

# Intimate relationship

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An **intimate relationship** is an interpersonal relationship that involves physical and/or emotional intimacy. Physical intimacy is characterized by friendship, platonic love, romantic love or sexual activity. While the term *intimate relationship* commonly implies the inclusion of a **sexual relationship**, the term is also used as a euphemism for a relationship that is strictly sexual.

Intimate relationships play a central role in the overall human experience.<sup>[1]</sup> Humans have a general desire to belong and to love, which is usually satisfied within an intimate relationship.<sup>[2]</sup> These relationships involve feelings of liking or loving one or more people, romance, physical or sexual attraction, sexual relationships, or emotional and personal support between the members.<sup>[1]</sup> Intimate relationships allow a social network for people to form strong emotional attachments.<sup>[1]</sup>

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## Intimacy

*Intimacy* generally refers to the feeling of being in a close personal association and belonging together. It is a familiar and very close affective connection with another as a result of a bond that is formed through knowledge and experience of the other. Genuine intimacy in human relationships requires dialogue, transparency, vulnerability, and reciprocity. The verb "intimate" means "to state or make known". The activity of intimating (making known) underpins the meanings of "intimate" when used as a noun and adjective. The noun "intimate" means a person with whom one has a particularly close relationship. This was clarified by Dalton (1959) who discusses how anthropologists and ethnographic

researchers access "inside information" from within a particular cultural setting by establishing networks of intimates capable (and willing) to provide information unobtainable through formal channels.<sup>[3]</sup> The adjective "intimate" indicates detailed knowledge of a thing or person.

In human relationships, the meaning and level of intimacy varies within and between relationships. In anthropological research, intimacy is considered the product of a successful seduction, a process of rapport building that enables parties to confidently disclose previously hidden thoughts and feelings. Intimate conversations become the basis for "confidences" (secret knowledge) that bind people together.<sup>[4]</sup>

To sustain intimacy for any length of time requires well-developed emotional and interpersonal awareness. Intimacy requires an ability to be both separate and together participants in an intimate relationship. Murray Bowen called this "self-differentiation". It results in a connection in which there is an emotional range involving both robust conflict and intense loyalty.<sup>[5]</sup> Lacking the ability to differentiate oneself from the other is a form of symbiosis, a state that is different from intimacy, even if feelings of closeness are similar.

From a center of self-knowledge and self differentiation, intimate behavior joins family members and close friends as well as those in love. It evolves through reciprocal self-disclosure and candor. Poor skills in developing intimacy can lead to getting too close too quickly; struggling to find the boundary and to sustain connection; being poorly skilled as a friend, rejecting self-disclosure or even rejecting friendships and those who have them.<sup>[6]</sup> Psychological consequences of intimacy problems are found in adults who have difficulty in forming and maintaining intimate relationships. Individuals often experience the human limitations of their partners, and develop a fear of adverse consequences of disrupted intimate relationships. Studies show that fear of intimacy is negatively related to comfort with emotional closeness and with relationship satisfaction, and positively related to loneliness and trait anxiety.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Types

Scholars distinguish between four different forms of intimacy: physical, emotional, cognitive, and experiential.<sup>[8]</sup>

- Physical intimacy is sensual proximity or touching,<sup>[9]</sup> examples include being inside someone's personal space, holding hands, hugging, kissing, petting or other sexual activity.
- Emotional intimacy, particularly in sexual relationships, typically develops after a certain level of trust has been reached and personal bonds have been established. The emotional connection of "falling in love", however, has both a biochemical dimension, driven through reactions in the body stimulated by sexual attraction (PEA, phenylethylamine),<sup>[10]</sup> and a social dimension driven by "talk" that follows from regular physical closeness or sexual union.<sup>[11]</sup>



Bonding between a mother and child

- Cognitive or intellectual intimacy takes place when two people exchange thoughts, share ideas and enjoy similarities and differences between their opinions. If they can do this in an open and comfortable way, they can become quite intimate in an intellectual area.
- Experiential intimacy is when two people get together to actively involve themselves with each other, probably saying very little to each other, not sharing any thoughts or many feelings, but being involved in mutual activities with one another. Imagine observing two house painters whose brushstrokes seemed to be playing out a duet on the side of the house. They may be shocked to think that they were engaged in an intimate activity with each other, however from an experiential point of view, they would be very intimately involved.<sup>[12]</sup>

Distinguishing intimate (communal) relationships from strategic (exchange) relationships may also be a factor. Physical intimacy occurs in the latter but it is governed by a higher-order strategy, of which the other person may not be aware. One example is getting close to someone in order to get something from them or give them something. That "something" might not be offered so freely if it did not appear to be an intimate exchange and if the ultimate strategy had been visible at the outset.<sup>[13]</sup> Mills and Clark (1982) found that strategic (exchange) relationships are fragile and easily break down when there is any level of disagreement. Emotionally intimate (communal) relationships are much more robust and can survive considerable (and even ongoing) disagreements.

