Seventy Years of Research on Personality and Close Relationships: Substantive and Methodological Trends Over Time

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ABSTRACT  The present review is based on a quantitative analysis of the abstracts for 477 studies published since 1932 on the topic of personality and close (romantic) relationships. This approach enables a “bird’s-eye” view of the content and methods that have characterized research in this area and an examination of publication trends over time. Results showed that 60% of all published studies in this area relied exclusively on cross-sectional and self-report methods; that nearly all used convenience samples, though more than half used nonstudent samples; and that more than one-third relied exclusively on data from individuals rather than couples. Few studies appeared to include elaborated networks of constructs in either the personality or relationship domain or to attempt to integrate an elaborated model of personality with an elaborated relationship model. Examination of trends over time revealed a mixed picture, with increasing use of the least informative designs balanced by evidence of increasingly complex conceptual models.

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The study of personality and close romantic relationships dates back to 1932 when Schiller published a paper on assortative mating on temperament and emotional traits. This paper was soon followed by other papers on assortative mating on personality characteristics (e.g., Hoffeditz, 1934; Willoughby, 1934; Terman & Buttenweiser, 1935a), and then in 1935 by the first papers linking an aspect of personality to marital satisfaction (Bernard, 1935; Terman & Buttenweiser, 1935b). Since that time, research in this area has burgeoned, though it has not to our knowledge ever been comprehensively reviewed. The present article partially addresses this gap by providing a quantitative analysis of the abstracts for 477 studies published since 1932 on the topic of personality and close relationships. Such a review, while lacking the precision of an in-depth analysis of the complete articles, permits a “bird’s-eye” view of the major substantive and methodological trends in this area of research since its inception.

Toward that end, we first describe the predominant methodological features of past studies on personality and close relationships, including sample characteristics, study design, and data collection methods. We then examine the content of this body of research in terms of the constructs and measures that have been used in both the personality and relationship domains, and attempt to characterize the complexity of this research using several indirect indicators. We examine trends over time in the methodological and substantive features of this area of research, and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses against a set of prescriptions set forth in this issue (see Cooper; Reis, Copabianco, & Tsai).

Several core features of relational phenomena pose unique methodological demands on researchers interested in studying personality and close relationships. First, relational phenomena do not reside in either person, but rather in their interactions. Thus, to understand the role of personality in relationships, one must understand how each partners’ personality shapes and is shaped by the dynamic and recurring interactions between them. Second, if relationships arise out of the ongoing patterns of interaction between two people, then it follows that relational phenomena exist at a higher level of analysis—the level of the dyad or group. Appropriate research designs must therefore deal with the inherently multilevel nature of relational phenomena, and the reality that explanations located solely at the individual level of analysis will never prove adequate. Third, relational phenomena are inherently dynamic and time-dependent.
Thus, successful efforts to understand the complex interplay between personality and relational phenomena must view people in their relationships over time. Fourth, both personality and relationship phenomena are multifaceted and multidetermined, and cannot be adequately addressed by focusing on simple bivariate associations between a single personality construct and a single relationship construct (though such studies can serve as useful building blocks for more comprehensive efforts).

These considerations point to a number of desirable features in studies on personality and close relationships. Perhaps most obvious, studies should include both couple members. Otherwise, relational processes cannot be studied, but only an individual’s constructions of those processes.

Second, both longitudinal and diary methodologies are ideally suited to capture the dynamic and time-dependent nature of relational phenomena. Diary studies enable a more fine-grained examination of the day-to-day interactions between couple members and how these are shaped by the personalities of both individuals in the relationship. Traditional longitudinal designs enable the study of reciprocal influence between individuals’ personalities and the ever-changing interpersonal landscape. In contrast, cross-sectional designs present snapshots frozen in time in which cause and effect are hopelessly intertwined.

Third, understanding how personality shapes and is shaped by recurring patterns of interactions requires observing and recording those patterns. As Gottman and Notarius (2000) note, complex patterns of social interaction “lie beyond the natural awareness of even the most keenly sensitive spouse or partner, and thus lie beyond assessment with self-report instruments” (p. 927). Interaction data therefore occupy a unique position in research on personality and close relationships. More generally, reliance on self-report data as the sole source of information about personality and relational phenomena is inherently limited due to the inability to separate the reality of relational phenomena from an individual’s accounts of those phenomena. As Reis and colleagues (this issue) point out, the futility of such efforts quickly becomes apparent if you have ever tried to sort fact from fiction, based solely on the retrospective accounts of an experience by two disputing parties. Thus, although self-report data provide a crucial window into a person’s private experience, the ideal study will supplement self-reports with independent sources of information that allow one to begin to separate strictly private experience from social reality.
Finally, the complexity inherent in both personality and relational phenomena requires explanatory models that integrate multiple constructs into a single overarching framework. Such models should consider not only the nature of underlying causal processes and important boundary conditions, but also attempt to integrate across levels of constructs. Specifically, it has been suggested (e.g., Cooper; Reis et al., this issue) that a crucial strategy for understanding both personality and close relationships requires consideration of how broad and relatively undifferentiated constructs, such as marital satisfaction or personal well-being, are linked with more refined aspects and processes, both at the level of the individual and the dyad. Only through such efforts can we begin to “unpack” broad and intrinsically important dimensions of individual and relationship functioning to reveal their inner workings.

