

Relationships research: a narrative review

Abstract

Research on relationships that appears in the 2024- 2025 literature is primarily based on self-report data on relationship satisfaction, risk factors for relationship dissolution and buffers for relationships. Relationship satisfaction characteristics include their being continuous, predictable, dependable, trusted and featuring a power balance between partners. Mindfulness, negotiating and sacrificing are other attributes of relationships that have been recently researched. The risks for relationship dissolution include being female and single. Other risk factors include having several concerns about the relationship, neuroticism, loneliness and engaging in excessive social media use. Surprisingly, buffers for relationships include social media use as well as digital connectivity and online dating. Methodological limitations of this literature include the infrequent specificity of the types of relationships and the lack of studies on positive effects of relationships.

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Introduction

Relationships research: a narrative review

This narrative review of the current literature on relationships research involved entering the search items relationships and 2024-2025 into the search engines of PubMed and PsycINFO. Exclusion criteria for this review included pilot studies and non-English language papers. Surprisingly, only 18 papers met criteria for this review. They can be divided into categories including relationship satisfaction (6 papers), risks for relationship dissolution (8 papers) and buffers for relationships (4 papers). The current research is based on self-report data typically from both members of the dyad.¹ These authors suggested that the current research is based on self-report data because observational methods that appeared in earlier research are more expensive.

Relationship satisfaction

Several studies in the current literature on relationships are focused on relationship satisfaction. Characteristics of relationship satisfaction include that it is continuous, predictable and dependable. It also involves a power balance of the members of the dyad and mindfulness of the partners as well as negotiating and sacrificing. Unfortunately, these variables were studied separately so that their relative importance for relationship satisfaction is unclear.

In a study in which relationship satisfaction was said to be continuous, relationship satisfaction and aspects of the interpersonal theory of suicide were explored.² In this sample (N=94), these included perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness. Greater perceived burdensomeness was related to suicidal ideation, but relationship satisfaction was not related to either burdensomeness or thwarted belongingness. Surprisingly, no conclusion was given on the importance of relationships being continuous.

In research on close relationships, two databases were included (N= 494 and 847).³ In these samples, close relationships were related to dependability and predictability. These would seemingly be important features for relationship satisfaction, but the relative importance of these variables for relationship satisfaction was not determined by, for example, a regression analysis.

Other researchers have reported that relationship satisfaction occurs in couples where power is balanced relatively equally between the partners.⁴ This result was derived from an assessment of power in couples engaged in integrative emotionally- focused therapy and

socio-emotional relationship therapy. This finding was not surprising given that a balance of power between partners of relationships has often been the focus of therapies.

In a scoping review of relationship-specific mindfulness (N=13 studies, 4002 participants), mindfulness was discussed in the context of psychosocial dispositions, emotion -related factors and relationship outcomes.⁵ The psychosocial dispositions included attachment orientation, empathy, and partner responsiveness. The emotion-related factors included stress, depression, and anxiety. The relationship outcomes included relationship satisfaction and sexual quality which were greater for those couples with greater mindfulness. The positive psychosocial dispositions, i.e. attachment orientation, empathy and responsiveness would be expected to contribute to relationship satisfaction. In contrast, the negative emotion-related factors including stress, depression and anxiety would be expected to be related to relationship dissatisfaction or at least less satisfaction. However, the numbers of samples or participants that experienced the positive versus the negative relationship factors were not given in this review.

In a paper that highlighted the importance of negotiating and sacrificing for a partner, the question addressed was whether AI Chatbots could emulate human connections.⁶ These authors claimed that 50 years of research on close relationships suggested that AI chatbots could not provide the benefits of negotiating and sacrificing for a partner and may even reinforce undesirable behaviors. This was a surprising question as AI partners are a relatively recent phenomenon (not for as many as 50 years) and those AI partners are notably intellectually interactive but not affectively interactive. Further, sacrificing is not likely to be apparent in interactions with AI companions (Table 1).

