

Minding the Close Relationship

A THEORY OF RELATIONSHIP
ENHANCEMENT

John H. Harvey
University of Iowa

Julia Omarzu
University of Iowa



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

© Cambridge University Press 1999

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1999

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Palatino 10.25/14 pt. System DeskTopPro_{/UX}® [BV]

*A catalog record for this book is available from
the British Library.*

Table 1 and portions of the text are reproduced from J. H. Harvey and J. Omarzu,
“Minding the Close Relationship,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 1: 223–239.
Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harvey, John H., 1943–

Minding the close relationship : a theory of relationship
enhancement / John H. Harvey, Julia Omarzu.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-63318-4 (hardbound)

1. Interpersonal relations. 2. Man–woman relationships.

3. Couples. 4. Cognition. I. Omarzu, Julia. II. Title.

HM132.H347 1999

302—dc21 98-51562

CIP

ISBN 0 521 63318 4 hardback

Contents

<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page ix</i>
1 <i>Introduction to the Minding Concept</i>	1
2 <i>Minding: Definition and Components</i>	11
3 <i>Knowing and Being Known by One's Partner</i>	31
4 <i>Attributions in Close Relationships</i>	61
5 <i>Acceptance, Respect, Reciprocity, and Continuity</i>	84
6 <i>Beginnings and Endings</i>	97
7 <i>Minding in the Close Relationship Literature</i>	120
8 <i>Minding and Other Major Concepts of Closeness</i>	137
9 <i>Evidence about Minding in Close Relationships</i>	157
10 <i>An International Perspective on Minding</i>	168
11 <i>Minding in Couples Therapy and Counseling</i>	182
12 <i>Limitations and Future Directions</i>	201
<i>References</i>	215
<i>Index</i>	223

Introduction to the Minding Concept

More has been written about how relationships don't work than about how they do. We have virtually no language, other than banality, to describe the couple who has been happy together for a long time. We would like them to have a secret, we would like them to have something they could give us. Or that we could give them, other than our suspicion. There is nothing more terrorizing than the possibility that nothing is hidden. There is nothing more scandalous than a happy marriage.

Adam Phillips, *Monogamy*

What's on your mind? In answer to this question, the January 6, 1997, issue of *USA Today* indicated that 64 percent of adults in the United States said that "relationships with loved ones" were "always on their minds." This survey's outcome hints at the substance of this book. Clearly, one of the things that matter most to most people is the status of their close relationships. These relationships give them psychological sustenance and provide a sense of meaning in life. Thus, our loves, or our hopes for love, are "always" on our mind. A main thesis of this book is that we can use our minds in a much more powerful and enduring way to achieve closeness than is often recognized in either popular or scholarly treatments of how to achieve satisfaction in close relationships.

The opening statement by Adam Phillips also resonates with a second theme of this book: We do not know very well how to talk about couples who achieve and maintain closeness over a long pe-

riod. We do not understand well the processes by which their love is preserved and even enhanced over time. Furthermore, Phillips's implication that perhaps "nothing is hidden" regarding such long-term closeness overlaps with the concept of "minding" that is articulated in this book. Minding may seem at first glance terribly simple – too simple to be scientific or even valid in terms of common sense. Yet we believe that it represents a central process by which people maintain closeness.

Minding is hypothesized to be a process by which couples can maintain close, satisfying relationships over long periods of time. While perhaps simple on the surface, in its detail and execution minding is complex and requires the development of finely tuned interpersonal skills. Before discussing the details of minding, however, we introduce it by describing how the concept developed.

MUSING ABOUT THE WHYS AND HOWS OF THE MAINTENANCE OF CLOSENESS

The idea for this conception of minding goes back to the spring of 1995. The first author began to jot down notes about the fact that in the relationship literature, there have been more than thirty years of research on the ingredients of what attracts people to one another and what eventually leads to closeness. However, despite this work and a burgeoning interest in close relationships in the social and behavioral sciences, we still have too little understanding of the processes involved in *long-term*, successful relating.