These four features of an ideal study, therefore, provide a backdrop for describing and evaluating existing research. Based on previous narrative reviews of research on personality (Winter & Barenbaum, 1999) and on close relationships (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), as well as more quantitative reviews of publication trends in the field of personality as a whole (e.g., Endler & Speer, 1998; Mallon, Kingsley, Affleck, & Tennen, 1998), we anticipate that few studies will meet these criteria, but that evidence of progress over time will be apparent.

METHOD

The PsychInfo database was searched using broad sets of key words to index studies that include terms relevant to both personality and close (romantic) relationships. Personality key words or phrases included “personality,” “trait,” “individual difference,” and “disposition.” Relationship words or phrases included “social relationship,” “close relationship,” “marriage,” “martial satisfaction,” “divorce,” “courtship,” “dating,” “mating,” and “homogamy” (typically operationalized as above chance similarity between spouses on some dimension). The search was limited to journal articles published in English. For articles published after 1997 when participant populations were consistently coded in the database, the search was further restricted to adolescent and adult human populations. A total of 3,385 potentially relevant abstracts were identified. Abstracts pre-dating 1997 were initially screened for nonhuman participants; remaining abstracts were then independently reviewed by the authors to identify the subset of articles that provided empirical data linking some aspect of personality to some aspect of
close romantic relationships, including stability, satisfaction, or functioning. Examples of the types of articles that were judged irrelevant include: (1) clinical case studies in which no data were presented; (2) studies that examined some aspect of personality and close relationships, but related them to a third variable rather than to each other; and (3) articles that mentioned personality as a possible explanation for an observed relationship phenomenon (or vice versa) but did not actually measure personality. Disagreements between readers were discussed to arrive at a consensus opinion. In the end, 477 abstracts were identified as relevant, and these constitute the basis of the analysis.

Coding Abstracts

Abstracts were coded on the following dimensions: (1) year of publication; (2) publication outlet; (3) study design; (4) data collection method; (5) sample size and characteristics; (6) and personality and relationship variables examined. Procedures for coding methodology and content differed, and are thus described separately.

Method Codes

Codes used for study design, data collection methods, and sample characteristics were similar to those used by West, Newsom, & Fenaughty (1992) and Mallon, Kingsley, Affleck, and Tennen (1998). Designs included passive cross-sectional, passive longitudinal, quasi-experimental (exposure to a manipulated independent variable but no random assignment), experimental (a manipulated independent variable plus random assignment), clinical trial or intervention, twin or family, and diary studies. Data collection methods included self-report, other-report, behavioral observations or interaction sequences coded with minimal inference (e.g., behavior counts), implicit or indirect measures (e.g., projective tests, global ratings of written or interview material), clinical or diagnostic interviews, objective test data (e.g., performance on a laboratory task, physiological indices, IQ test score), and archival data.

Characteristics of individuals and of couples, in those studies using couples, were coded separately. Individuals were characterized as students, nonstudent adults, adolescents, or members of a clinical or special population. Student codes were assigned to both graduate and undergraduate students. Adult codes were assigned when participants were explicitly described as adults, when methods of participant recruitment were clearly aimed at the wider community, or when the age of the sample was more diverse or older than the average student sample. Couples were characterized as dating, engaged, married, or newlyweds. Finally, sample size (recorded as the total number of individuals) was also coded.
All abstracts were coded independently by two trained undergraduate raters, and discrepancies were resolved by one of the authors. Multiple codes on a single dimension were assigned when appropriate (e.g., a study might include an experiment and a longitudinal follow-up). Finally, missing data codes were assigned when insufficient information was included in the abstract to reliably code a particular dimension.

**Content Codes**

Substantive codes were assigned for both the personality and relationship foci of each article. Following Endler and Speer (1998), the content of the coding system was developed by first listing the main foci of each article and then developing a system that encompassed the primary themes apparent across all articles. It should be noted that the appearance of certain categories is somewhat arbitrary in the sense that decisions about which categories to collapse were subjective and ultimately dictated by their frequency in the data.

