



PART I

FOUNDATIONAL IDEAS OF RELATIONSHIP SCIENCE

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Excerpt
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THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELATIONSHIPS

The Uniqueness and Universality of Relationships

Reginald (“Reg”) Kenneth Dwight, born in Pinner, England in 1947, suffered a lonely and difficult childhood. As he later wrote, “My dad was strict and remote and had a terrible temper; my mum was argumentative and prone to dark moods. When they were together, all I can remember are icy silences or screaming rows” (John, 2019). To escape this stressful home life, Reg found refuge playing his grandmother’s piano, and his musical genius emerged quickly. As his parents’ marriage fell apart (they divorced when he was 13), Reg’s future in music began to take shape. Soon, Reg – the man we now know as Elton John – hit the world scene. With popular songs and a reputation for brilliant, wildly theatrical performances, Elton John was singing, playing, and hand-standing his way toward mega-star status. His love life, however, was on unsolid ground. Elton John’s relationships, be they with women or men, never lasted, despite his desire for a long-term commitment.

Hoping to change his relationship patterns, Elton John proposed to Renate Blauel, the woman who would become his wife on Valentine’s Day in 1984. Despite an auspicious date for a wedding, this marriage had a rocky run, not made easier by Elton John’s alcohol and drug addiction. After four years together, the couple divorced. Later, in 1993, the now sober Elton John met Canadian-born David Furnish, an advertising executive fifteen years his junior, and felt an immediate attraction to David’s maturity and independence. Observers noted how David embraced Elton John’s lifestyle, fame, and public image in a way that previous partners had not. After twelve years together, Elton John and David Furnish affirmed their commitment in a Civil Partnership Ceremony on December 21, 2005, the day Great Britain recognized same-sex couples as having many of the same rights as married different-sex couples. Since then, they have welcomed two children into their family (see Figure 1.1). “Our love has grown stronger and stronger,” Elton John stated in a public interview, adding, “you have to work at it” (Kimble, 2017).

Elton John’s romantic relationship experiences are at once both unique and universal. They are unique because they reflect the specifics of his personality and personal history intersecting with those of his chosen partners, and they exist within the specific sociocultural context of his international fame in England in the late 1900s. Yet, Elton John’s motivation to find love, and the highs and lows on that journey, are also quite universal. Even though relationship experiences are idiosyncratic, we can see consistent patterns in how they form, how their dynamics take shape, and how these relationship dynamics affect the partners’ well-being. In other words, all relationships share critical commonalities and predictable differences that make them a rich topic to study empirically.



Figure 1.1 Elton John and Renate Blauel celebrating their 1984 Valentine's Day wedding (a); David Furnish and Elton John with their two children (b). Why do some relationships flourish while others do not? (Photo: Patrick Riviere / Hulton Archive / Getty Images [a] and Michael Kovac / Getty Images Entertainment [b])

This chapter will introduce you to the exciting world of relationship science. You will learn about the human drive for belonging, how we define and categorize relationships, and why relationships are critically important. Your goal in this chapter is to gain appreciation for aspects of relationships that are common across people and the diverse ways that people can experience their relationships.



GUIDING QUESTIONS

Consider these questions as you read this chapter:

- What is relationship science?
- What is a romantic relationship?
- Why do people need relationships?
- How do relationships contribute to psychological and physical health?

Relationship Science

What questions come to mind when you think about Elton John's relationships? What questions do you have about your own relationships? Relationships are central to our lives, yet we often feel they are mysterious, random, or impossible to predict. Quite on the contrary. As you will see, although early relationship scientists encountered considerable skepticism, the science of relationships today is a flourishing field that has produced extraordinary and important insights into all aspects of human relationships. Let's start at the beginning.

Early Attempts to Study Relationships Scientifically

Rigorous scientific inquiry takes resources. You need lab space, equipment, and technology; education, training, and expertise; and participants willing to offer their time, trust, and

information. Plus, when scientists focus on one question, they do so at the expense of investigating other questions; funding that supports one line of inquiry deprives a different line of inquiry. Any research endeavor, therefore, should be worth all the investment. Are relationships worth it? Should we commit resources to the theoretical and empirical study of relationships?

Historically, not everyone has thought so. Take, for example, William Proxmire, a former US Senator from Wisconsin. Senator Proxmire created the notorious Golden Fleece Awards, ironic honors he bestowed to government agencies when they engaged in what he judged as wasteful spending of taxpayer money. In March 1975, Senator Proxmire presented his inaugural Golden Fleece Award to the National Science Foundation (NSF) for giving \$84,000 of grant money to support one of the first scientific investigations of love. Research on love, he argued, was an obvious waste of money.