Table 1 Relationship satisfaction variables (and first authors)

Variables	First authors
Dependability and predictability	Camanto
Balance of power between partners	Jenks
Mindfulness	Varghese
Negotiating and sacrificing	Smith

Risks for relationship dissolution

Several risks have been identified for relationship dissolution. They include being female, single, having an interracial relationship, having relationship concerns, neuroticism, loneliness, and excessive social media use.

A significant gender discrepancy has been noted in a study entitled “Romantic relationships matter to men more than to women”.⁷ In this study, men were noted to expect more benefits from a relationship, both mentally and for physical health. In addition, they were less likely to initiate break-ups and suffered more from the dissolution of relationships. These data are surprisingly different than the common lore that women suffer more from heartbreak, highlighting the need for replication studies.⁸

Single individuals also have less relationship satisfaction and therefor are noted to be at greater risk for relationship dissolution.⁹ In this sample (N=1811), single individuals were reported to be more conscientious, but also to be less extroverted and more neurotic based on the five personality types. Being less extroverted and more neurotic likely confounded the effects of being single in this sample. And, it's not clear the degree to which being single and having those personality characteristics contributed to relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution.

Interracial relationships are at greater risk for relationship breakups than same race relationships. In a study on interracial relationships (N=796), they were noted to be at greater risk than same race relationships (N= 798).¹⁰

Jealousy was greater in interracial relationships, which was described as greater frequency and intensity of worrying about potential romantic rivals. This result is difficult to interpret, although those in interracial relationships may worry about same race rivals as same race relationships are still less stigmatic and presumably less stressful.

Relationship concerns have also contributed to relationship dissolution. In a paper entitled “Who is afraid of romantic relationships?”, a group of young adults (N= 1083 close friends 18 to 30-years-old) were surveyed on their romantic relationship concerns.¹¹ The concerns were for ineptitude defined as failing partners' and relatives' expectations and subjugation including loss of independence, boredom, sexual frustration and thwarting one's achievements. The third was an abuse concern defined as losing control over one's resources, being hurt physically or sexually, harming relationships with friends or relatives and being accused of inappropriate behavior. Ineptitude was greater than subjugation, which was greater than abuse.

Ineptitude was greater for younger females, subjugation for older males and religious folks and abuse for younger males and religious folks. The complexity of these findings is likely a function of measuring three factors comprised of many different concerns. Data like these would be more informative if they had been treated with more complex data analyses. The three general concerns including ineptitude, subjugation and abuse are increasingly serious concerns with the more serious concern contributing more to the variance in relationship dissolution. The variety of behaviors that were included in these factors could have been entered into structural equation modeling to help inform therapy/intervention research.

Loneliness has accounted for both the formation and the dissolution of relationships. At least two studies have focused on how loneliness undermines close relationships. In one study, loneliness undermined close relationships and persisted over time which related to reduced feelings of regard and care (N= 1197).¹² These would seem to be confounding variables.

In another study, the quantity and quality of social relationships were associated with loneliness in older adults (N= 474 adults 77+ years-old from Sweden).¹³ Based on the three- item UCLA Loneliness

Scale, the quality of the relationship (closeness, conflict, closeness and conflict combined) explained the most variance in loneliness. It is not clear why closeness and conflict were combined as they would likely be negatively correlated. Having a partner led to less loneliness, even if there was conflict in the relationship. Having a close relationship with children was also related to less loneliness.

Excessive social media use has contributed to relationship dissolution. Loneliness could have led to excessive social media use noted in a study entitled “The mediating role of social media addiction and phubbing in basic psychological needs and relationships and relationship satisfaction” (N= 958 students).¹⁴

The psychological needs addressed in this research included love and belonging. Excessive social media use and phubbing (turning to a cell phone or other social media device during a face-to-face interaction) have both been noted to have negative effects on relationships.¹⁵ However, they have rarely been explored together, probably because phubbing has been considered a form of excessive social media use. Since any kind of social media use and phubbing would be a form of ignoring the partner, it is not surprising that these behaviors had negative effects on the outcome variables of this study including psychological needs (love and belonging), relationships and relationship satisfaction.