A total of 16 personality codes were used. Three codes were assigned to broadband trait measures of personality: (1) three factor (positive emotionality, negative emotionality, constraint, Tellegen, 1982; or extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, Eysenck, 1967) or five factor (extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness; Costa & McCrae, 1985) models, along with any of several other multitrait measures that have been shown to map onto these same dimensions (see John, 1990, for a review); (2) the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI; Hathaway & McKinley, 1942); and (3) measures of temperament. Codes were also assigned for general measures of well-being or personal distress (e.g., depression), and for personality disorders (e.g., borderline personality disorder). Eleven additional codes were used to categorize narrow and mid-range personality constructs, including self-constructs (predominantly self-esteem and self-monitoring); attachment styles; aggressive traits (trait hostility, anger expression); gender role attitudes (e.g., attitudes toward the proper roles of men and women); social competence (e.g., social or assertion skills, social anxiety); socioemotional orientation (e.g., empathy, altruism, affiliative need); impulsivity, thrill-seeking and sensation seeking; ego development, maturity, and resilience; control-related constructs, including locus of control, perceived personal control, and autonomy; and finally cognitive-related constructs, including attributional styles, cognitive complexity, and so on. The interpersonal circumplex dimensions (dominance and warmth) were also coded separately. Although these dimensions, which are closely related to two of the Five Factor dimensions (extraversion and agreeableness), might have been coded with the Five Factor models and hence treated as a broadband measure, we elected to code them separately and treat them as mid-range measures because of their specific interpersonal focus (Wiggins & Trobst, 1999).
Four broad relationship codes were used: (1) relationship stability (e.g., its duration or dissolution); (2) global ratings of relationship satisfaction or quality (indexed by the Locke-Wallace [Locke & Wallace, 1959], Dyadic Adjustment Scale [Spanier, 1976], and a host of other standard and investigator developed measures); (3) homogamy or assortative mating (studies examining the degree of similarity between partners); and (4) more specific aspects of quality or functioning. The final category included eight subcodes: (1) communication, problem solving, and decision making; (2) love, intimacy, trust, and caregiving; (3) sexuality and sexual behavior; (4) violence, aggression, and abuse; (5) conflict and conflict resolution; (6) power, dominance, and equity; (7) role relationships and division of labor within the relationship; and (8) interpersonal attraction and factors that influence partner desirability. It should be noted that attraction was not included as a key word in our original search because most research in this area has focused on factors influencing attraction in initial encounters between strangers (Berscheid, 1985), and as such has limited relevance to processes in ongoing, close relationships.

Once the coding system was developed, abstracts were reviewed and coded together by both authors until agreement on use of codes was established. All abstracts were then coded for personality and relationship content (on separate passes) by the second author. Multiple content codes were assigned when appropriate, and missing data codes were assigned when the focus of the article could not be clearly identified.

To establish reliability of the content coding, a randomly chosen subset of 5% of the abstracts was re-coded by the first author. A total of 768 individual content codes (32 possible personality + relationship codes × 24 abstracts) were reviewed; agreement was obtained in 87% of the cases, thus indicating a high rate of overall agreement. Nearly all disagreements involved the number of narrow personality or specific relationship codes to be assigned, or disagreements about the specific categories content to which should be assigned. Several of the narrow categories were later collapsed into broader categories anyway (due to low rates of endorsement), thus minimizing the impact of these discrepancies.

Validity of Approach

The present study coded characteristics of studies from abstracts of articles rather than from the articles themselves. Although an analysis based on the full articles would no doubt yield a more accurate and complete picture of research in this area, this task was beyond the scope of the present review. To judge the nature and extent of any errors introduced into our analysis by this method, we retrieved and coded a randomly selected subset of 5% of the
articles included in the present review and then compared these codes to the
codes initially assigned on the basis of the abstract alone.

Comparison of the two sets of codes revealed few discrepancies overall. Out of 456 methodological codes compared across the two methods, only 8 discrepancies (<2%) were identified. Out of 720 potential content codes (30 codes, including “other” categories, × 24 articles) that might have been assigned for the personality and relationship foci of the selected abstracts, 13 (<2%) instances were found in which codes were not assigned that would have been assigned on the basis of the full article. Despite the small number of errors in assigning individual codes, about 1/5 (5 out of 24) of all abstracts contained at least one coding error that was unlikely to have occurred had the data been extracted directly from the article. Examination of the type of errors showed that most errors were ones of omission. These omissions led to a higher overall rate of missing data for certain variables, and to at least some underrepresentation of methodological features and content of the studies. Few actual coding errors were found.

Although the nature of bias associated with the underrepresentation of methods or content cannot be readily quantified, bias associated with missing data can be gauged by examining patterns of missing data to determine whether missingness is systematically related to other study characteristics. Missing data dichotomies were therefore created for each of the five variables found to have above-average amounts of missing data: personality content codes (15% missing); sample size (15% missing); couple type among studies using couples (20% missing); and number of waves (24% missing) and length of study (16%) among longitudinal studies.

Results of these analyses showed that abstracts of recent studies were more likely to provide codable descriptions of the personality measures and to report sample size, but were less likely to provide explicit descriptions of the type of couples sample used (whether adult, student, etc.). There were no trends over time in the likelihood of reporting number of waves or length of follow-up among longitudinal studies; and neither publication outlet nor an index of study quality (created by identifying the subset of studies that was strictly cross-sectional and relied exclusively on the self-reports of individuals) was systematically related to any of the missing data dichotomies. These data suggest that more recent studies will be somewhat overrepresented in analyses of personality content and sample size, but underrepresented in analyses of couple characteristics.