The fallout from Proxmire's "award" was swift and consequential for the pioneering scientists studying relationships. Elaine Hatfield, the principal investigator of the awarded NSF grant, became the main target (Hatfield, 2006). The press derided her work, and she received threatening mail by the bagful. While some people stood steadily in her corner, the majority seemed ready to relegate the study of love permanently to poets and philosophers. A magazine took an informal poll and only 12.5 percent of readers were in favor of applying the scientific method to a study of romantic love (Hatfield, 2006). The Golden Fleece Award also shined its unwelcomed spotlight on Ellen Berscheid, who joined Hatfield as a polarizing figure, but a visionary scientist whose research and writings were laying the groundwork for decades of future research (Reis et al., 2013). The Golden Fleece Award proved to be a serious setback for the scientific study of love and relationships, but on account of Berscheid's and Hatfield's work, which gained increasing traction in the 1980s and 1990s, relationship research would nevertheless soon coalesce into what we now recognize as **relationship science**.



RESEARCHER SPOTLIGHT: Elaine Hatfield, PhD

How did you become a relationship scientist?

In 1962, I realized that, in the daytime, all my pals, who were working with Gordon Bower, worked with rats in a runway, constructing math models, but in the evening, we complained about our romantic lives. When I suggested we might conduct research on love, I received mockery. When I suggested the same thing to Leon Festinger's research group, they were equally mocking. But, of course, I went ahead. Today, thousands of researchers work on this topic.

How did you stay motivated during your career and what did you enjoy?

One of the ways I stayed motivated was to always work on several topics at once, so when one failed I was optimistic about others. As for what I enjoyed, I very much enjoyed working with colleagues and with students, and I love research.



Figure 1.2 Dr. Elaine Hatfield is a professor of Psychology at the University of Hawai'i. (Photo courtesy of Elaine Hatfield, PhD.)

What makes for a good relationship scientist and what's next for the field?

To me, curiosity is a quality that makes for a great relationship scientist. In the future, I would love to see the field of relationship science expand to include more cross-cultural research.

Relationship Science Today

Relationship science today is a vibrant, thriving academic discipline. The last decade alone saw 1.5 million publications relating to romantic relationships (Sharkey et al., 2022); clearly, what Hatfield (2006) once termed, “l’affaire Proxmire” is history. Today, relationship science is an interdisciplinary field devoted to understanding all aspects of human relationships. Its central goals are to (1) describe relationship dynamics (i.e., relationship-relevant thoughts, emotions, and behaviors) and (2) identify the precursors and predict the consequences of these relationship dynamics. Regarding the second goal, being able to see what leads to, and results from, certain dynamics gives us a chance to differentiate the healthy processes from those that are less adaptive. Research into these questions can reveal how joining, participating, or leaving a relationship affects individuals, their broader social network, and society at large. In addition to **basic research** goals, that is, gaining knowledge about relationships for the sake of understanding, some relationship scientists also conduct **applied research**, which is designed to inform interventions to improve relationship dynamics.

Relationship researchers have the challenging job of demystifying complex interpersonal dynamics. **Dyadic relationships** – those relationships between two people – contain several sources of information and influence. Each individual brings their own personality, history, and goals into the relationship. Through these factors, dyad-members influence each other bidirectionally. For example, Elton John’s touring lifestyle impacted each of his partners, and his partners’ unique personalities similarly impacted Elton John’s experiences. An additional, albeit invisible, player that influences and is influenced by each partner is the relationship itself. Every relationship develops its own identity and is therefore greater than the sum of its parts (i.e., the partners). In relationships defined by more than two partners, the same principles apply, but in a triadic, quadratic, or other (you get the picture) structure. Further, as we will discuss in a moment, each relationship is situated in a broader context that has a role in shaping partners and the relationship. This complexity is one reason that relationship science is so interesting and offers so many opportunities to explore meaningful questions.

Since the early work of Berscheid and Hatfield, relationship science has flourished, profiting from its multidisciplinary nature. Fields like the biomedical sciences, anthropology, communication, gerontology, philosophy, education, and economics join the more dominant voices of psychology (e.g., social, personality, evolutionary, clinical/counseling, cognitive), behavioral neuroscience, human development, and family sciences to round out what we currently know about human relationships. These multiple voices make a difference. A study of passionate love within romantic relationships, for example, can be advanced by knowing the neurochemical underpinnings of emotion, by examining cultural differences in expressions of love, by considering love as an adaptation that promotes bonding, and by documenting how passion changes over the life course. Each discipline offers important insights that help reveal more about human relationships.