## Physical and emotional

Love is an important factor in physical and emotional intimate relationships. Love is qualitatively and quantitatively different from liking, and the difference is not merely in the presence or absence of sexual attraction. There are three types of love in a relationship: passionate love, companionate love, and sacrificial love. Sacrificial love reflects the subsumption of the individual self will within a union and is said to be expressed within the Christian Godhead and towards humanity. Companionate love involves diminished potent feelings of attachment, an authentic and enduring bond, a sense of mutual commitment, the profound feeling of mutual caring, feeling proud of a mate's accomplishment, and the satisfaction that comes from sharing goals and perspective. In contrast, passionate love is marked by infatuation, intense preoccupation with the partner, throes of ecstasy, and feelings of exhilaration that come from being reunited with the partner.<sup>[14]</sup>

*Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms....  
So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle  
gently entwist;  
the female ivy so enwrings the barky fingers of  
the elm.*

*O, how I love thee! How I dote on thee!*

– Titania, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 4,  
Scene 1

Two people who are in an intimate relationship with one another are often called a couple, especially if the members of that couple have placed some degree of permanency to their relationship. These couples often provide the emotional security that is necessary for them to accomplish other tasks, particularly forms of labor or work.

## Empirical research

The use of empirical investigations in 1898 was a major revolution in social analysis.<sup>[15]</sup> A study conducted by Monroe,<sup>[16]</sup> examined the traits and habits of children in selecting a friend. Some of the attributes included in the study were kindness, cheerfulness and honesty.<sup>[1]</sup> Monroe asked 2336 children aged 7 to 16 to identify "what kind of chum do you like best?" The results of the study indicate that children preferred a friend that was their own age, of the same sex, of the same physical size, a friend with light features (hair and eyes), friends that did not engage in conflict, someone that was kind to animals and humans, and finally that they were honest. Two characteristics that children reported as least important included wealth and religion.<sup>[16]</sup>

The study by Monroe was the first to mark the significant shift in the study of intimate relationships from analysis that was primarily philosophical to those with empirical validity.<sup>[1]</sup> This study is said to have finally marked the beginning of relationship science.<sup>[1]</sup> However, in the years following Monroe's influential study, very few similar studies were done. There were limited studies done on children's friendships, courtship and marriages, and families in the 1930s but few relationship studies were conducted before or during World War II.<sup>[15]</sup> Intimate relationships did not become a broad focus of research again until the 1960s and 1970s when there was a vast amount of relationship studies being published.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Current studies

Today, the study of intimate relationships uses participants from diverse groups and examines a wide variety of topics that include family relations, friendships, and romantic relationships, usually over a long period.<sup>[1]</sup> Current study includes both positive and negative or unpleasant aspects of relationships.

Research being conducted by John Gottman (2010) and his colleagues involves inviting married couples into a pleasant setting, in which they revisit the disagreement that caused their last argument. Although the participants are aware that they are being videotaped, they soon become so absorbed in their own interaction that they forget they are being recorded.<sup>[1]</sup> With the second-by-second analysis of observable reactions as well as emotional ones, Gottman is able to predict with 93% accuracy the fate of the couples' relationship.<sup>[1]</sup>

Another current area of research into intimate relationships is conducted by Terri Orbuch and Joseph Veroff (2002). They monitor newlywed couples using self-reports over a long period (a longitudinal study). Participants are required to provide extensive reports about the natures and the statuses of their relationships.<sup>[1]</sup> Although many of the marriages have ended since the beginning of the study, this type of relationship study allows researchers to track marriages from start to finish by conducting follow-up



Romantic relationship is often crowned with marriage.

interviews with the participants in order to determine which factors are associated with marriages that last and which with those that do not.<sup>[1]</sup> Though the field of relationship science is still relatively young, research conducted by researchers from many different disciplines continues to broaden the field.<sup>[1]</sup>

Evidence also points to the role of a number of contextual factors that can impact intimate relationships. In a recent study on the impact of Hurricane Katrina on marital and partner relationships, researchers found that while many reported negative changes in their relationships, a number also experienced positive changes. More specifically, the advent of Hurricane Katrina led to a number of environmental stressors (for example, unemployment, prolonged separation) that negatively impacted intimate relationships for many couples, though other couples' relationships grew stronger as a result of new employment opportunities, a greater sense of perspective, and higher levels of communication and support.<sup>[17]</sup> As a result, environmental factors are also understood to contribute heavily to the strength of intimate relationships.