In short, the results of these analyses suggest that the present approach provides an efficient and reasonably valid method for summarizing and describing the salient features of this body of literature. Although some inaccuracies, due primarily to errors of omission, were undoubtedly introduced, it appears that the amount of bias introduced as a result of missing data is small.
Variable Construction and Data Analysis

A series of dichotomous variables was created using the assigned personality and relationship codes to indicate whether a given construct or category of constructs was examined separately or in conjunction with other constructs. Thus, codes were created to indicate whether a study examined only a single personality construct or category of constructs (e.g., socioemotional traits alone, or a broadband measure alone), or multiple constructs (e.g., socioemotional traits in combination with a broadband measure). Similar codes were created to distinguish single vs. multiple foci within the relationship domain and to describe how personality and relationship constructs were combined across domains. These measures are used as rough indices of a study’s conceptual complexity and breadth. Although we recognize that simply including constructs from multiple domains does not guarantee that a broad and integrative framework was adopted, nevertheless, studies that fail to include multiple constructs will necessarily be hampered in efforts to build broad, integrative models of personality and close relationships. In other words, these variables indicate whether a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for testing an elaborated or integrative conceptual model was met.

Data were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to describe the features of studies, and their co-occurrence within studies. To examine trends over time, publications were grouped by year into six categories roughly corresponding to decade. Because few publications appeared prior to 1960, publications predating 1960 \((n = 37)\) were treated as a group. Publications for 2000 and 2001 \((n = 33)\) were also treated as a separate group. For analyses of variables with low base rates, or for analyses conducted on a subset of the data, further collapsing of the decade variable was sometimes necessary in order to maintain adequate cell size, within-cell variability, or both. One-way analysis of variance was used to test for linear, quadratic, and cubic trends over time in dependent measures. The Mantel-Haenzel test for linear association (available in chi-square) was also used to test for linear associations between decade and dichotomous outcomes.\(^1\) To prevent the presence of a handful of studies with unusually large sample sizes

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1. In cases involving continuous predictors and dichotomous outcomes, logistic regression would normally be the analytic tool of choice. However, because the logistic function (which ranges from 0 to 1) is essentially linear between .30 and .70, ANOVA and similar techniques provide estimates of effects for dichotomies that are very close to those that would be obtained in logistic regression so long as the dichotomy falls within that range of endorsement (Huselid & Day, 1991). Thus, the practical consequences of using the ANOVA to analyze dichotomous outcomes are inconsequential in such situations. For this reason, and because of the ease of testing for nonlinear components in ANOVA models, we elected to use analysis of variance as our primary analytic tool.
from exerting undue influence on the results of our analyses, sample sizes in excess of 1,000 individuals (500 couples) were set to 1,000.

RESULTS

Number of Publications by Time

As shown in Table 1, publications in the area of personality and close relationships occurred at the rate of about one per year through the 1950s. Since that time, however, the number of publications has approximately doubled with each passing decade. Thus, there appears to be growing interest in this area of research, at least as indicated by the number of empirical publications on the topic.

Publications by Outlet

As shown in Table 2, more than 1/2 of all published articles on personality and close (romantic) relationships appeared in psychology journals. By far, the most common outlet among these were social/personality journals, with nearly 1/3 of the total number of articles appearing in these journals. A little more than 1/5 of the articles appeared in specialty journals devoted to relationships, and the remaining were spread throughout other disciplines, including psychiatry and biomedical fields, sociology, communications, and specialty journals in the area of sexual behavior and sexuality. Examination of outlets by decade revealed a significant ($p < .05$) linear increase in the proportion of articles published in social/

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior to 1960</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960–1969</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970–1979</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980–1989</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990–1999</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000–</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
personality journals vs. other outlets, rising steadily from 9% during the 1960s to 47% in the past 2 years. No change, however, was found in the proportion of publications in relationship journals. Given the shift toward publication in social and personality journals, we will evaluate the possibility that this trend accounts for other time-related trends observed in the data and describe those cases where it does.

### Design Features

As shown in Table 3, 3/4 of all published studies on personality and close relationships relied exclusively on the use of passive, correlational designs. More informative designs were relatively rare, with longitudinal designs being by far the most common among them. The modal longitudinal study, however, included only two waves (55%) and was of relatively short duration (72% less than 5 years; 48% less than 2 years). Thus, few longitudinal studies provide a true developmental perspective or make use of the most advanced statistical techniques, all of which require 3 (or more) waves of data. Less than 2% of all studies used any sort of diary or experience-sampling methodology, and only a handful used twin or family methodology. Finally, a mere 8% of studies used multiple designs,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlet</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality/Social (30%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical/Counseling (10%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental (3%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General/Other (11%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship/Marriage/Family</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatry/Behavior Genetics/Biomedical</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality/Sexual Behavior</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Other</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. No journal or category of journal appeared more than 10 times in the two Other categories. Most common were communication journals, Sex Roles, and social biology or evolutionary journals. Percentages in parentheses are percentages of the total number of studies.*
with the most common combination being a cross-sectional study paired with an experiment or quasi-experiment.

