

## The Best of Times, the Worst of Times: The Place of Close Relationships in Psychology and Our Daily Lives

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines the place of relationships in our daily lives and in the field of psychology. The first section of the article offers reasons why relationships are central for humans. Next, the place of relationships in the history, institutional aspects, and subfields of psychology is presented. Then a paradox about relationships is presented: They are both among the most positive, uplifting of life's experiences and yet they can also be among life's darkest aspects. Despite the negative aspects of relationships, most people are very happy in their intimate relations. The paper ends with possible explanations for why satisfaction may be so high.

**Keywords:** Social Psychology | Happiness | Daily Life | Intimate Relationships | Relationship Satisfaction | Institutional Aspects

### **Article:**

I have taken as the title of this article the opening sentence of Charles Dickens' classic novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens was referring to the French revolutions but, as I hope to show, he might equally well have been talking about our personal relationships. In this article, I want to address three key topics:

- 1) the centrality of relationships in our lives,
- 2) the place of relationships in the history, institutional aspects, and subfields of psychology, and
- 3) the paradoxically positive and negative nature of relationships.

Let me start by discussing one of the greatest scientific contributions of all times, Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. When Einstein was in graduate school, one of his best friends was

Marcel Grossman, who quickly recognized Einstein's genius. Not everyone, however, was drawn to Einstein. Biographers indicate that Einstein antagonized his professors. When it came time for Einstein to find a job, he had trouble, in part, because his professors did not help him. Eventually, he ended up in the Swiss Patent Office. How did he get there? Apparently, the Director of the Patent Office was a friend of Marcel Grossman's family and hired Einstein as a favour to them.

As Einstein looked back on his having worked in the patent office, he attributed much of his scientific success in formulating the special theory of relativity to it. He felt that being in that setting allowed him to pursue risky and unorthodox ideas that he probably would not have explored had he been in a traditional university position. This story illustrates key themes of this article. On the one hand, Einstein encountered troubles in his relationships and on the other hand they helped him.

### **The Centrality of Relationships in Our Lives**

Dating back to Aristotle, humans have been described as a social animal. To further underscore the centrality of other people in our lives, let me reflect on their biological imperative, how much time we spend with them, what gives value to our lives, and what many see as basic human needs.

Without mating, our species would not reproduce. Playwright Tony Kushner has expressed this nicely in saying "The smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one... From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs" (p. 307). Notwithstanding modern reproductive technology, virtually all of us today, and certainly our pre-20th century ancestors, owe our existence to a man and a woman having gotten together.

Apropos of the amount of time we spend with others, Reed Larson and his associates (see Larson & Bradney, 1988) had 179 presumably normal teenagers and adults carry electronic pagers with them wherever they went for a week. Once during every two hours of their waking day, Larson beeped these individuals, asking them to indicate what they were doing and who, if anyone, was with them. Over 70% of the times they were paged, these North Americans were in the presence of other people. Worked out over adulthood, from the time a person is 18 years to until they are 65 years of age, this means each person will likely spend over 288,204 hours in the presence of other people. And, for an estimated 61% of adults, most of the time spent sleeping is done so beside another person (Murphy, 2006).

Of course, being in the presence of other people does not guarantee that we are interacting with them or that we have personal relationships with them. Likewise, we can have sex as a short interaction outside of a close relationship. So to demonstrate the importance of relationships per se we need to consider more than acts of conception and the time we spend with others.

This brings me to what makes our lives meaningful. When Klinger (1977) asked Americans this question, he found that most of them mentioned close relationships - friends or parents or siblings or relationships with opposite sex partners or with their own children. Similarly, they commonly mentioned that feeling loved and wanted added meaning to life. In contrast, less than half of the respondents said that occupational success or religious faith was an important source of meaning to them. Similarly, Reginald Bibby (2001) surveyed 3,500 Canadian teenagers. He presented them with 27 different values, asking them which were important to them. The most frequently endorsed value was friendship. It was viewed as important by 85% of those responding, ranking ahead of other values such as "a comfortable life," power, recognition, and excitement.

Complementing the meaning that laypeople report finding from the close relationships they enjoy in life, Baumeister and Leary (1995) have argued that humans have a pervasive, near universal need to belong. More precisely, their contention is that "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). This need directs our thoughts and behaviours across a wide variety of situations. The belongingness hypothesis predicts that people will:

- \* be eager for and facile at forming new bonds, but dislike breaking them,
- \* devote considerable cognitive processing to interpersonal interactions and relationships,
- \* be threatened by real, potential, or imagined changes in one's belongingness status, with negative affect linked to decreases in it and positive affect linked to increases in belongingness,
- \* not be fully satisfied by either interaction without a bond of caring or caring without frequent interaction, and
- \* have lower needs for belongingness if this need is already satisfied but will substitute one social bond with another if satisfaction is being blocked.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) presented a variety of evidence in support of their view.

## **The Place of Relationships in Psychology**

### **History**

Given their centrality in our lives, it is not surprising that the understanding and analysis of relationships has a long history in social thought and psychology (see Perlman & Duck, 2006) . As early as the Greek philosophers, there was noteworthy writing on relationships. Plato discussed love in his Symposium, and Ovid gave advice (e.g., "Love must be fostered with soft words") . In his Nicomachean Ethics and his treatise on Rhetoric, Aristotle perceptively addressed a number of topics including: the definition and types of friendship, the functions of friendship, the role of friendship in maintaining a stable society, who we select as friends, the

role of individual differences in our friendships, and the breakdown of relationships. As the following quotes illustrate, other early philosophers were also concerned with various aspects of interpersonal relationships:

\* Friendship makes prosperity more brilliant, and lightens adversity by dividing and sharing it. (Cicero)

\* Shyness is in fact an excess of modesty. (Plutarch)

\* By all means marry; if you get a good wife, you 'll be happy. If you get a bad one, you 'll become a philosopher. (Socrates)

\* He that is not jealous, is not in love. (St. Augustine)

Fast forwarding through historical time, in the late 1880s and early 1900s, key founding figures in the modern social sciences were articulating their viewpoints. Their ideas had implications for our understanding of relationships. For example, Darwin (1859) wrote his treatise on the origins of species that would come to be a key underpinning for modern evolutionary positions such as those developed by Buss (1998). Freud wrote on the role of parent-child relationships in personality development (see Hall & Lindzey, 1957, Chapter 2). James (1890) contended that the self-concept is defined in our relationships with others. Durkheim's (1897/1963) concern with social organization led him to explore social isolation and alienation. Simmel (1950) examined the unique properties of dyads, partnerships that involve just two people.