How do people maintain their closeness and satisfaction over an extended period of time? Students in relationship classes frequently ask this question. Many have observed their parents' divorces and subsequent start-ups and dissolutions with different lovers, and their own relationship peaks, valleys, and dissolutions. They have seen many relationship endings in their twenty or so years, but few "lastings." They may have seen their grandparents make it to their golden anniversary, but they wonder whether relationships are now so different that their situations may not be comparable with those

of their grandparents. This seems discouraging to those who hope for true “life partners” to share the ups and downs of their futures.

In answer to these kinds of questions about the dynamics of long-term closeness, we as instructors tend to stammer out answers about the importance of making wise selections of mates in the first place, as if what happens over the “extended period” is not similarly critical. Or we come up with platitudes, responses such as “It takes a lot of work” or “It takes regular communication.” It was partly frustration with the insufficiency of these answers that led to the conception of *minding*. Thus, in the wee hours of the morning, the first author began to write a short paper on this enigma.

Then, in the early fall of 1995, the first author had the good fortune to begin to work with the second author in the Personality and Social Psychology graduate program at The University of Iowa. The maintenance question was a puzzle that intrigued both of us. We also shared an interest in exploring an emphasis upon the *mind's* role in relating. Very soon we began to trade our individual guesses about the correct formulae or interrelated components for *minding*. We eventually integrated our ideas in a 1997 article published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Review*.

When we speak of the mind, and the use of the mind in relating, we mean cognition, the “thinking” work we do each day. This could specifically include our thoughts, memories, knowledge acquisition, decisions, judgments, and attributions. Although we consider emotion to be an important aspect of relationships, our theory of “*minding*” addresses how our thinking processes may impact those emotions.

As we note in the Preface, we are indebted to Norbert Kerr and to the anonymous reviewers who challenged us to make the argument more coherent and better fitted to other works in the literature than we had initially conceived to be relevant. These reviewers, and others, helped us build the theory and delineate the implications that are presented here.

So, the “short” article on the mystery of maintaining close relationships became an essay about the importance of the *mind* in

achieving long-term closeness. But the elaboration of this idea required a lot of “minding” itself and study of the relevant literature. And it turned into a very long article. Strangely enough, *there was no previous analysis in the vast close relationship literature that emphasized the mind and its functioning as vital to relationship closeness*. It is this emphasis and an accompanying delineation of the hows of relationship functioning that our subsequent writing, including this book, has attempted to provide.

A further compelling stimulus for this book has been the many discussions of “minding” we have had with students in interpersonal relationship classes, with research colleagues, and with participants in our research on the topic. From the beginning, students have been drawn to the idea of minding. And why not? What do we do in higher education other than espouse and argue the role of the human mind in regulating and affecting the course of our lives? Students seem to appreciate the logic of the minding approach. It has a set of criteria that makes sense in terms of their attempts to be close to others in daily life.

But the larger community of scholars and interested readers has never questioned whether people use their minds in close relationships. Of course, they do. Rather, their questions are about how and when, especially regarding the search for long-term closeness. Answering these questions is a daunting task. While trying to describe the ways in which the mind operates in relationships in general, we also need to take into account the major categories of social and personal differences among people. People have different personality qualities, grow up and live in different cultures and social situations, and are socialized in vastly different types of families with different experiences and backgrounds. Individuals are born with differing biological systems and sometimes develop different temperaments in conjunction with those systems and different social situations. Further, various circumstances also affect literacy, intelligence, and physical health, which in turn may influence social skills and memory. Thus people are most likely to have very different abilities in carrying out close relationships.

A theory of relationship closeness and satisfaction, which mind-

ing is, must be quite carefully constructed so that it applies to as many different people in as many different social milieus as possible. So far, as we will elaborate in this book, we have good reason to believe in the generality of our theory. It covers much territory in addressing what we know about long-term closeness. As will be discussed, other conceptions (e.g., a general theory of intimacy) exist that also cover much of the same territory. We will try to distinguish minding from these conceptions. Our hope is that minding can be used as a framework theory that will enable relationship scholars, students, and laypersons to better understand and discuss what keeps people together, and happy together.