Examination of trends over time revealed complex and complementary patterns of change in the proportion of studies using cross-sectional vs. longitudinal designs. As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of studies using a cross-sectional design showed a general decline across time, whereas the proportion of longitudinal studies increased across time. Polynomial contrasts revealed a significant linear trend for both series and a marginally significant cubic trend for the proportion of studies using longitudinal designs over time. (Although the deviation from linearity was significant for cross-sectional designs, neither the quadratic nor cubic term was

Table 3
Characteristics of Study Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strictly Cross-Sectional (76%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longitudinal</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental/Quasi-Experiment/Intervention</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Percentages sum to more than 100 because individual abstracts could be assigned to more than one code. Percentages in parentheses are percentages of the total number of studies.

![Figure 1](Image)

*Figure 1*  
Percentage of studies using cross-sectional and longitudinal designs by decade.
Among the subset of longitudinal studies providing data on number of waves \((n = 60)\), there was a significant \((p < .05)\) linear increase in the proportion of studies including three or more waves, rising from 25\% prior to the 1980s to 55\% in the last 2 years. Among those providing data on length of follow-up \((n = 67)\), however, there has been no change over time. Finally, although the proportion of studies using at least one of the remaining more informative designs varied significantly from year to year, there was no trend over time toward increasing or decreasing use of such designs. Thus, research on personality and close relationships has seen an overall decrease in the use of strictly cross-sectional designs and a concomitant increase in the use of longitudinal designs, particularly those collecting three or more waves of data. Little progress, however, has been made in the use of other more informative designs, including the use of diary studies.

Despite evidence of positive trends over time, research on personality and close relationships appears to rely more heavily on cross-sectional designs and to use fewer experiments and quasi-experiments than the field of personality as a whole. (For comparative data, see Endler & Speer, 1998; Mallon et al., 1998; West et al., 1992.) Although these discrepancies may stem, at least in part, from differences in the databases utilized in the earlier reviews, they presumably also reflect the nature of the phenomena under study. According to Berscheid (1985), as early as 1985, researchers had already begun to shift their attention away from factors influencing attraction in initial encounters between strangers to the study of attraction in ongoing relationships. With this shift in focus, factors that could be readily manipulated in a laboratory lost some of their currency because of their limited ability to illuminate processes in ongoing relationships. Thus, the relatively greater reliance on passive cross-sectional and longitudinal designs versus experimental ones in this area of research may well reflect a preference to study ongoing relationships in naturalistic settings.

Data Collection Methods

Similar to findings from earlier reviews of personality research (e.g., Endler & Speer, 1998), self-report methods dominate in this area of research as well. As shown in Table 4, although virtually all studies used self-report methodology in some way, more than 3/4 of these relied on self-report measures as the sole source of data. Twenty-two
percent of studies used more than one data collection method, most commonly combining self- and other report. Examination of data collection methods by decade revealed no significant trends over time. Thus, there appears to be no reliable movement away from the sole reliance on self-report data.

Sample Characteristics

Sample Size

Among the subset of abstracts providing sample size information, the average sample sizes were 356 individuals ($Md = 172$) and 169 couples ($Md = 81$). Only 2% of abstracts specifically mentioned the use of a representative or random sample. Examination of sample sizes by decade revealed no clear trend over time in sample size for couple studies, though a trend toward the use of smaller samples of individuals was apparent. The mean sample size decreased in each consecutive decade (except for the 1970s when the mean sample size [$n = 129$] was unusually small) from a high of 366 prior to the 1960s to the current mean of 252. Although the overall downward trend was not significant, the starting and end points were significantly different ($p < .05$) by post-hoc contrasts. Thus, despite repeated warnings in the literature about the importance of sample size and the threat of Type II error.

Table 4

Data Collection Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-report</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strictly self-report (77%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Inferential</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Report (10%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit/Indirect (6%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical Interview (4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal Inference</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Observation/Interaction (6%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective Test Data (3%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archival (&lt;1%)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Note. Percentages sum to more than 100 because individual abstracts could be assigned more than one code. Percentages in parentheses are percentages of the total number of studies.
(Cohen, 1962), the mean sample size among studies using individuals has declined over time.

**Use of Couples vs. Individuals**

Nearly 2/3 \((N = 298, 0.62\%)\) of all studies included both couple members. Although this proportion might be viewed as surprisingly high, it nevertheless means that nearly 40\% \((N = 199)\) of all studies relied solely on the perspective of a single individual. More disheartening, however, is the fact that the proportion of studies using couples has dropped significantly \((p < .001)\), from nearly 80\% in the 1970s to 54\% during the 1990s and only 47\% in the last 2 years.

**Participant Characteristics in Studies of Individuals**

As shown in Table 5 (top half), college students and adults residing in the community were equally represented among samples of individuals, each accounting for nearly 45\% of all studies. (Two percent of studies included both students and nonstudent samples, and are thus represented in both percentages.) Although the percentage of studies using students in the present review is lower (and the corresponding percentage of adults higher) than percentages reported in several earlier reviews of personality research (Endler & Speer, 1998; Mallon et al., 1998), these discrepancies appear explicable in terms of two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristics of Individual and Couple Samples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults or College/Adult Mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical/Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type of Couples

| Married | 143 | 60 |
| Newlywed | 21 | 9 |
| Dating/Engaged | 33 | 14 |
| Mixed | 41 | 17 |