At about this same time, a major revolution occurred in social analysis: namely, the use of empirical investigations gained a toehold. In a 1898 article, Will S. Monroe asked 2,336 children in western Massachusetts to indicate the habits and traits that they considered to be important in selecting friends. They identified such attributes as kindness, cheerfulness, and honesty. This is one of the first, if not the first, empirical investigations of relationships. In 1912, Harris reviewed a number of statistical facts on human mating to conclude that on "average, similar individuals tend to marry" (p. 191). Harris called this assortative mating.

During the mid-1920s, Ernest Burgess (1926) conducted a painstaking survey of the scant literature available on the family, laying out what some consider the first vision of the modern field of family relations. Highlights of the 1930s included Moreno's (1934) studies of sociometry (e.g., children's choices of friends among their classmates) and longitudinal studies of marital success (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

In the post-WWII period, close relationship-related research enjoyed a new prominence, both publicly and within the discipline of psychology. The cover story of the August 24, 1953 issue of *Time*, the United States' leading news magazine in that era, featured Alfred Kinsey and his pioneering research on sexual practices. Three presidents of the American Psychological Association (APA) gave their presidential addresses on topics related to relationships. Robert

Sears (1951) argued that to best understand personality and social behaviour, we need to examine not only individual but also dyadic influences. Harry Harlow (1958) indicated the importance of mother love to the development of monkeys. Arguably, Theodore Mead Newcomb is the APA president whose work is most directly related to what we now consider the study of personal relationships. In his presidential address, Newcomb (1956) spoke on the question of interpersonal attraction, or who likes whom. He reported the preliminary findings from a study in which he had provided housing to a small group of Michigan students in return for being able to study the friendships that developed in the group. Five years later, Newcomb (1961) published a monograph in which he gave a full report of his findings, and he also offered a balance-type theoretical perspective that he discussed in terms of systems of orientation (AB-X) for understanding what he had found.

### Institutional Presence

As areas of research gain momentum, they commonly develop institutional aspects. Within the study of relationships, professional associations such as the National Council on Family Relations and publications such as the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* date back to the 1930s. As the nature of intimate relationships changed, a new wave of organizations (e.g., the International Association for Relationship Research) and journals (*Personal Relationships*) devoted to the study of relationships including, but not exclusively concerned with, the family sprung up in the 1980s.

The field of marital and couple therapy also traces its roots to the 1930s when centres such as Emily Mudd's pioneering Marriage Council of Philadelphia was established (Bischof & Helmeke, 2003). The American Association of Marriage Counselors (AAMC) was established in 1945; it has evolved to become the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT).

Psychologists have been prominent in these institutional facets of the relationship area, but these organizations and journals have definitely been multidisciplinary in scope. Within organized psychology, both the Canadian and American Psychological associations have family sections (or divisions). The American Psychological Association publishes the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

For me, one of the exciting Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) developments in 2005-06 was CPA's participation in a recently funded national network concerned with bullying. Despite Canada's traditional image as a peace-loving nation, a 2001-2002 World Health Organization study ranked Canada in the top third in a 35-nation survey for prevalence of bullying and victimization (Craig & Yossi, 2004). Roughly 40% of Canadian youths aged 11 to 13 years reported having been bullied in the past couple of months. CPA members Debra Pepler of York University and Wendy Craig of Queen's University are leading an \$800,000 endeavour to reduce bullying problems and promote healthy relationships among children. The project will develop

assessment, educational, and intervention tools, as well as policies related to bullying that can be implemented in communities throughout Canada. CPA will join with other partners in sharing up-to-date scientific knowledge and expertise, building awareness of bullying and aggression problems, plotting strategies, informing public policy-making, and shifting attitudes on this important issue. The American Psychological Association has adopted an antibullying policy statement; CPA is considering developing fact sheets and related materials on this topic.

### **The Place of Relationships in Various Subareas of Psychology**

The last theme I wish to develop in terms of the place of relationships in psychology is to contend that there is an important interpersonal aspect in most areas of psychology. Fully treating this argument is beyond the scope of this article, but let me give a few examples, starting with the social science areas of psychology.

Social psychologists have long been interested in questions of interpersonal attraction, how people influence and are influenced by others, how the presence of others affects task performance, and the like. Concepts such as social facilitation and social loafing are discussed in most contemporary social psychology textbooks. Currently, social psychologists are among the most important contributors to the study of relationships (see Perlman & Duck, 2006).

In the area of personality psychology, two facets of the so-called Big Five factors, extroversion and agreeableness, have obvious interpersonal ramifications (McCrae & Costa, 1999). The circumplex view of personality places interpersonal relations at the heart of personality, suggesting that personality can be conceptualized as a circular set of attributes organized around dominant-submissive and hostile-friendly axes (Wiggins & Trobst, 1997). Personality psychologists working from a motivational tradition have identified interpersonal needs such as the need for affiliation and the need for intimacy (e.g., McAdams & Constantian, 1983). There is a long tradition of relating personality characteristics to relationship satisfaction, stability, and homogamy (Cooper & Sheldon, 2002). In the past 30 years, advocates of the self-monitoring construct (Leone & Hawkins, 2006) have been active in finding consistent differences between high self-monitors and low self-monitors in terms of the structure of their social relationships (segmented vs. integrated), their basis for choosing friends and romantic partners (activity-based vs. person-based), and their orientation to romantic and marital partners (uncommitted vs. committed). High self-monitors have more segmented, activity-based, and less committed relations.

