

## Stepping in the Right Direction.

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[Adams, R. G.](#) 2009. Stepping in the Right Direction. *Personal Relationships* 16(2): iii-v.  
[DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-6811.2009.01215.x](#)

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### **Abstract:**

Collectively, the articles published in this issue remind us of the advantages of studying a variety of types of relationships in a variety of cultural contexts. Although in the editor's preface to the last issue of *Personal Relationships* (Volume 16, Number 1), I discussed the importance to the field of the in-depth literature focused on romantic relationships, ultimately the further development of a literature describing how the variation in the structures, processes, and consequences of romantic, marital, sibling, parent-child, friend, and other types of close relationships will be necessary to advance the field. Without the development of a robust comparative literature, it will, for example, remain unknown whether hierarchical relationships such as those between parents and children involve different processes and lead to different consequences than ones where equality is more likely such as friendship, whether legally recognized romantic relationships such as heterosexual marriages differ systematically from those that exist without legally-binding contracts such as co-habiting heterosexual or homosexual couples, and whether relationships determined by blood ties such as those between siblings differ in significant ways from those that are generally more voluntary such as friendships. Yes, this issue includes some studies of romantic partners and married couples, but it also includes studies of close relationship partners (including spouses, friends, and family members), parent-child relationships, and social networks and therefore represents "a step in the right direction."

**Keywords:** academic publishing | journal editing | personal relationships | sociology | romantic relationships | sociology research | academic research

### **Article:**

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consequences of romantic, marital, sibling, parent-child, friend, and other types of close relationships will be necessary to advance the field. Without the development of a robust comparative literature, it will, for example, remain unknown whether hierarchical relationships such as those between parents and children involve different processes and lead to different consequences than ones where equality is more likely such as friendship, whether legally recognized romantic relationships such as heterosexual marriages differ systematically from those that exist without legally-binding contracts such as co-habiting heterosexual or homosexual couples, and whether relationships determined by blood ties such as those between siblings differ in significant ways from those that are generally more voluntary such as friendships. Yes, this issue includes some studies of romantic partners and married couples, but it also includes studies of close relationship partners (including spouses, friends, and family members), parent-child relationships, and social networks and therefore represents “a step in the right direction.”

In the same sense that I argued in the preface for the last issue of *Personal Relationships* that studying one type of relationship repeatedly is an advantage for the field because it leads to research addressing in-depth issues, studying one cultural context such as the United States repeatedly also represents an advantage because to a certain extent cultural context is “held constant” in the literature. This means that as readers review the results of one United States study after another, they are building an in-depth understanding of how personal relationships operate in one cultural context without having to consider cultural effects simultaneously. This in-depth understanding of relationships in the United States then can serve as a basis for framing more advanced research questions for studies of relationships in parts of the world that have received less attention.

The overrepresentation of studies conducted in the United States in the personal relationship literature has, I think, also had negative effects on interpretations of the personal relationship literature. To put it bluntly, I think it has led scholars, especially in the United States, to ignore cultural variation in the structures, processes, and consequences of personal relationships and to assume that all findings apply universally. Note that throughout this discussion thus far, I have glossed over the tremendous cultural variation that exists within countries as many personal relationship researchers do when they fail to describe the specific context in which they conducted their research in their methods sections. Asking scholars to add information about the country where they did the research and the specific context or population they studied is the most frequent request I have made of authors whose articles my associate editors have recommended for publication in *Personal Relationships*. I think the authors would have included the information initially if they thought it was important. The articles included in this issue remind us that it is. Yes, a majority of the articles published herein are based on studies conducted in the United States, but also included are reports on research conducted in New Zealand, the Netherlands, and China. In this issue, the reader will also find the results of studies conducted within the United States in the Southwest, Midwest, and Northeast. Therefore, in addition to representing a step in the right direction because it includes articles examining a

variety of types of relationships, this issue also represents a step in the right direction because it includes articles, which are published in the order in which they were submitted, based on research conducted in different cultural contexts.