*Note.* Twenty-one studies included both samples of individuals and samples of couples. Characteristics of these samples are reported in both breakdowns.
interrelated trends. Specifically, we found that the proportion of studies using students has significantly ($p < .05$) increased from a low of 15% prior to the 1960s to about 48% over the past 22 years (the period corresponding roughly to those covered by the above reviews), while the proportion of studies using adults significantly ($p < .001$) declined from a high of 62% prior to 1960 to 39% during the 1990s and only 22% since 2000. Thus, the greater use of adult samples observed in the present review is at least partly due to the inclusion of studies in our database that were published prior to those included in the earlier reviews. In addition, we found that the trends toward both increasing use of students and decreasing use of adults could be explained by the increasing proportion of studies published in social/personality journals. In other words, disciplinary differences in the tendency to rely on undergraduate students as research participants, and the increasing presence of a discipline prone to over-rely on such samples, appears to explain both why the percentage of studies using students vs. adults is relatively low in the aggregate, as well as why it is on the rise.

**Couple Characteristics**

The bottom half of Table 5 shows the distribution of couple types among the subset of studies providing descriptive information on couple type ($N = 238$). Nearly 70% of these studies used married or newlywed couples, and another 17% included a mix of couple types, many of which also included at least some married couples. (Unfortunately, we did not code mixed samples for their specific composition.) Combining information on individual and couple characteristics revealed that 62% of studies using couples included community-residing (i.e., nonstudent) married or newlywed adult couples. Examining this proportion by decade showed no overall trend across time, though post-hoc contrasts indicated a marginally significant ($p < .10$) decline from 70% in the 1980s to 50% in the last 2 years. Thus, the use of married couples in studies using couples continues to be the norm, although if recent trends continue, it may not be for long.

**Prevalence of Cross-Sectional, Self-Report Studies Using Individuals**

Perhaps least informative of all studies for understanding the complex and dynamic links between personality and relational phenomena are
those combining a passive cross-sectional design with exclusive reliance on self-report data from a single individual. Nearly 1/4 (23%) of all studies fell into this category. Though 60% of all studies relied solely on cross-sectional and self-report methods, nearly 2/3 of these included data from both couple members, thus greatly reducing the percentage of studies characterized by all three (i.e., cross-sectional, self-report, individuals as participants) limitations. Unfortunately, as shown in Figure 2, the percentage of studies characterized by all three limitations has risen steadily since the 1960s. Both the linear and quadratic terms describing this trend across time were marginally ($p < .10$) significant. Thus, although the percentage characterized by all three limitations represents a minority of all studies, the tendency toward the increasing use of such designs is a clear cause for concern.

**Intraindividual and Personality Characteristics**

Table 6 presents a summary of intraindividual and personality characteristics examined in studies for which personality codes could be assigned. As shown in Table 6, nearly 40% of all studies included one or more broadband measures of personality. Most common among these were various measures of the three- and five-factor models of personality, followed by the MMPI. More than 1/4 of all studies examined some aspect of personal adjustment or distress; another 7% examined personality disorders as opposed to dimensional traits. More than 60% examined one or more narrow or mid-range personality

![Figure 2](image-url)

**Figure 2**

Percentage of cross-sectional studies relying exclusively on self-report data from a single individual by decade.
traits, the most common being various self-constructs and the interpersonal circumplex dimensions.

Combining across major content categories identified in Table 6, we found that the modal study examined a single personality construct in isolation. Indeed, fewer than 1/3 (30%) examined constructs in more than one of the major categories identified in Table 6 (i.e., broadband traits, global adjustment, personality disorders, or narrow/mid-range traits), and fewer than 1/4 (22%) included the specific combination of a global aspect of personality together with a narrow or mid-range personality trait.

Examination of trends in personality content across time revealed a significant ($p < .05$) decline in the use of broadband measures as the sole focus of studies on personality and close relationships. As shown
in Figure 3, this decline was accompanied by an overall increase ($p < .01$) in the proportion of studies focusing solely on narrow or mid-range traits. However, no change over time occurred in the proportion of studies examining constructs from multiple categories, or in those examining a global or broadband measure with a narrow or mid-range trait. Thus, it appears that the trend away from an exclusive focus on broadband traits was accompanied by an increased focus on more narrowly defined traits, rather than on efforts to integrate across types and levels of trait constructs. Of course, critics of the broadband trait models (e.g., Block, 1995) would argue that a shift of focus toward narrow and mid-range traits is, in and of itself, a positive development, for such a focus more readily fosters insight into underlying process and mechanisms.