In the area of developmental psychology, there has been extensive research on the intergenerational transmission of attitudes, values, and traits and on how parental child-rearing practices and/or parent-child relations influence offspring. Certainly, evidence for intergenerational similarity in outlooks can be found (see Troll & Bengtson, 1979). Whether this is due to genetic or environmental factors has often been debated. In the past decade, there has also been considerable controversy over the extent to which parents influence their children

(Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Harris, 1998). At first blush, one might assume that an attack on the importance of child-rearing practices would be a minimization of interpersonal influences in human development. I do not, however, take this to be the case. How do those who question parental influences explain personality and behaviour in adolescence and adulthood? Common alternate explanations focus on genetic factors and peer influences. A concern with peer influences obviously puts interpersonal factors front and centre. Even genetic explanations get one back to mate selection, which is an interpersonal process and a focus of evolutionary psychologists (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Other topics of concern to developmental psychologists include how social relations change across the lifespan (Noller, Feeney, & Peterson, 2001) and the relationship between early attachment or peer relations and later outcomes (Parker & Asher, 1987).

In the area of organizational behaviour, interpersonal relations enter into such topics as leadership styles, mentoring, office romances, workplace sexual harassment, and the like. As our economy has increasingly become service-oriented, psychologists have begun exploring how impersonal service delivery such as at McDonald's or via an ATM machine compares with more personal service delivery such as via an old-fashioned family physician who had a personal relationship with each patient (Gutek, Bhappu, Liao-Troth, & Cherry, 1999). In three different studies, Gutek et al. (1999) consistently found that customers having a personal relationship with a specific service provider had more interactions and were more satisfied with service delivery than those who did not have a personal relationship.

As a final social science area in which interpersonal factors are critical, consider clinical and counseling psychology. The interpersonal is prominent here in at least five ways: 1) interpersonal problems are a key reason why clients see mental health professionals (Veroff, Kukla, & Douvan, 1981), 2) there is an interplay, perhaps bidirectional, between disrupted interpersonal relationships and mental health problems (e.g., depression), as illustrated in a recent special issue of the *Journal of Family Psychology* (Beach & Kaslow, 2006; cf. Segrin, 1998), 3) there are important dyadic aspects of coping with stress (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1997; Revenson, Kayser, & Bodenmann, 2005), 4) many consider the relationship between the client and therapist a key factor in the success of therapy (Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000), and 5) therapy for couples works. Christensen and Heavey (1999) note that couples in marital therapy are nearly twice as likely to improve as those in control conditions. According to Christensen and Heavey's review, roughly 65% of couples in marital therapy show improvement, with perhaps about half of that group starting out as distressed yet becoming nondistressed after therapy.

Interpersonal factors in the natural science areas of psychology are undoubtedly less common, but nonetheless they can be found. Consider the following examples, starting with perception, memory, and motor performance.

From virtually the moment they are born, human babies have a particular interest in the human face (Mondloch et al., 1999). For example, newborns only 30 minutes old will visually track a

facial stimulus with their head further than they will other objects of comparable complexity (Johnson, Dziurawiec, Ellis, & Morton, 1991). Among adults, the classic Asch (1951) studies in social psychology demonstrate the influence that others' judgments have on how experimental participants see, or at least report seeing, the length of lines.

Wives have more vivid memories for relational events than do husbands, and there is evidence of partners developing domain-specific areas of knowledge (Acitelli & Holmberg, 1993).

People perform a pursuit motor task (e.g., guiding a visually displayed object into a target region) better when performing with another person than when performing alone (Reed et al., 2006).

Even quantitative psychologists are concerned with relationships. An assumption of many statistical procedures is that the data come from independent sources. Members of a relationship, however, are linked together. In the past two decades, there have been advances in how to perform analyses of couple and family data, including special correlational procedures, the social relations model, and hierarchical linear modeling (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

As the Canadian Psychological Association's leadership of the Enhancing Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Primary Health Care (EICP) Initiative testifies, in the past 25 years, psychology has become closely aligned with health. Interpersonal relationships are crucial in this area. In this domain, one of the classic propositions is the social support hypothesis that social support helps people avoid and cope with stress (Cobb, 1976). Another example of the role of interpersonal factors in health is a communication model of pain advanced by future and former CPA Presidents Thomas Hadjistavropoulos and Kenneth Craig (2004). A relatively recent but flourishing area of work is in social aspects of neuroscience, physiology, etc. (Loving, Heffner, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2006). For example, by using fMRI techniques to study brain activation patterns, Fisher, Aron, and Brown (2005) contended that romantic love is primarily a motivational system, rather than an emotion. More will be said on relationships, health, and mortality in a later section of this article.

In reviewing these areas, my purpose has been to illustrate how interpersonal aspects are found in other areas of psychology. The reverse, however, is true as well. Specific domains of psychology (and other disciplines) have influenced the study of personal relationships. For example, work on such topics as interdependence theory and social cognition that are rooted in social psychology have had a major impact on the way relationships are conceptualized today.

### **Relationships: The Best and the Worst Relationships and Well-Being**

Having argued that the interplay of ideas between psychology and the study of close relationships is a two-sided affair, I now wish to argue that there are two sides to relationships themselves: They can be associated with the best of times but they can also be associated with the worst of times. I will start by contending that relationships are crucial to our well-being. But



exactly what is well-being? Although I will not get into current discussions of the measurement and structure of well-being (see Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), in the study of relationships, there has been a concern with several variables that can be considered indicators of well-being. These include: happiness (life satisfaction or subjective well-being), mental health, physical health, and mortality.

*Happiness and subjective well-being.* Wood, Rhodes, and Whelan (1989) conducted a meta-analysis of 22 studies relating marital status to reports of life satisfaction and happiness. On average, married persons were happier and more satisfied with their lives than were nonmarried individuals. Similarly, based on a larger meta-analysis of 151 first-order effect sizes, Okun, Stock, Haring, and Witter (1984) reported that social activities predicted a small, but significant, proportion of the variance in subjective well-being. More recent work is available, also consistently demonstrating the positive association between having relationships and subjective well-being (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006), but leaving open to debate the magnitude of the association and the degree to which having relationships versus the quality of those relationships is key.

