to the other partner. By the mid-1980s, a full 46 percent of all marriages were marriages in which at least one partner had been married before, and roughly 16 percent of married couples included spouses with at least one child from a former marriage (Norton, 1987). According to the Stepfamily Association of America, at this time roughly one in three Americans is part of a blended family.

Changes in the age of first marriage, women's employment outside the home, and the existence of stepfamilies could be taken as indicators that the traditional family is still basically intact, having merely adapted to external pressures in relatively minor ways. However, other changes have led to alternative forms of relationships that for many have taken the place of traditional marriage and family.

Among those changes is the rising tide of **singles**. In 1970, 38 million adults 18 or older (28 percent) were divorced, widowed, or had always been single. By 2002, this number had jumped to 86 million, and singles accounted for more than 40 percent of the adult population in the United States. U.S. Census data indicate that by 2014 these numbers had jumped to 124.6 million singles, accounting for just over 50 percent of the population. At the same time, the percentage of married couples steadily declined from about 72 percent in 1970 to under 60 percent in 2002 (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). According to data (ironically) compiled by the Centers for Disease Control, marriage rates have continued to decline throughout the first two decades of the 21st century. For example, in 2009 a full 47 percent of women had never been married. The divorce rate may be an indirect beneficiary of marriage's declining popularity as it, too, has steadily declined since its peak around 1980. The emergence of singlehood poses an important challenge to a culture that promotes and values marriage through a variety of mechanisms (DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005).

But even those who desire to become coupled often find unexpected twists and turns (and perhaps even potholes) on the road to couplehood. Consider, for example, the case of one of the authors' students. Aixa took the authors' course during her sophomore year in college in large part for very personal reasons. At the time, she was living with her African-American mother and her Latino father, who, after 20-some years of marriage, were contemplating a divorce. Matters were complicated by her mother's chronic illness, which triggered frequent and often dramatic medical emergencies. After a great deal of contemplation, Aixa decided to escape the strained life at home by moving in with Ramon, her fiancé of six months. At first, life with Ramon was blissful. But less than a year after they moved in together, he lost his job and, in Aixa's words, simply came apart. Unable to find another job he liked, Ramon became verbally and physically abusive to the point that Aixa decided to terminate the relationship. She subsequently moved back in with her parents, who by then had gotten divorced but nonetheless kept living together. Aixa is now dating again, although for the time being she is not looking for a serious relationship, which could get in the way of her aspirations to pursue a medical degree.

If nothing else, Aixa's example is maximally removed from the *Leave It to Beaver* model of dating, marriage, and family. Life at home is not necessarily a safe haven from which to

explore the world, and it often provides models of relationships that are more frightening than soothing. As for dating, the rules of the game have changed to include arrangements that were unheard of 30 years ago. At the same time, the stakes are higher, and, as a result, the consequences of false starts can be profound.

Of course, it is one thing to lament that "things are different now." Anyone with minimal observational skills can probably cite numerous examples of relationships that have strayed from the traditional trajectory. To make sense of it in a theoretical manner is an altogether different story, however, and it is not certain that anyone has a clear-cut answer. Instead, the state of affairs resembles a just-opened puzzle. We don't quite know how the pieces fit together, and we are not even sure if the manufacturer included them all. In this particular case, the solution to solving the puzzle may begin with the recognition that relationships do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, how we think and feel about them along with our conduct is to some extent influenced by the larger physical and sociocultural context (Werner, Brown, Altman, & Staples, 1992).