Examination of changes in the proportion of studies using specific broadband measures revealed a marginally significant ($p < .07$) decline in use of the MMPI (from 17% during the 1960s to 3% in the past 2 years), but no change in the use of three or five factor inventories. Thus, the overall decline in the use of broadband measures appears to reflect a waning interest in the MMPI, at least among researchers studying personality and close relationships. Meanwhile, the proportion of studies focusing on self-related constructs increased significantly (from 0% prior to 1960 to 23% in the past 2 years), as did the proportion focusing on attachment styles (from 0% prior to 1980 to 17% in the past 2 years; $p$'s < .05). No trends over time were observed for any of the remaining narrow to mid-range traits (listed in Table 6). Given the surge of interest in self-constructs over the past several decades among personality and social psychology (Endler & Speer, 1998), it is not surprising that the significant increase in publications on self-constructs was entirely accounted for by the shift toward publication in social/personality journals. Thus, the overall increase in the number of studies focusing on narrow or mid-range traits appears to be due primarily to increases in the numbers of studies on attachment styles and the self, with the latter occurring as a result of the increasing

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2. Although we initially expected to see an increase in research using the Five Factor Model following seminal publications by Costa and McCrae during the 1980s, it appears that the increasing use of five-factor measures has, to at least some degree, supplanted, rather than supplemented, earlier research on various three-factor models. Thus, our decision to collapse across these models, rather than code them separately, most likely accounts for the lack of an overall increase in this category.
participation in research on this topic of researchers who primarily identify with social/personality psychology.

**Relationship Characteristics**

As shown in Table 7, almost half of all studies examined global satisfaction or relationship adjustment; approximately 1/4 examined relationship status or stability; and 1/4 examined homogamy or assortative mating. Nearly half of all studies examined one or more narrow aspects of relationship functioning or process, most commonly the emotional tone or closeness of the relationship. Finally, among the subset of studies examining a specific aspect of relationship functioning, the vast majority (70%) examined only a single relationship topic.

Combining across the major content categories identified in Table 7, we found that the modal study examined only a single relationship construct or category of constructs. Indeed, only 38% of studies examined two or more categories of relationship constructs, and only 28% focused on both a global and specific dimension of relationship functioning.

Examination of trends over time showed a significant ($p < .01$) decline in the proportion of studies examining homogamy, both alone and in conjunction with other constructs. As shown in Figure 4, the proportion of studies focusing on a single, global relationship construct (either satisfaction/quality or status/stability, but not both)
also declined significantly \((p < .001)\), although this appeared to be due primarily to a decrease in the number of studies focusing exclusively on relationship satisfaction. The proportion of studies focusing exclusively on some specific aspect of relationship functioning, however, revealed no change over time (bottom line, Figure 4).

Examination of trends over time in studies investigating multiple categories of relationship constructs revealed significant increases in those focusing on more than one relationship construct or category of constructs \((p < .001)\), as well as those examining a global relationship construct (satisfaction/quality, status/stability, or both) in concert with one or more specific relationship constructs \((p < .05)\). Together, these data suggest that researchers examining personality and close relationships are not simply shifting their attention away from global aspects of relationship functioning to narrow ones, but rather are increasing their efforts to integrate across multiple relationship constructs.

Examination of changes over time in the nature of specific topics revealed significant \((p < .05)\) increases in the number of studies examining intimacy issues and processes (from 11% prior to 1960 to

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**Table 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Global Satisfaction/Relationship Adjustment</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Status/Stability</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assortative Mating/Homogamy</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Behaviors &amp; Dimensions</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy, Trust, Caregiving (16%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Behavior (9%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication, Problem Solving,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-Making (8%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict (8%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence, Aggression, Abuse (7%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power, Dominance, Equity (5%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Relationships/Division of Labor (4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attraction (4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Behaviors, Dimensions* (4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Specific codes in the “Other” category appear less than 2% of the time. Percentages sum to >100 because one study could examine multiple variables. Percentages in parentheses are percentages of the total number of studies.
36% in the past 2 years); violence or abuse in relationships (none prior to 1960 vs. 17% in the past 2 years); and specific communication and problem-solving behaviors (from 3% prior to 1960 to 14% in the past 2 years). At the same time, the number of studies examining sexual behavior declined significantly \((p < .05)\), from 22% of all studies prior to 1960 to 6% in the past two years. Because sexual aggression was coded in the violence and aggression category, these trends raise the possibility that researchers have shifted their attention away from studying the more normative aspects of sexuality in close relationships toward a focus on its more pathological forms.

**Combined Personality and Relationship Foci**

As we argued earlier, the most promising approaches for studying personality and close relationships combine sophisticated models of personality and personality processes with sophisticated models of relationships and relationship functioning. To gain some insight into the prevalence of this type of research in the literature and whether it is becoming more common, we examined the percentage of studies that included multiple categories of relationship constructs together with multiple categories of personality constructs. Such studies were disappointingly rare, accounting for only 13% of all published studies, whereas nearly half (47%) of all studies related only a single personality construct to a single relationship construct. However, examination of changes across time in these measures revealed a significant \((p < .05)\)
decline in the proportion of studies relating only a single personality construct to a single relationship construct (top line, Figure 5) coupled with a nonsignificant trend in the opposite direction for studies including multiple personality constructs and multiple relationship constructs. As an additional indicator of the complexity of studies, we also coded specific reference in the abstract to tests of mediation, moderation (or interaction), and reciprocal influence. Although only 11% of studies indicated tests of any of these more complex processes, their prevalence in the literature increased significantly from 2% of studies prior to 1980 to 19% in the last 2 years (bottom line, Figure 5). Thus, there are hopeful signs of increasing conceptual complexity in the literature.