Over and above persisting differences in life satisfaction, there is evidence that the presence or absence of others influences fluctuations in levels of happiness across our daily lives. Daniel Kahneman, CPA's 2006 Honorary President, has conducted research associating Texas women's moods with how they were spending their days (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). Their moods were most positive when with friends and less happy when alone. Complementing these findings, Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, and Ryan (2000) found that self-reported mood and vitality were higher on days in which individuals were more engaged in enjoyable, intimate social interaction. Using an experience sampling (beeper) methodology, Larson and his colleagues have conducted studies in which they found that participants' moods were generally more positive when they were in social settings than when they were alone (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1982).

*Mental health.* Undoubtedly, a case can be made that a lack or dysfunction in relationships is associated with poor mental health. For example, Brown and others have argued that the lack of a supportive relationship is a key factor in the etiology of depression (Brown & Harris, 1978). Consistent with this, Gotlib and Whiffen (1991, p. 182) concluded "the results of a considerable number of studies converge to suggest that, compared to nondepressed persons, depressed individuals report having smaller and less supportive social networks."

One of the classically studied phenomena that could be considered a mental health indicator is suicide. Using data from the Duchy of Obdenburg (Northern Germany) from 1871-1885, Durkheim 1887-1963 showed that unmarried men over 20 had nearly twice as many suicides as married men. The exact results were 194 per 10,000 for unmarried men versus 103 per 10,000 for married men. The precise proportions vary by gender, area, and period, but the general tendency of marriage to be associated with lower suicide rates seems to hold widely.

*Physical health.* Reviews of available evidence conclude that being married is associated with fewer sick days, less use of hospital facilities, and less likelihood of having chronic health conditions (Verbrugge, 1979). Complementing these findings, Russell and his associates have conducted a prospective study of older adults, obtaining baseline measures and then following them over time (Russell, Cutrona, de la Mora, & Wallace, 1997). These investigators found that those individuals who were least lonely were the most apt to remain in their own homes and apartments. Those who were initially lonely were more apt to move into nursing home facilities.

*Mortality.* The discussion of nursing homes brings us close to the end of the life cycle. The relationship between social ties and mortality has been thoroughly studied over a long period of time. In 1858, William Farr, an eminent British epidemiologist, examined French mortality rates. He concluded: "Marriage is a healthy state. The single individual is more likely to be wrecked on his voyage than the lives joined together in matrimony" (p. 440). More recently, Statistics Canada provided me with Canadian data showing the life expectancy of married men to be seven years (or 10%) longer than that of never-married men. Women also benefit from marriage but, not by as much, for married women only outlived never married women by three years. Waite and Gallagher (2000) have compatible prospective data showing that married 48-year-olds have a higher probability of living to age 65 than do single 48-year-olds.

There have been several longitudinal/prospective studies of sociability and age-adjusted death rates. Berkman and Syme (1979) conducted one of the most classic of these. In 1965, they began following a representative sample of 6,928 adults in Alameda County, California. At the beginning of the study, they obtained measures of each person's social relationships to determine: 1) whether they were married, 2) how many close friends they had and how often they saw them, 3) whether they were church members, and 4) the number of memberships they had in formal and informal groups.

After nine years of following these individuals, those who were weakly socially integrated, as indexed by marriage, social contacts or group memberships, were more likely to be deceased. Using a composite index of integration, weakly integrated individuals were twice as likely as those with high social integration to have died.

Berkman and Syme (1979) also controlled for several other factors including: 1) level of health, 2) socio-economic status, 3) smoking, 4) obesity, 5) alcohol consumption, 6) frequency of physical activity, 7) health practices, and 8) use of health services. Even after controlling for these factors, the inverse association between social involvement and mortality remained. Berkman's (1995) review of eight other similar studies shows the robustness and reliability of the finding that socially isolated individuals have high age-adjusted mortality rates.

A good deal of effort has gone into explaining why more socially connected people live longer. One possibility is that a selection factor is operating. People who marry and have a wide circle of friends may be different in some way that fosters their longer survival. Another basic perspective

is that relationships somehow serve a protective function, for instance, by helping people avoid health risks such as excessive drinking, getting them to engage in healthy behaviour (e.g., exercise), providing emotional security, and the like. Whatever the reason why social integration fosters well-being, Uchino, Cacioppo, and Kiecolt-Glaser (1996, p. 521) concluded that "there is relatively strong evidence linking social support to aspects of cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune systems." So, there are physiological functions that mediate the association between social support and positive health outcomes.

As the slogan for a California public service program proclaimed (Hersey, Klibanoff, Lam, & Taylor, 1984), I have argued: "friends can be good medicine." I have presented evidence that relationships are linked with: life satisfaction, mental health, physical health, and longevity. Thus, the association of sociability with well-being seems well established. It cuts across time, cultures, measures of sociability, and indicators of well-being. Finally, it seems important. In the health domain, cigarette smoking is one of the most widely studied and clearest hazards to health and longevity. Research demonstrates that sociability has as strong, probably even a stronger association, with well-being in this domain than does smoking (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988).

### **The Dark Side of Relationships**

So perhaps I could stop now by saying "Quit smoking and have successful friendships: You'll live a long, happy life." I believe that is probably true, but there is a nagging counter story: Relationships can also ruin your life.

Paul Shaffer's (1985) play, *Amadeus*, depicts the relationship between the great composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Antonio Salieri. Salieri was the court composer to Emperor Josef of Austria. In that position, he was the most famous, most successful composer in Europe - until Mozart arrived in Vienna. Shaffer depicts Mozart as boastful, immature, and yet lusty - a former child prodigy from Salzburg with a love/hate relationship with his father. In the movie version of *Amadeus*, actor Tom Hulee gave him a heinous laugh. Music was everything to Salieri, and Mozart produced music filled with "the voice of God." It galled Salieri that a "giggling, dirty-minded creature" would be so chosen by the Almighty. Once Mozart arrived, Salieri's place in the musical limelight was diminished as Mozart and his music grew more popular.

At first Salieri tolerated Mozart. When, however, he discovered that Mozart had seduced a beautiful opera singer that Salieri had admired and secretly lusted after, his hatred solidified. He asked God to give him talents. He could not understand why God favoured Mozart, such a vulgar creature, to be his instrument. Salieri made fun of Mozart's personality. Ultimately, he vowed to ruin what he saw as God's musical incarnation, Mozart. He wheedled it so that Mozart no longer got pupils and watched as Mozart sank into poverty, unable to care for his family. Others laughed at his compositions when Mozart was reduced to mounting shows at a local bar. When

they were originally done, these performances lasted only one or two nights before closing. But, Salieri, alone, immediately recognized the genius of these works.