SYNERGY: A CENTRAL QUALITY OF MINDING

In the dictionary, “synergy” refers to “combined or cooperative action or force.” In this book, it refers to a central quality of minding that will be defined and discussed: Couples working together can create more of a general, consensual meaning of closeness than they do separately. “Together” is a vital aspect of minding (see the discussion of reciprocity). Minding first creates this working-together synergy. Then, once created, the synergy reinforces and produces further minding. We will argue that minding does not fully occur without the existence of this synergy.

Relationship synergy does not represent only “holy moments” or the rare occurrence of special times – what have been referred to as epiphanies – in couples’ mutual experiences. Rather, in our view, synergy is more of a prosaic continuing feature of minding. It encompasses a sense of bonding and completeness that couples may carry with them throughout days, weeks, or even years.

We also argue that minding is not something a couple can do one day, neglect for a week, and then resume with effectiveness. It is a thought and activity pattern that must be built into the day-to-day realities of the couple. To continue in a state of relationship synergy, the minding process must not stop.

Synergy therefore reflects what we see as the ultimate goal of the minding process. All of the components we describe – the patterns

of thinking and behaving, the striving for relationship stability – are centered on the goal of relationship synergy. A well-minded couple feels stronger, better, and healthier together than apart.

LOOKING FOR DATA

Some readers, especially scholars in the area of relationship research, may feel this book is premature. We do not have large amounts of data collected specifically to validate the concepts behind minding theory. We still feel, however, that this book can make an important contribution. Our reasons include the following:

(1) The theory involves several interrelated components, which require time-consuming research to test thoroughly and to evaluate carefully in the context of other conceptions of closeness and satisfaction. Although that technical enterprise can be and is being pursued currently, we believe that efforts to amass data can be done simultaneously with presenting the theory.

(2) We also believe that there is enough evidence of various sorts available to begin to support the theory. Part of what we have done in creating minding theory is to combine some of the principles established by other researchers, some working in the area of relationships, some in other areas of psychology. In many ways we have not “invented” the theory so much as put the pieces together in a new way. The evidence collected by others validates the ideas behind our theory, if not its exact form and application to relationships. This book, in part, explores some of the diversity of this evidence.

(3) Because we believe in the theory, we want to present it as widely as possible so that varying audiences can evaluate it and “use” it, if they find elements of its argument to be compelling. Such an outcome would be marvelous to us.

Other scholars have already contributed to the development of our ideas by being cynical, challenging, or supportive. Many have offered points of revision. Some have suggested that the ideas are “too obvious.” Ironically, minding may seem both too involved to be studied easily, and at the same time too obvious and simple.

We recall that the ideas in Fritz Heider's book *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1958) were circulated in memo form for over fifteen years in the 1940s and 1950s, but were scoffed at and thought to be much too transparent to have any value for our understanding of social perception processes. Today, scholars in social psychology recognize Heider's ideas as profound and as having been seminal in their impact. Probably all thinkers and writers should be warmed by this story.

We have no illusions that minding will be as important to understanding closeness as have Heider's ideas for understanding social perception. Still, we have confidence that there *is* something new and potentially valuable here.

As apparent in various parts of this book, we are writing for multiple audiences. We are partially writing for scholars of close relationship phenomena, but we also want to produce this book now for laypersons, thoughtful general students of close relationships, and clinicians or family therapists. The reactions of our students have encouraged us to believe that the message of the book will have value to these broader audiences. We have written some chapters with them specifically in mind.

We hope also that teachers will find the book of use as a supplement in courses on close relationships. In addition to our argument about the merit of minding, we provide integrative discussions of many major concepts pertinent to relationship closeness. These should be of value to classes studying the maintenance of close relationships.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In this book, we present the concept of minding as an invaluable process involved in long-term closeness and satisfaction in human relationships. On initial scrutiny, the idea may seem quite simple. It centers on the use of one's mind to facilitate relating to a partner. We use the gerund "minding" to emphasize the role of the mind in this process.

We stress that the process is far from simple, especially in its

execution in close relationships. Even though we emphasize the mind as critical to closeness, we also recognize the role of behavior as similarly essential. We believe that the mind should take precedence in our understanding of closeness because it can regulate behavior and social interaction.

People plan much that they do. People can calculate and anticipate outcomes. People can imagine what others think and feel, especially others to whom they are close. People can learn from their mistakes. These are minding acts when they occur within a framework of caring about a close other and taking actions consistent with that caring.