Neuroticism has also been a personality risk variable for relationship breakups. In a review of 42 studies on relationships, agreeableness and extraversion led to greater relationship satisfaction.¹⁶ However, a very high 40% heritability was noted for neuroticism which led to relationship instability.

Although all of these variables have been considered risk factors for relationship dissolution in this current review, relationship dissolution was rarely studied as an outcome although it could be predicted based on the severity of the risk factors. Researchers have not used that as an outcome variable likely because almost all of these studies were cross-sectional, not longitudinal or not retrospective studies which could have targeted relationship dissolution as an outcome variable (Table 2).

Table 2 Risks for relationship dissolution (and first authors)

Risks	First authors
Male gender	Wahring
Being single	Hoan
Interracial relationships	Pham
Those with multiple concerns	Tartakovsky
Loneliness	Lemay, Norlin
Excessive social media use	Karaman
Neuroticism	Eskandor

Buffers for relationships

Buffers for relationships have been addressed in this current literature. They include social media use, digital connectedness and online dating. Relationships, in turn, have been noted to buffer minority stress. A positive influence of social media was reported in a study entitled “The uses and gratification of social media and their impact on social relationships and psychological well-being” (N= 1176).¹⁷ The positive effect of social media on relationships in this study was surprising given that it has typically had negative effects on relationships. Likely, the partners in these relationships were spending time together on social media either communicating with each other or others or had some consensus about their individual use of social media. Similar data were reported for digital connections

strengthening couple relationships (N = 45 couples).¹⁸ In this study, the digital connections were between partners which would suggest additional time together which has typically had positive effects on relationships and has been a target for couples therapy (Table 3).

Table 3 Buffers for relationships (and first authors)

Buffers	First authors
Social media	Bhagiasevi
Digital connectedness	Johnson
Online dating	Hu

Surprisingly, online dating has been a buffer for relationships. In one study, online dating was said to “make relationships more successful” (N=2787 individuals in the Pew study).¹⁹ However, these effects were only noted if the individuals discussed their relationship online and were married. This effect of online dating was not observed in non-marital relationships. Online discussions of relationships are likely less volatile than in person discussions, which may explain the effect for marital relationships, although it’s not clear why married couples would be engaging in “online dating”. The absence of the positive effect of online dating on non-marital relationships is surprising given that their physical distance would likely benefit from more online dating.

Methodological limitations of this current literature

Several methodological limitations can be noted for this current literature on relationships. Frequently the relationship types have not been specified or have been combined in the same study even though they would presumably have different qualities. No literature on acquaintances appeared perhaps because they don’t usually have negative effects like romantic relationships, partnerships and marriages. Romantic relationships would presumably differ from partnerships or marriages but they were not typically specified or compared. Surprisingly, nothing appeared on parental or sibling relationships. Different personality types would also seemingly affect relationships, but personality types were not a variable in any of the studies. Seemingly, similar personality types might have more relationship satisfaction, although “opposites attract” is an expression that is often noted about relationships

Surprisingly, none of the studies focused on the positive effects of relationships even though the common lore suggests the importance of having friends and partners and the negative effects of loneliness. Only two relationship satisfaction behaviors were the focus of research including predictability and dependability.

The only risk factors that appeared in this literature included several demographic variables including gender, age, being single and being in an interracial relationship. Feelings were the focus of at least one paper on jealousy. And only two behaviors were considered risk variables including excessive social media use and phubbing. That same behavior, excessive social media use, was surprisingly also considered a buffer for relationships. Although online relationships were considered risky, no consideration was given to how many online relationships convert to offline relationships. Despite these limitations, the literature is informative and suggestive for future research including the need for focusing on positive effects of relationship satisfaction.²⁰

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Conflicts of interest

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