In the end, which comes at the beginning of this play, Salieri is mad. He confesses to a priest that he has murdered Mozart out of envy. Both his own and his adversary's lives are ruined out of their rivalry.

Not every relationship goes as far afield as Shaffer's version of Salieri's and Mozart's, but many relationships do have negative, foreboding facets. There is now a growing literature on the negative aspects of relationships (see Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994; Kowalski, 1997, 2000; Perlman, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998). I have classified the problems into four categories: entering and leaving relationships, problematic relationships, communicating and interacting in relationships, and abuse.

In terms of entering and exiting relationships, when people are asked how much stress and change various events would cause in their lives, death of a spouse and a divorce have been consistently rated at the top of the list (Miller & Rahe, 1997). Other problems in this domain include shyness, loneliness, infidelity, jealousy, and peer rejection.

Being enemies is a classic form of a problematic relationship. But, even close relationships can have troublesome ingredients, such as undue demands or one's partner being selfish. We now know a good deal about caregiving and the burdens that can be associated with it.

The problems associated with communication and interaction include offensive verbal or nonverbal behaviour, deception, hurtful messages, conflict, and betrayal. For example, Bella DePaulo and her colleagues at the University of Virginia had students keep daily diaries of their lying behaviours. They reported telling an average of two lies per day, lying to roughly a third of the people with whom they interacted (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). Adults living in the community off campus reported fewer lies, yet only 5% of these respondents reported having not lied at all during the week of data collection. Even intimate relationships are affected by lies. We tell our intimate partners a lot of lies and the biggest deceptions we undertake occur more frequently in our intimate relationships than anywhere else. If there is a silver lining in lying, it is sometimes done to protect the feelings and identity of the other person.

Negative interactions in marriage and other personal relationships can clearly grind on those involved. Böiger, DeLongis, Kessler, and Schilling (1989) investigated 21 different forms of daily stress. They concluded that "interpersonal conflicts are overwhelmingly the most important kind of daily stress influencing psychological distress" (p. 811).

Violence, aggression, and abuse in relationships are a final type of interaction that belongs in discussions of the dark side of relationships. Abuse in relationships can be psychological, physical, or sexual; it can involve spouses, dating partners, parents and children, or seniors. The Conflict Tactics scale is a classic measure of abuse that has been used in numerous studies,

including ones with large, representative national samples (Straus & Gelles, 1990). It includes eight items ranging from minor acts such as slapping or grabbing to severe violence (hitting with fist, beating up another person, and use of a gun or knife). In the 1985 National Violence Survey (N= 6,002 married or cohabiting couples), 16.1% of couples reported physical assault during that year (Straus & Gelles, 1990, p. 96). Severe violence occurred in 6.1% of couples.

Spitzberg (1999) conducted a meta-analysis of 120 studies involving over 100,000 participants that dealt with sexual aggression (see also Lloyd & Emery, 2000) . Overall, in these studies about 13% of women and just over 3% of men reported having been raped; 18% of women and nearly 6% of men said they have been the victims of a rape attempt; 24% of women and 9% of men reported having been the victims of unwanted sexual contact not involving intercourse.

### **The Paradox of Being Best and Worst**

If there are so many aversive aspects of relationships, one might expect marital partners to report low levels of marital satisfaction and our well-being to be adversely affected by relationships. Yet partners routinely report their relationships overall are good and considerable research shows the net benefit of social bonds. For instance, apropos of how we judge our relationships, in Russell and Megaard's (1988) analysis of the 1972-1986 National Opinion Research Center surveys involving over 11,000 respondents, 96% said their marriages were "happy"; only 3% described their marriages as "not too happy."

There are probably multiple factors that explain the paradox of why people judge their relationships so positively and/or benefit from them in die face of the dark aspects of relationships. First, many respondents may have a positivity or social desirability bias in their verbal reports (Schumm et al., 1986). Complimenting such a reporting bias, selective perception and memory may help participants minimize their bad experiences (Matlin & Stang, 1978; Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen, & Betz, 1996).

Second, it may be that some relationships go along working fairly well until near their end. So even if they do terminate, they may be rated positively at the time of the survey and have a beneficial effect on well-being most of the time. Bad events may, however, be powerful when they do occur (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001 ) .

Third, there are clear individual differences in the satisfaction and benefits people derive from relationships. For instance, a classic finding is that individuals high in neuroticism have less gratifying relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The quality of relationships is undoubtedly associated with the extent to which relationships foster well-being. Perhaps the majority of us derive benefits from our relationships, but a minority suffers.

Fourth, despite the impact of negative events on marriages, the ratio of positive to negative events may be high in most marriages. Support for this view comes from Gottman's (1993) classic finding that in the typical successful marriage, partners have a ratio of 5 positive to 1

negative interaction, even during discussions of issues over which they have experienced conflict. If this is the case, then despite the various forms of negativity in relationships and strong impact such behaviours have, the high frequency of positive behaviours may, nonetheless, make relationships supportive and satisfying to their participants.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

In conclusion, psychology is often defined as the science of mental processes and behaviour. The concern with mental processes focuses attention on what goes on within the individual. I hope that in this article I have convinced you that poet John Donne was correct that "No man is an island, entire of itself." Instead, we are interconnected with others. Thinking in a broader manner, including dyadically, adds to understanding of many psychological phenomena.

For me, being President of the Canadian Psychological Association has been a great honour. I will remember my Presidential year with deep satisfaction, in part because of the positive things that I feel have happened for the Association in 2005-2006, but also because of the supportive, positive relationships it fostered for me. Relationships can be hell, but they can also be wonderful. My wish for you as a reader, and for people all around the world, is that we all get a great deal of the wonderful results that relationships bring. They are an unlimited, indefinitely sustainable resource that we can all enjoy and from which we can all benefit.