Levinger (1994) identified three sets of interlinked social forces that have contributed to the changing landscape of close relationships:

1. First, historians and economists alike have long pointed out that Western societies have become increasingly concerned with issues of autonomy and personal control. Some (e.g., Dizard & Gadlin, 1990) have attributed this to the spread of commerce and industry, which operates by stimulation of consumer need. Commerce flourishes more easily when people have a sense of independence along with the ability to make choices in the marketplace. At the same time, this individualistic orientation toward independence and freedom of choice helps erode people's dependence. As a result, elders try not to burden their adult children, parents put a greater emphasis on work and leisure often at the expense of not attending to their children's support needs, and spouses develop careers independently from one another. It is possible to respond to these changes in vastly different ways. Some may be compelled to re-create rigid traditional forms of relationships (e.g., return to family values), whereas others may try to avoid any sort of permanent commitment (e.g., remain single, cohabitate). But regardless of which solution is adopted, everyone has become more preoccupied with the conduct of their relationships.
2. To some extent, the economic changes just described have empowered women to the point that their relationships with men are less and less defined in terms of "owner-property" relationships (Scanzoni, 1979a). Instead, male-female relationships have come to be more and more defined in terms of intimacy. Intimacy, by definition, implies equality, and this has put pressure on women to be more assertive and independent and pressure on men to be more sensitive and caring. Of course, at this point we are still short of having achieved complete gender equality. However, the notion that equality may be within reach may lead many to monitor their relationship more carefully. Such monitoring may paradoxically magnify even small inequalities and consequently lead to increased levels of dissatisfaction (Levinger, 1994). Interestingly, a process of this nature may help explain why wives in traditional marriages are often more satisfied with their relationship than wives with stronger expectations about equality (Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Peplau & Hill, 1990).
3. Finally, the increase in autonomy and independence and the push for equality have been accompanied by a reduction in the legal, economic, religious, and social

> barriers against the ending of marriages. In some ways, the idea that marriages do not have to last "until death do us part" can lead to the perception of perpetual choice, and thus it promotes the possibility of exiting a relationship when careful monitoring suggests that its outcomes fall below one's expectations. Of course, to see others get divorced further highlights exiting a relationship as a viable solution to marital dissatisfaction, which, among other things, shows that the microcontext of a close relationship (i.e., how individuals conduct themselves in it) can become part of a larger social force. The reduction in barriers against exiting a relationship and a corresponding reduction in barriers against entrance have triggered many to seek alternatives to marriage, including staying single and cohabitation. Just as importantly, they have provided a context that enabled people to have interracial and same-sex relationships.

These changes in relationships brought on by the changes in the macrocontext in which they take place are dramatic indeed, primarily in terms of the speed with which they happened. As late as 1967, a Columbia College male and a Barnard College female were denied graduation upon disclosing their unmarried cohabitation (Levinger, 1994). Miscegenation laws prohibiting marriage between people of different racial backgrounds were not finally abolished until that same year. And it was not until 1974 that psychologists dropped homosexuality from their compendium of psychological disorders.

Yes, a lot has changed over the past 30 years, but a lot has also remained the same. Just as they have done in the past, people will always fall in (and out of) love, except that they now have many more choices in terms of partners and the types of relationships they form. And although this can make things very complicated, the life of virtually any intimate relationship can be conceived of as unfolding in a predictable number of stages. In the *sampling* stage, people look at and compare characteristics of others to determine their suitability for an intimate relationship. In the *bargaining* stage, they exchange information about each other to determine whether they will be able to maintain a long-term, exclusive relationship. The *commitment* stage is marked by such behaviors as getting married, buying a house, and having children, with each behavior reducing the likelihood for alternative relationships. Finally, just as all close relationships have a beginning, they will eventually end as well, either through a breakup, divorce, or death. This is the *dissolution* stage, which has unique ramifications for all involved. This book is written as a journey that will take the reader through all these stages and discuss the rich history of research on all the things that matter to us when it comes to our relationships. After a brief detour into the methods social scientists use to study relationships, the journey will begin in earnest by looking at what research has taught us about how and why we become attracted to others in the first place.

Thinking Critically About Relationship Issues, Theories, and Research

- Imagine that a time machine transported you into the 22nd century. Considering how relationships have changed in the last 50 years, what would you expect to find? What might be different? What might be the same?