One study suggests that married straight couples and cohabiting gay and lesbian couples in long-term intimate relationships may pick up each other's unhealthy habits. The study reports three distinct findings showing how unhealthy habits are promoted in long-term, intimate relationships: through the direct bad influence of one partner, through synchronicity of health habits, and through the notion of personal responsibility.<sup>[18][19]</sup>

## History

### Ancient philosophers: Aristotle

Over 2,300 years ago, interpersonal relationships were being contemplated by Aristotle. He wrote: "One person is a friend to another if he is friendly to the other and the other is friendly to him in return" (Aristotle, 330 BC, trans. 1991, pp. 72–73). Aristotle believed that by nature humans are social beings.<sup>[2]</sup> Aristotle also suggested that relationships were based on three different ideas: utility, pleasure, and virtue. People are attracted to relationships that provide utility because of the assistance and sense of belonging that they provide. In relationships based on pleasure, people are attracted to the feelings of pleasantness when the parties engage. However, relationships based on utility and pleasure were said to be short-lived if the benefits provided by one of the partners was not reciprocated. Relationships based on virtue are built on an attraction to the others' virtuous character.<sup>[1]</sup>

Aristotle also suggested that relationships based on virtue would be the longest lasting and that virtue-based relationships were the only type of relationship in which each partner was liked for themselves. The philosophical analysis used by Aristotle dominated the analysis of intimate relationships until the late 1880s.<sup>[15]</sup>

### 1880s to early 1900s

Modern psychology and sociology began to emerge in the late 19th century. During this time theorists often included relationships into their current areas of research and began to develop new foundations which had implications in regards to the analysis of intimate relationships.<sup>[15]</sup> Freud wrote about parent

–child relationships and their effect on personality development.<sup>[2]</sup> Freud's analysis proposed that people's childhood experiences are transferred or passed on into adult relationships by means of feelings and expectations.<sup>[15]</sup> Freud also founded the idea that individuals usually seek out marital partners who are similar to that of their opposite-sex parent.<sup>[15]</sup>

In 1891, William James wrote that a person's self-concept is defined by the relationships endured with others.<sup>[2]</sup> In 1897, Émile Durkheim's interest in social organization led to the examination of social isolation and alienation.<sup>[2]</sup> This was an influential discovery of intimate relationships in that Durkheim argued that being socially isolated was a key antecedent of suicide.<sup>[2]</sup> This focus on the darker side of relationships and the negative consequences associated to social isolation were what Durkheim labeled as anomie.<sup>[15]</sup> Georg Simmel wrote about dyads, or partnerships with two people.<sup>[1]</sup> Simmel suggested that dyads require consent and engagement of both partners to maintain the relationship but noted that the relationship can be ended by the initiation of only one partner.<sup>[15]</sup> Although the theorists mentioned above sought support for their theories, their primary contributions to the study of intimate relationships were conceptual and not empirically grounded.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 1960s and 1970s

An important shift was taking place in the field of social psychology that influenced the research of intimate relationships. Until the late 1950s, the majority of studies were non-experimental.<sup>[15]</sup> By the end of the 1960s more than half of the articles published involved some sort of experimental study.<sup>[15]</sup> The 1960s was also a time when there was a shift in methodology within the psychological discipline itself. Participants consisted mostly of college students, experimental methods and research were being conducted in laboratories and the experimental method was the dominant methodology in social psychology.<sup>[15]</sup> Experimental manipulation within the research of intimate relationships demonstrated that relationships could be studied scientifically.<sup>[1]</sup> This shift brought relationship science to the attention of scholars in other disciplines and has resulted in the study of intimate relationships being an international multidiscipline.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 1980s to 2000s

In the early 1980s the first conference of the International Network of Personal Relationships (INPR) was held. Approximately 300 researchers from all over the world attended the conference.<sup>[15]</sup> In March 1984, the first journal of Social and Personal Relationships was published.<sup>[15]</sup> In the early 1990s the INPR split off into two groups; in April 2004 the two organizations rejoined and became the International Association for Relationship Research (IARR).<sup>[1]</sup>

Donald Nathanson, a psychiatrist who built his study of human interactions off of the work of Silvan Tomkins, notes the relationship between two individuals, intimacy, is best when the couple agrees to maximize positive affect, minimize negative affect and allow for the free expression of affect (*Shame and Pride*, 1994). These findings were based on Tomkin's blueprint for emotional health which also emphasizes doing as much of the maximizing, minimizing and expressing as possible.<sup>[20]</sup>

## See also

- Affection
- Dating
- Free union
- Human sexuality
- Love
- Loving kindness
- Marriage
- Monogamy
- Outline of relationships
- Parenting
- Pederasty
- Physical intimacy
- Polygamy
- Polyamory
- Power and control in abusive intimate relationships
- Relationship status

## Terms for members of intimate relationships

- Boyfriend / Girlfriend
- Companion
- Concubine
- Confidant or confidante
- Life partner
- Lover
- Mistress
- Partner
- Primary / Secondary
- Sexual partner
- Significant other
- Spouse
- Socionics
- Back-up partner(Hanzi: 備胎對象)

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## External links

- International Association for Relationship Research (<http://www.iarr.org>)
- Process of Adaption in Intimate Relationships (<http://www.utexas.edu/research/pair/>)

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