Figure 1.3 The importance of recognizing the significance of context and diversity is abundantly clear when we think about commitment-related rituals that occur cross-culturally. Every sociocultural context, for example, provides constraints and opportunities that influence the way in which people express their romantic interests, form relationships, and live out their relationships. (Photo: PeopleImages / iStock / Getty Images Plus [a] and Rawpixel / iStock / Getty Images Plus [b])

Current Directions in Relationship Science

Having accumulated a basic understanding of how relationships are built, experienced, and broken, the field of relationship science is now digging deeper. Its questions are becoming more nuanced and specialized. For example, relationship scientists are now identifying boundary conditions for established effects (e.g., when is a friend's support no longer beneficial?) and revealing intermediary factors that explain relationship outcomes (e.g., is support beneficial *because* it communicates affection?). They are asking directional questions to differentiate causal forces from outcomes, and they are zeroing in on differences between laboratory-established patterns and how people experience relationship events in real life (e.g., do people actually choose romantic partners who have the traits that they say they want?). New ways to access data (e.g., Big Data) and advanced analytic methods (e.g., machine learning) are further energizing the field.

Relationship scientists are also moving the field toward a greater focus on context and diversity. **Context** refers to the setting, framework, or environment in which something occurs. It is both difficult to notice and incredibly influential, and while context is not a new focus, it has new energy today (Schoebi & Campos, 2019). After all, imagine what Elton John's relationship with his husband would be like if they fell in love in another culture (e.g., Russia, Nigeria) or during another time (e.g., 100 years ago, 50 years from now)? Relationships are clearly fundamentally tethered to their contexts. They are also inherently diverse. On account of its increasing attention to relationship diversity, relationship science is on the verge of an inclusion revolution. We will return to this important idea in detail, later in this chapter.

The Need to Belong

Could you imagine a life with zero social relationships? No one to look at; no one to think about; no one to talk to you; no one to touch you. Prolonged aloneness is such a strange and

terrifying idea that it regularly captures screenwriters' attention (e.g., *The Martian*, *Cast Away*, and *Gravity*), but we do not need to go to outer space or a remote desert island to realize how critical social interactions are to our well-being. Consider what happens to your thoughts and emotions when you accidentally offend a friend; when your romantic partner will not hold your hand; or when someone you care about does not text you back.

The Damaging Effects of Social Isolation and Exclusion

As humans, we are deeply social creatures. From infancy to old age, the profoundly negative psychological, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical outcomes of neglect or a lack of social connection underscores how much we need other people (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). The consequences of isolation are even more dire when people are subjected to **social exclusion**, a state of emotional or physical separation from others which is perceived as intentional and punitive (Wessermann et al., 2016). Consider **solitary confinement**, a form of social exclusion used in the prison system and widely judged as a form of torture. Solitary confinement typically involves separating an inmate from the general prison population for 22 to 24 hours a day for at least fifteen consecutive days (Resnik et al., 2018). As shown in Figure 1.4, some solitary confinement sentences span months, even years. National survey data show that over 60,000 inmates in the United States, a number equivalent to approximately every resident in Santa Cruz, California, or every resident of Grand Junction, Colorado, are living their day-to-day life in solitary confinement. This group has over-representation of Black men and Black women, relative to their proportion in the general prison population.

As you might expect, the psychological toll of solitary confinement is considerable. Quantitative and qualitative data show higher rates of depression and anxiety in solitary confinement prisoners compared with the general inmate population, and substantial numbers of people in solitary confinement report significant psychological distress, serious mental illness, self-harm attempts, and suicide attempts (Reiter et al., 2020). These associations do not demonstrate that solitary confinement *causes* these outcomes, as mental health



Figure 1.4 The percentage of inmates in solitary confinement by duration of confinement in thirty-three jurisdictions, inclusive of over 31,000 inmates. (Source: Adapted with permission from Bertsch et al. [2020])

issues or psychopathology may factor into receiving solitary confinement sentences, yet individuals in solitary confinement experience it as unnatural and psychologically challenging. Said one inmate, “It’s dehumanizing. No human contact. As [a] human being, I feel like we’re meant to socialize, and it [has] an effect on your mentality while you’re sitting in the cell” (Reiter et al., 2020, p. 559).

Are we “meant to socialize” like this inmate suggests? Yes. According to the **belongingness hypothesis**, people have an innate, fundamental motivation to form, maintain, and keep close interpersonal connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This motivation is presumed to drive all people, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, culture, or other differentiating factors. It suggests that in the same way humans require sleep, food, and water, they also have a basic requirement for satisfying relationships on which their thriving, and indeed their survival, depends.



IN THE NEWS

Social Distancing and COVID-19

What was it like for you when, in 2020, your daily social interactions experienced an abrupt change? Recall how COVID-19 (“Coronavirus”), a highly contagious and potentially deadly respiratory virus, threatened to overwhelm healthcare systems, leading governments to require that people practice *social distancing*. Social distancing involves physically spacing oneself from others (e.g., by six feet). Overnight, businesses closed their offices and shifted to tele-communication, students transitioned to online learning, people stopped traveling, and, in many areas, gatherings of more than ten people were prohibited. People accustomed to interacting with dozens of people over the course of a day were now engaging in very few in-person conversations, if any at all (Figure 1.5).