In this book we emphasize minding as it applies to relationships *after people have made a commitment* (whether in marriage or otherwise). By commitment, we mean a mutual expectation that a couple's relationship will continue for an indefinite, long-term period. This expectation can be manifested in explicit agreement or in the implicit private judgments of partners (Parks, 1997). However, parts of the minding process may be useful both in courtship prior to commitment and in movement away from a close relationship. Hence, we include a chapter on minding in courtship and relationship dissolution.

We most frequently use heterosexual, romantic relationships as our examples. Most of the research in the close relationships field has involved this type of relationship. We do believe, however, that our ideas apply equally well to homosexual romantic relationships, to close, nonromantic friendships, and to some familial relationships.

Throughout the book we examine some related concepts that have special relevance to the use of the mind in achieving closeness. These include Beck's (1988) explanations of why "love is never enough" in achieving closeness, Schwartz's (1994) descriptions of the "peer marriage," and the ingredients of "the good marriage" delineated by Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1995) book of that title. We expand on and compare these and other conceptions of close relationships with the logic of minding. The concerns of these scholars are at the center of our inquiry into minding as well.

For the sake of convenience, we refer to close relationships as being “well minded” or “not well minded.” We recognize that there is most probably a continuum of minding. Some couples may be very skilled at minding, while others are clearly not. It is probable, however, that a couple could fall between these two extremes as well.

A brief outline of the chapters is as follows. Chapter 2 presents a description of the minding theory; Chapter 3, an in-depth discussion of the knowing-other component and its relevance to other psychological and close relationship concepts. How do people both learn about their partners and allow themselves to be known by their partners? Is there a critical balance between knowing and being known in order for minding to be effective? We consider these matters in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 discusses in detail the attribution component and its relevance to other psychological and close relationship concepts. Given that attribution is frequently going on in our minds, is it always relevant to minding? Or is it a certain kind of attribution about our partners and the relationship that matters most? These questions are considered in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 presents an overview of evidence pertaining to the remaining components of minding: acceptance, reciprocity, and continuity. How are these elements integrated into the minding package? What do they bring to a relationship that facilitates its survival?

Minding in courtship, casual friendship, dissolution, and familial relationships is addressed in Chapter 6. We consider possible differences in how much people use their minds in developing approaches to relating in these kinds of situations. Is minding a part of close friendships? How can minding be of use when relationships are just beginning or ending?

Chapter 7 discusses minding in the context of current close relationship literature and other general concepts of closeness. The minding concept is applied to mainstream relationship literature questions and lines of work. We compare and contrast these, and try to make the case that minding is an original and useful idea for this literature.

In Chapter 8 minding is compared to treatments in major relationship books about closeness, especially the concepts of “love is never enough,” “peer marriage,” and “the good marriage.” In this discussion, we have selected three major approaches to maintenance of relationships to which we believe minding is highly comparable.

Evidence from various sources about minding is presented in Chapter 9. At the time of the writing of this book, we have collected various types of evidence pertinent to minding from young couples, college students, and middle-aged persons in and out of relationships.

Further evidence about issues in relating and minding-type activities, from an international perspective, is presented in Chapter 10. The first author spent several months in Romania interviewing couples and singles about close relationships there. The perspectives provided by these respondents are valuable to the overall picture of how people try to make relationships work in very difficult socio-economic conditions. At the time of the interviews, Romanians averaged about \$100 per month in income and faced about 150 percent annual inflation. Situations of loss, as evidenced by the large numbers of orphan children, orphan pets, and beggars, are pervasive there. How do relationships work in such a climate? How do these and other potent external conditions influence the maintenance of close relationships? These questions are considered in Chapter 10.

Chapter 11 examines how the minding ideas may be extrapolated to therapy and applications contexts. We believe that minding has considerable merit for counseling couples interested in the growth of their relationships. We articulate how the minding strategy might work, and we contrast it to other “self-help” approaches.

In the final chapter, we conclude with a discussion of the overall issues and questions arising from the conceptualization of minding. We consider possible alternatives for maintenance and speculate about future directions for minding theory and research.