

## Examining Romantic Relationships.

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### **Abstract:**

All of the articles included in this issue examine romantic relationships. Although it was not intended, these articles therefore comprise a de facto special issue on this topic. Let me be perfectly clear: I did not hold back related articles in order to publish them together. The articles that were ready to submit when this issue was due to the publisher just all happened to be on the topic of romantic partnerships. This is the second time during my term as Editor of *Personal Relationships* that this has happened; as Associate Editor Susan Boon noted (“Communicating Personal Relationships Research Findings,” *Personal Relationships*, Volume 15, Number 3, p. i), last year’s third issue was also totally devoted to articles on romantic relationships. Furthermore, the issue published in between these two included several articles focused on them as well.

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### **Article:**

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From one perspective, the extent of the predominance of articles focused on one type of personal relationship could be seen as problematic. In this regard, a member of the International

Association for Relationship Research made a snide comment to me when I first agreed to edit *Personal Relationships*: “Oh so you are going to be the new editor of the *Journal of Romantic Relationships*? How did a friendship scholar land that assignment?” He went on to say that in order for the field to advance, studies examining a larger variety of types of relationships were needed. His point is well taken.

From another perspective, however, as the articles published in this issue illustrate, studying one type of personal relationship in depth and repeatedly is as important as studying the breadth of types of such relationships more superficially. Although hopefully the literature on personal relationships will eventually include in-depth examinations of the breadth of types of personal relationships, for now I think it is a distinct advantage for the field that at least one type of personal relationship has already been studied extensively. The authors of the articles in this issue, which are published in the order in which they were submitted, represent a variety of disciplines (psychology, communication studies, human development and family studies, sociology, human ecology, and family and consumer sciences) and more than one country (the United States but also Canada and China). More related to establishing the importance of in-depth examinations of a single type of relationship, however, they used a variety of study designs, studied different populations, tested a wide-range of theoretically-driven hypotheses, and focused on diverse topics relevant to understanding of romance. So although the authors studied the same type of personal relationship (i.e., romance) their approaches and contributions are quite distinct and reflective of the relatively advanced state of research on romantic relationships compared to the state of research on other types of personal relationships.

Three of the articles are specifically methodological in focus and have implications for researchers who study personal relationships other than romantic ones. Note that studies like these are possible to conduct only because romantic relationships have been so thoroughly scrutinized. It would not have been possible, for example, for James M. Graham and Kenan Christiansen to write their article, “The Reliability of Romantic Love: A Reliability Generalization Meta-Analysis,” if an ample number of studies using various measures of romantic love had not been conducted previously. This team of psychologists from the United States concludes that the reliability scores from several measures are influenced by sample characteristics, suggesting that researchers using them need to be careful when making substantive interpretations of their findings. In their article, Catherine A. Surra, Melissa A. Curran, and Kristi Williams (“Effects of Participation in a Longitudinal Study of Dating”) remind researchers that participation in interviews can potentially change beliefs about the topic under study. Although this interdisciplinary team (family science and sociology) from the United States acknowledges that repeated assessments may be methodologically advantageous in some ways, their findings raise general questions about the effects frequent observations have on the respondents and the data they provide. Although in their article, “Sex Differences in Jealousy: Misinterpretation of Non-Significant Results as Refuting the Theory,” John E. Edlund and Brad J. Sagarin reach substantive conclusions regarding differences in how men and women respond

to imagined infidelity, this pair of psychologists from the United States also examines the methodological issues underlying the debate among evolutionary psychologists over whether this difference exists. They conclude that it is important for researchers not to interpret individual non-significant results as refuting theory, a conclusion that is relevant no matter what type of personal relationship is under study.

The articles by Lawrence A. Kurdek (“Assessing the Health of a Dyadic Relationship in Heterosexual and Same-Sex Partners”) and Brian G. Ogolsky (“Deconstructing the Association between Relationship Maintenance and Commitment: Testing Two Competing Models”) both include examinations of commitment in romantic same-sex relationships in the United States. Kurdek, a psychologist, examines data from both members of dating heterosexual, married heterosexual, cohabiting gay male, and cohabiting lesbian couples. He reports that relationship monitoring by both partners accounts for unique variance in commitment, even with other variables controlled. In addition, he concludes that researchers can reliably assess relationship monitoring in partners from diverse types of couples. Rather than reporting findings across participants with different sexual orientations, Ogolsky essentially controls for sexual orientation by studying a sample of participants all of which are involved in same-sex romantic relationships. A United States post-doc in human ecology, he compares two different models of commitment, information-seeking and motivational models. As predicted from a literature review of studies of commitment in heterosexual relationships, the information-seeking model was more predictive for people in short-duration relationships and the motivational model was more predictive for those who had been in relationships for a long time. Both Kurdek and Ogolsky build on the foundation created by researchers who studied heterosexual romantic relationships before them and model how studying same-sex relationships using two different types of study designs (comparing findings from samples of people with different sexual orientations and examining the predictive power of theories used previously with heterosexual samples) might contribute to the literatures on types of personal relationships other than romantic ones.

This issue includes articles by two sets of authors from outside the United States who reach similar conclusions in their examinations of the association between attachment style and romantic relationship success. Like Kurdek and Ogolsky, Carolyn Birnie, M. Joy McClure, John E. Lydon, and Diane Holmberg, a team of psychologists from Canada, also studied commitment, but their participants were heterosexual college students. In their article, “Attachment Avoidance and Commitment Aversion: A Script for Relationship Failure,” they conclude that avoidantly attached individuals enter into new relationships with detailed scripts for commitment aversion that lead them to expect relationship failure. Furthermore, they suggest that avoidant individuals might be able to learn to be more optimistic and thus more successful in their romantic relationships. Similarly, Chin Ming Hui and Michael Harris Bond (“To Please or to Neglect Your Partner? Attachment Avoidance and Relationship-Driven Self-Improvement”) conclude that self-improvement is a potential resource in sustaining relationships. In a series of two studies

of Chinese college students in Hong Kong, this team of psychologists concludes that avoidantly attached individuals might be able to learn to implement more adaptive behaviors in advance of anticipated events. It is interesting how similar the conclusions of these two sets of authors are, especially given that one was studying the effects of attachment in an individualistic country and the other in a collectivist one. Once again, it is the stage of development of research on romantic relationships allows for this type of observation.

Finally, in their article “On-again/Off-again Dating Relationships: How Are They Different from Other Dating Relationships?,” René M. Dailey, Abigail Pfister, Borae Jin, Gary Beck, and Gretchen Clark, communication studies scholars from the United States, examine a topic that has not received much attention in the literature on romantic relationships. They report that on-off dating relationships are quite common and partners in them are less likely to report positive experiences and more likely to report negative ones than partners who have been together continuously. Furthermore, renewals were associated with more negative experiences and fewer positive ones. It remains to be seen whether a study of on-off relationships among friends or other types of partners might demonstrate similar patterns.

The articles included in this issue reflect the relatively advanced stage of research on romantic relationships. At an earlier stage in the development of the research in this area, the methodological studies, examinations of subpopulations, implicitly comparative research, and explicit replications would not have been possible or at least would not have been as meaningful. Personal relationships scholars’ “love affair with love affairs,” as contributor Michael Harris Bond calls it, has been constructive. For those of us who study types of relationships that have not yet received as much attention, the work of romance scholars serves as an important source of ideas and inspiration.

On behalf of the editorial team of *Personal Relationships*,

Rebecca G. Adams