Accompanied by PowerPoint slides, the author verbally presented a version of this article as his Presidential Address at the meeting of Canadian Psychological Association in Calgary, Alberta, June 9, 2006. Correspondence can be addressed to Dan Perlman, School of Social Work and Family Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z2 (E-mail: d.perlman@ubc.ca) .

## **Résumé**

Le présent article examine l'importance des relations dans notre quotidien et dans le domaine de la psychologie. La première section présente certaines raisons pour lesquelles les relations se trouvent au coeur des préoccupations de l'être humain. Il décrit ensuite la place qu'occupent les relations dans l'histoire, certains aspects institutionnels des relations et des sous-champs de la psychologie. Il examine ensuite un paradoxe des relations : d'une part, elles font partie des expériences de la vie les plus positives et inspirantes et d'autre part, elles peuvent représenter des aspects parmi les plus obscurs de la vie. Malgré les aspects négatifs des relations, la plupart des personnes se disent heureuses dans leurs relations intimes. L'article conclut sur des explications possibles de la raison pour laquelle la satisfaction peut être aussi élevée.

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## **Le meilleur des mondes, le pire des mondes : la place des relations intimes en psychologie et dans notre vie quotidienne**

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J'ai tiré le titre du présent article de la première phrase du grand roman de Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens faisait référence à la révolution française, mais comme j'espère pouvoir le démontrer, il pouvait tout aussi bien évoquer nos relations personnelles. Dans cet article, je veux aborder trois sujets clés :

- 1) la centralité des relations dans nos vies,
- 2) la place des relations dans l'histoire, leurs aspects institutionnels et les sous-champs de la psychologie,
- 3) la nature paradoxalement positive et négative des relations.

**La centralité des relations dans nos vies**

Depuis Aristote, l'homme a été décrit comme un animal social. La centralité des personnes qui nous entourent dans nos vies est soulignée par au moins quatre points.

Sans l'accouplement, notre espèce ne se reproduirait pas.

Les études de Pager démontrent que les adolescents et les adultes en Amérique du Nord passent plus de 70 pour cent du temps où ils sont éveillés en présence d'autres personnes (voir Larson et Bradney, 1988).

Lorsque Klinger (1977) a demandé aux Américains ce qui rendait nos vies significatives, il a trouvé que la plupart d'entre eux ont mentionné les relations intimes, soit avec les amis ou les parents, les frères et soeurs, ou les relations avec leurs partenaires sexuels de sexe opposé, ou les parents avec leurs propres enfants. Par opposition, moins de la moitié des répondants ont indiqué que le succès au travail ou la foi religieuse était une source importante de signification pour eux.

Finalement, de façon complémentaire, Baumeister et Leary (1995) ont démontré que les humains ont un besoin profond, presque universel, d'appartenance qui oriente les pensées et les comportements dans une grande variété de situations.

## **La place des relations en psychologie**

Histoire.

Compte tenu de leur centralité dans nos vies, il n'est pas surprenant que la compréhension et l'analyse des relations aient une longue histoire dans la pensée et la psychologie sociales (voir Perlman et Duck, 2006). Plusieurs philosophes grecs ont écrit des choses mémorables sur les relations personnelles. Platon a discuté de l'amour dans son Symposium et Ovide a donné des conseils (par ex., « L'amour doit être suscité par des mots doux »). Dans son Éthique à Nicomaque et son traité sur la Rhétorique, Aristote s'est penché de façon très perspicace sur un certain nombre de sujets dont la définition et les types d'amitiés, les fonctions de l'amitié, le rôle de l'amitié dans le maintien d'une société stable, qui nous choisissons comme amis, le rôle des différences individuelles dans nos amitiés et l'effritement des relations.

Faisant un grand saut dans l'histoire, à la fin des années 1880 et au début des années 1900, des figures de proue (par ex., Darwin, Freud, Durkheim) dans les sciences sociales modernes ont articulé leurs points de vue. Leurs idées avaient des implications pour notre compréhension des relations personnelles.

À peu près au même moment, une révolution majeure s'est produite dans l'analyse sociale, c'est-à-dire que nous avons assisté à la naissance des premières enquêtes empiriques. Dans un article de 1898, Will S. Monroe a étudié les comportements et les traits psychologiques (par ex., la gentillesse, la gaieté et l'honnêteté) que les enfants résidant dans l'ouest de l'État du Massachusetts considéraient importantes lors du choix de leurs amis.

Au cours des années 1930, la recherche a commencé à prendre de l'essor. Les études de Moreno (1934) en sociométrie (par ex., le choix des camarades de classe chez les enfants) et les études longitudinales du succès conjugal (voir Karney et Bradbury, 1995) ont fait partie des faits saillants de la recherche au cours de cette décennie.

Après la Deuxième grande Guerre mondiale, la recherche concernant les relations intimes a connu un nouvel essor au sein de la discipline de la psychologie. Trois présidents de l'American Psychological Association ont fait leurs discours d'acceptation de la présidence sur des sujets liés aux relations. Robert Sears (1951) a fait valoir que pour mieux comprendre la personnalité et le comportement social, nous devons examiner non seulement les influences individuelles, mais aussi les relations dyadiques. Harry Harlow (1958) a indiqué l'importance de l'amour maternel pour le développement des singes. Theodore Mead Newcomb (1956) s'est penché sur la question de l'attraction interpersonnelle ou qui aime qui.

Présence institutionnelle.

À mesure que les domaines de recherche prenaient de l'essor, ils acquéraient communément des aspects institutionnels. À l'intérieur de l'étude des relations, les associations professionnelles comme le « National Council on Family Relations » et les publications comme le Journal of Marriage and the Family ont vu le jour au cours des années 1930. Le domaine de la thérapie conjugale et du couple trouve aussi ses racines au cours des années 1930 lorsque des centres comme le « Marriage Council of Philadelphia d'Emily Mudd » (conseil matrimonial de Philadelphie) ont été établis (Bischof & Helmeke, 2003).

Au sein d'organisations regroupant les différents secteurs de la psychologie d'aujourd'hui, tant la Société canadienne de psychologie que l'American Psychological Association comptent des sections (ou divisions) qui s'intéressent à la famille. L'American Psychological Association publie le Journal of Family Psychology. La Société canadienne de psychologie (SCP) participe maintenant à un réseau national qui a récemment obtenu un appui financier en vue de lutter contre les problèmes d'intimidation et de promouvoir de saines relations entre les enfants.