Five of the articles focus on romantic relationships, including studies of married couples in the 10 capital cities of China (Hao Chen, Shanhong Luo, Guoan Yue, Dan Xu, and Ruixue Zhaoyang, “Do Birds of a Feather Flock Together in China?”), married couples in the Midwestern United States (Lauren M. Papp, Chrystyna D. Kouros, and E. Mark Cummings, “Demand-Withdraw Patterns in Marital Conflict in the Home”), married or cohabiting couples in two Dutch community samples (Dick P. H. Barelds and Pieterneel Dijkstra, “Positive Illusions about a Partner's Physical Attractiveness and Relationship Quality”), romantic relationships among undergraduates at the largest public university in New Zealand (Nickola C. Overall and Chris G. Sibley, “Attachment and Dependence Regulation within Daily Interactions with Romantic Partners”), and dating relationships among couples recruited from a major metropolitan area in the southwestern United States (Timothy J. Loving, Marci E. J. Gleason, and Mark T. Pope, “Transition Novelty Moderates Daters' Cortisol Responses When Talking about Marriage”). Chen, Luo, Yue, Xu, and Zhaoyang, a team of psychologists, some on the faculty of Nan Kai University and others working in the United States, report that as in North America, married couples in China are similar on demographics and values. In marked contrast to findings on couples from the United States, however, the couples in China are consistently and strongly similar on domains of personality. Interestingly, the authors argue that this tendency could be exacerbated by the single-child policy that has been in place in China for more than 20 years, observing that children who grow up in the absence of siblings may be more similar to their homogenous parents than those with siblings are and thus be less inclined to be comfortable with people who are different than they are and less likely to marry them. Papp, Kouros, and Cummings, an interdisciplinary team from the United States representing Human Development and Family Studies and Psychology, studied linkages between demand-withdraw communication, marital conflict, and depression. Whether the husband did the demanding and the wife did the withdrawing or the reverse, negative emotions and lower level of conflict resolution resulted. Spousal depression was linked to an increased likelihood of the husband demanding and the wife withdrawing. Indicating that the sample they studied was homogeneous, they suggest future studies examine the same topic in populations that are more diverse ethnically and psychologically. In their study of married or cohabiting heterosexual couples in two Dutch community samples, Barelds and Dijkstra, a married team of psychologists, reported that couples tend to have positive illusions regarding their partner's physical attractiveness and these positive illusions in turn contribute to relationship quality. They speculate about how their findings might have been different in cultures in which partners are not constantly exposed to images of attractive people or in collectivist cultures where partners may be more concerned about what they contribute to the relationship than about what their partners contribute.

The remaining two articles reporting research on romantic relationships examine seemingly less committed ones. Overall and Sibley, a team of psychologists from New Zealand, studied undergraduates at the University of Auckland. They reported that lower personal control predicted lower perceived regard and intimacy, greater partner derogation and withdrawal, and reduced attempts to improve interaction quality. Their results suggest that dependence is a critical component of interactions for all intimates, not just for those with poor attachment histories. Loving, Gleason, and Pope, all affiliated with the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Texas, found that simply discussing the possibility of marriage raised cortisol responses among the dating couples from the larger metropolitan area, which adds to the expanding literature on the biological consequences of personal relationships. Studies to determine whether these findings regarding similarity, communication, physical attractiveness, personal control, and cortisol responses to discussions of commitment are possible to replicate when other types of personal relationships (e.g., between siblings, friends, and parents and children) are examined would be important contributions to the literature.

Three articles examine relationships other than romantic ones. In their article, “Parental Shame and Guilt: Distinguishing Emotional Responses to a Child's Wrongdoings,” Marchelle Scarnier, Toni Schmader, and Brian Lickel, a team of psychologists from the United States, studied parents in six locations in the Midwest and Southwest, including a large public university, a smaller community college, a parent organization, and elementary school, a high school, and a religious organization. They reported parents who experienced guilt in response to their children's misdeeds as opposed to shame also responded more adaptively. It would be interesting to know if these findings would be replicated in a study of a nonhierarchical relationship such as friendship. Jennifer L. Bevan, a communication studies scholar from the United States, studied the close relationships (spouses, romantic partners, friends, and family members) of people who had been diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome. In her article, “Interpersonal Communication Apprehension, Topic Avoidance, and the Experience of Irritable Bowel Syndrome,” she concludes that interactions with close relationship partners tend to be associated with aggravated rather than alleviated symptoms. Perhaps interactions with close relationship partners lead to other negative symptoms as well and that these symptoms vary by type of relationship. Future research will tell. Finally, in a study of the social networks of undergraduate students at a medium-sized, academically-oriented university in the Northeastern United States, a team of psychologists, Fen-Fang Tsai and Harry T. Reis, document the problems associated with perceived loneliness. In their article, “Perceptions by and of Lonely People in Social Networks,” they report that compared to people who are not lonely, lonely people rate both their close and less close relationships with others more negatively. It would be interesting to know whether these findings would be replicated in southeastern Asia where a collectivist culture dominates and Fen-Fang Tsai serves on the faculty at National University of Singapore.

So this issue represents two steps in the right direction, one because it includes studies of a variety of types of personal relationships and one because it includes studies of personal

relationships in a variety of cultural contexts. Although the studies published here do not compare findings across types of personal relationships or cultures, they do provoke questions about their variation. All that remains is for personal relationship researchers to do is to design, conduct, and report on studies to answer them.

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

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