As you might expect from the belongingness hypothesis, many people found this new reality incredibly difficult, with some failing to resist the urge to gather and others finding refuge in virtual communication.

Public service announcements emphasized that social distancing need not result in social disconnection, but widespread difficulties with social isolation led public health campaigns to focus on preventing loneliness, fostering relationships, and maintaining psychological health. The heavy burden of navigating months of constrained social interactions highlights how ingrained the need to belong is in human psychology.



Figure 1.5 In what ways do virtual conversations help fulfill your belonging needs and how do they fall short? (Photo: Oscar Wong / Moment / Getty Images)

Locating belonging as a fundamental need implies that it is a universal human feature, one that is etched into the very basic biological and psychological systems that define being human. As such, the need to belong likely reflects an evolutionary past in which being with other people conferred critical advantages for reproduction and survival. Think about it: children who formed attachments with their parents (and their parents with them) may have enjoyed better odds of survival; people motivated to stay with their sexual partners may have shepherded more children safely toward adulthood; people compelled to live in groups (e.g., families, communities) may have benefited from greater safety, cooperative problem solving, and resource sharing, not to mention having others around to care for them when they were sick or injured. The motivation to be with other people likely provided our ancestors with such an impressive array of benefits that it ultimately became a dominating characteristic of those who survived and reproduced. Over time, the need to belong was thus engineered as a core human drive.

The Importance of Social Acceptance

Aloneness is appealing at times, but healthy and well-adjusted people tend to immensely value their relationships. Relationships provide people with the feeling of **social acceptance**, which helps fulfill their belongingness needs (Leary, 2010). Social acceptance is inherently rewarding and much more desired than its painful counterpoint, social exclusion (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). Consider Figure 1.6. Recall that social exclusion

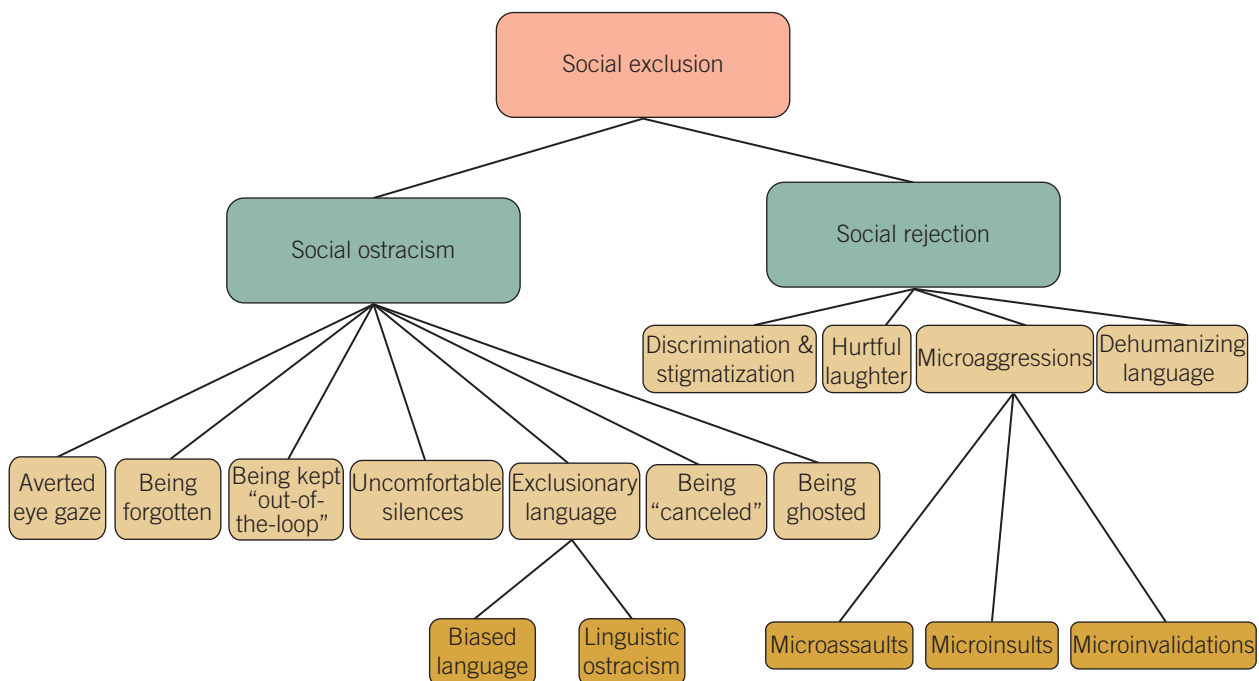


Figure 1.6 A taxonomy of social exclusion. Which types of social exclusion have you experienced or enacted against others? (Source: Drawn based on data in part from Wesselmann et al. [2016])