La place des relations dans les sous-domaines de la psychologie.

Le dernier thème que je veux souligner quant à la place des relations en psychologie est l'importance des aspects interpersonnels dans la plupart des domaines de la psychologie. Le présent article ne vise pas à traiter entièrement de cette question, mais laissez-moi présenter brièvement trois exemples.

Les relations interpersonnelles sont prédominantes en psychologie clinique et du counseling d'au moins cinq façons : 1) les problèmes interpersonnels sont une raison clé pour laquelle les clients consultent des professionnels de la santé mentale (Veroff, Kukla & Douvan, 1981), 2) il y a une action réciproque, peut-être bidirectionnelle, entre les relations interpersonnelles perturbées et les problèmes de santé mentale (par ex., la dépression), tel qu'illustré dans un numéro spécial récent

du Journal of Family Psychology (Beach et Kaslow, 2006), 3) il y a des aspects de relations dyadiques importantes dans la gestion du stress (Revenson, Kayser & Bodenmann, 2005), 4) de nombreux chercheurs considèrent que la relation entre le client et le thérapeute est un facteur clé dans le succès de la thérapie (Martin, Garske & Davis, 2000) et 5) la thérapie de couples fonctionne. Plus spécifiquement, Christensen et Heavey (1999) ont remarqué que les relations de couples en thérapie conjugale ont presque deux fois plus de chances de s'améliorer que de groupes témoins.

Dans le domaine de la psychologie de la santé, l'une des propositions classiques de l'hypothèse du soutien social est qu'il aide les personnes à éviter le stress et à le gérer (Cobb, 1976). Le modèle de communication de la souffrance mis de l'avant par le futur et l'ancien président de la SCP Thomas Hadjistavropoulos et Kenneth Craig (2004) est un autre exemple du rôle des facteurs interpersonnels en santé.

Même les psychologues quantitatifs sont préoccupés par les relations. Une hypothèse d'un grand nombre de méthodes statistiques est que les données doivent provenir de sources indépendantes. Cependant, les participants à une relation sont liés ensemble. Au cours des deux dernières décennies, il y a eu des progrès sur la façon d'effectuer les analyses de données sur le couple et la famille, notamment des méthodes corrélationnelles spéciales, le modèle des relations sociales et le modèle hiérarchique linéaire (voir Kenny, Kashy & Cook, 2006).

### **Relations : le mieux et le pire**

Les relations personnelles sont essentielles à notre bien-être mental et physique. Comme il a été indiqué précédemment, il peut être démontré qu'un manque ou une dysfonction dans les relations peut être associé à une santé mentale médiocre. Wood, Rhodes et Whelan (1989) ont effectué une méta-analyse de 22 études liant l'état conjugal à des rapports de satisfaction et de bonheur dans la vie. En moyenne, les personnes mariées étaient plus heureuses et plus satisfaites de leurs vies que les individus qui n'étaient pas mariés. L'humeur des personnes fluctue également en fonction de la personne avec qui nous passons du temps : l'humeur des femmes est plus positive lorsqu'elles sont avec des amis et elles sont moins heureuses lorsqu'elles sont seules (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz & Stone, 2004).

Les recensements des preuves disponibles permettent de conclure que le mariage est associé à un moins grand nombre de journées de maladie, d'une moins grande utilisation des établissements hospitaliers et de possibilités moins grandes de souffrir de conditions de santé chronique (Verbrugge, 1979). La relation entre les liens sociaux et la mortalité a été étudiée de façon exhaustive sur une longue période de temps. En 1858, William Farr, un épidémiologiste britannique éminent, a examiné les taux de mortalité en France. Il a conclu que : « Le mariage est un état sain. La personne seule a de plus grandes possibilités d'échouer dans son périple que celle dans une union conjugale » (p. 440). Plus récemment Statistique Canada m'a fourni des données canadiennes révélant que l'espérance de vie des hommes mariés était de sept années plus longues



(ou 10 %) que celle des hommes qui n'avaient jamais été mariés. Les femmes bénéficient aussi du mariage sur ce plan, mais pas autant, compte tenu qu'elles ont une espérance de vie de trois ans de plus que les femmes qui n'ont jamais été mariées.

Comme le slogan pour un programme de service public californien le proclamait (Hersey, Klibanoff, Lam & Taylor, 1984), j'ai fait valoir que : « les amis pouvaient être un bon remède. » La recherche démontre que l'association entre l'intégration sociale et le bien-être demeure significative même après avoir introduit des contrôles statistiques pour divers facteurs comme le statut socioéconomique, le tabagisme et les pratiques de santé (Berkman & Syme, 1979). Par surcroît, l'effet de la sociabilité est fortement associée, probablement même plus fortement, au bien-être physique que l'effet du tabagisme (House, Landis & Umberson, 1988).

### **Le côté sombre des relations**

Je pourrais peut-être arrêter ici en déclarant « Cessez de fumer et cultivez des amitiés fructueuses : vous vivrez une vie longue et heureuse. » Je crois que cette assertion est probablement vraie, mais l'envers de la médaille nous indique autre chose : les relations peuvent également ruiner votre vie.

Il y a de plus en plus d'écrits sur les aspects négatifs des relations (voir Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994; Kowalski, 1997; Kowalski, 2000; Perlman, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998). J'ai classifié les problèmes en quatre catégories : le début d'une relation et la fin d'une relation, les relations problématiques, la communication et l'interaction dans les relations et l'abus.

En ce qui touche le début d'une relation et la fin d'une relation, lorsqu'on demande aux personnes l'importance du stress et du changement que divers événements causeraient dans leur vie, la mort du conjoint et le divorce se trouvent toujours en tête de liste (Miller & Rahe, 1997). D'autres problèmes dans ce domaine sont la timidité, la solitude, l'infidélité, la jalousie et le rejet des pairs.

Le fait de s'opposer en ennemi est une forme classique de relation problématique. Mais, même les relations les plus intimes peuvent comporter des sources de complications, comme les exigences exagérées d'un partenaire ou un partenaire qui agit de façon égoïste. Finalement, nous avons beaucoup appris des aidants naturels et des fardeaux qui peuvent leur être imposés.

Les problèmes associés à la communication et à l'interaction incluent notamment les comportements verbaux ou non verbaux offensants, la déception, les messages blessants, le conflit et la trahison. Les interactions négatives dans un mariage et d'autres relations personnelles peuvent vraiment causer un effritement des sentiments. Böiger, DeLongis, Kessler et Schilling (1989) ont étudié 21 formes différentes de stress quotidien. Ils ont conclu que les « conflits interpersonnels sont, de manière accablante, le genre le plus important de stress quotidien qui influence la détresse psychologique » (p. 811).

La violence, l'agression et l'abus dans les relations sont représentés le dernier type d'interaction associé au côté sombre des relations. L'abus dans les relations peut être psychologique, physique ou sexuel; il peut impliquer les conjoints dans les fréquentations occasionnelles entre hommes et femmes, les parents et les enfants, ou les personnes âgées. Dans le National Violence Survey (enquête américaine de 1985) (N= 6 002 couples mariés ou en union libre), 16,1 % des couples ont signalé une agression physique au cours de l'année qui s'était écoulée et 6,1 % ont signalé de la violence grave (Straus & Gelles, 1990, p. 96) . Dans une méta-analyse de 120 études impliquant plus de 100 000 participants, Spitzberg (1999) a trouvé que 18 % des femmes et près de 6 % des hommes ont déclaré avoir été victimes d'une tentative de viol; 13 % des femmes et un peu plus de 3 % des hommes ont déclaré avoir été violés.

### **Le paradoxe du mieux et du pire**

Étant donné que nous retrouvons un si grand nombre d'aspects répulsifs dans les relations, on pourrait s'attendre à ce que les individus impliqués dans des relations de couple fassent état de faibles niveaux de satisfaction conjugale et que leur bien-être soit affecté de façon négative par leur relations. Mais il en est tout autre. Il demeure que les partenaires indiquent continuellement et de façon générale, que leurs relations sont bonnes et qu'un nombre considérable de recherches révèlent un avantage net d'avoir ou de maintenir des liens sociaux. Par exemple, au sujet de la façon avec laquelle nous jugeons nos relations, Russell et Megaard (1988) ont observé lors de l'analyse d'un sondage effectué par le « National Opinion Research Center » pour la période s'écoulant entre 1972 à 1986 (N= 11,000 répondants), que 96 % des participants ont décrit leurs mariages comme étant « heureux »; comparativement à 3 % seulement qui ont décrit leurs mariages comme « pas très heureux. »

Il y a probablement de nombreux facteurs qui peuvent expliquer le paradoxe observé entre les raisons pour lesquels les personnes jugent que leurs relations sont tellement positives et/ou qu'ils en tirent les aspects sombres des bénéfiques et des relations. Tout d'abord, de nombreux répondants peuvent avoir un biais positif ou un biais de désirabilité sociale lors de leurs réponses (Schumm et al., 1986). En plus de ces biais, les perceptions et la mémoire sélectives peuvent avoir contribué au fait que les participants aient tendance à minimiser leurs mauvaises expériences (Matlin & Stang, 1978; Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen & BeU, 1996).

Deuxièmement, il se pourrait que certaines relations fonctionnent assez bien jusqu'au moment où elles tirent à leur fin. Alors même avoir été jugées positives au moment de l'enquête et avoir produit un effet bénéfique sur le bien-être lors de leur déroulement. Néanmoins, de mauvais événements peuvent être lourds de conséquences lorsqu'ils surviennent (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001).

Troisièmement, il y a des différences individuelles claires dans la satisfaction et les avantages que les personnes tirent de leurs relations. Par exemple, une conclusion classique est que les individus qui ont des tendances névrotiques élevées ont des relations moins gratifiantes (Karney

& Bradbury, 1995). La qualité des relations est sans aucun doute associée à quel point les relations favorisent le bien-être. Il est donc probable que la majorité d'entre nous tirent des avantages de nos relations et une minorité en souffre.

Quatrièmement, malgré l'incidence d'événements négatifs sur les mariages, le rapport des événements positifs avec les événements négatifs peut être élevé dans la plupart des mariages. Cette perspective s'appuie sur la conclusion classique de Gottman (1993) indiquant que dans un mariage réussi typique, les partenaires ont un rapport de cinq interactions positives pour une interaction négative, ceci même lorsqu'ils discutent de questions qui sont à l'origine d'un conflit. Si c'est le cas, il n'est donc pas surprenant de constater que malgré les diverses formes de négativité dans les relations et la forte incidence de comportements négatifs, la fréquence élevée de comportements positifs peut faire en sorte que les relations interpersonnelles représentent une grande source de soutien et de satisfaction pour les individus qui y sont impliqués.

### **Sommaire et conclusion**

En conclusion, la psychologie est souvent définie comme la science des processus mentaux et des comportements. L'intérêt pour les processus mentaux fait en sorte qu'on concentre l'attention sur ce qui se produit à l'intérieur de l'individu. J'espère que, dans cet article, je vous ai convaincu que le poète John Donne avait raison lorsqu'il déclarait « Qu'aucun homme est une île, entier en lui-même. » Nous sommes tous inter-reliés les uns aux autres. En pensant d'une manière plus vaste, même de façon dyadique, on ajoute à la compréhension d'un grand nombre de phénomènes psychologiques.

Quant à moi, j'ai été très honoré d'avoir occupé la présidence de la Société canadienne de psychologie. Je me souviendrai de cette année comme président de la Société comme une année de très grande satisfaction, en partie à cause des choses positives qui se sont produites au sein de la Société en 2005-2006, mais aussi à cause des relations de soutien positives que j'ai vécues. Les relations peuvent être l'enfer, mais elles peuvent aussi être merveilleuses. Je vous souhaite à vous lecteur et aux personnes dans le monde entier que nous puissions tous récolter les résultats merveilleux que les relations produisent. Ils sont une ressource illimitée et infiniment renouvelable dont nous pouvons tous profiter pleinement et dont nous pouvons tous bénéficier.

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