**DISCUSSION**

The present review of the content and methods used in studies of personality and close relationships presents a mixed picture of the state of research overall. Sixty percent of all studies were cross-sectional in design and relied on self-reports as the sole source of data. Longitudinal designs were relatively uncommon, and diary studies virtually nonexistent. Moreover, when longitudinal designs were used, the majority were short term and involved only two waves of data collection. Thus, only a small percentage of studies were able to examine meaningful developmental change in either personality or relationships, or to exploit state-of-the-art statistical techniques, which require three or more waves of data. Only a very small percentage of
all studies observed couples interacting, either in a laboratory or
naturalistic setting. On a more positive note, however, nearly 2/3 of all
studies used couples, and a majority of these were married or
newlywed couples drawn from the community. Nevertheless, when
these methodological features are considered in tandem, it is clear that
few studies are optimally designed. In fact, only 4% of all studies met
all three methodological criteria (viz., not strictly cross-sectional, data
source other than self-report, couples rather than individuals) set forth
at the outset of this review.

Examination of trends over time in methodological features of
studies also revealed a mixed picture. The use of longitudinal designs,
especially those having three or more waves of data, has increased,
while the use of strictly cross-sectional designs has decreased. These
are, obviously, very positive developments. At the same time,
however, there was a decrease in studies using couples rather than
individuals, a decrease in studies using adults, and a corresponding
increase in studies using students. The joint effect of these trends,
unfortunately, is that the proportion of strictly cross-sectional studies
relying solely on the self-reports of individuals has increased over time
(Figure 2). Thus, despite some very positive trends, studies using the
least informative design for investigating personality and relational
phenomena have become more, rather than less, prevalent.

The content of research on personality and close relationships is
considerably more flexible than its methodology. On the personality
side of the equation, more than 60% of all studies examined one or
more narrow or mid-range traits (most commonly self-constructs and
interpersonal circumplex dimensions); 37% examined a broadband
measure or construct (most commonly a three- or five-factor measure);
and more than 1/4 focused on personal adjustment or distress. On the
relationship side, nearly half of all studies examined global relation-
ship satisfaction, 1/4 relationship status and stability, and 1/4
homogamy or assortative mating on personality. Fully 50% of all
studies examined a specific aspect of relationship functioning, most
commonly factors related to its emotional tone.

Examining patterns of single and multiple substantive foci revealed
that the modal study focused on a single construct (or category of
constructs) in isolation. Specifically, we found that 70% of all studies
examined only a single personality construct, and 62% examined only
a single relationship construct. Not surprisingly then, nearly half of all
studies (47%) related a single personality construct to a single
relationship construct, most often a narrow personality trait to a
specific aspect of relationship functioning. Indeed, only 13% of all
studies combined multiple personality with multiple relationship foci.
Thus, few studies appear to include the breadth of constructs that
would permit researchers to build broad, integrative models that marry
theoretically rich conceptualizations of personality with equally rich
conceptualizations of relationships. Although unfortunate, this state of
affairs is understandable to the extent that few scholars are equally
comfortable with the accumulated bodies of knowledge in both areas.

Despite the difficulties inherent in building sophisticated and
integrative models of personality and close relationships, there was
encouraging evidence of increasing complexity over time. The
percentage of studies relating only a single personality construct to a
single relationship construct decreased significantly over time, while the
percentage of studies specifically alluding to tests of more complex
processes (e.g., mediation or moderation) increased significantly. Thus
our data suggest that researchers are not only including a broader
representation of constructs in both the personality and relationship
domains, but also beginning to ask more complex questions of these data.

The results of the present study are highly consistent with key
findings from several recent reviews of the social/personality literature
(Endler & Speer, 1998; Mallon et al., 1998; West et al., 1992). Despite
different methodologies and only partially overlapping slices of the
existing literature, the portrait of the modal study is the same: the
overwhelming majority of studies use cross-sectional methods, and
rely exclusively on self-report data. Although the limitations of these
methods are well-known, and numerous critics have exhorted
researchers to embrace a broader repertoire of methods, this mode
of conducting research has been remarkably resistant to change. Both
Endler and Speer (1998) and West and colleagues (1992) point to a
number of factors that have contributed to this situation, including
pragmatic obstacles such as costs, systemic pressures to publish in a
climate where numbers may count more than quality, and lack of
adequate graduate training in complex statistics and methods (see also,

In addition, Mallon et al. (1998) point to what is perhaps an even more
fundamental issue. The design and methods of personality research,
they argue, will become more sophisticated when researchers begin to
ask questions and test hypotheses that simply cannot be addressed
through cross-sectional designs and questionnaires administered to
undergraduate students. We agree and believe that researchers interested in personality and close relationships have already begun to ask these sorts of questions. As evidence for this, we cite the fact that samples in the set of studies we reviewed were much more diverse than those in earlier reviews, with only about 40% of all studies being conducted with students, compared to 60% to 70% in the reviews by Endler and Speer (1998) and Mallon et al. (1998). Moreover, nearly 2/3 of all studies in the present review included couples rather than individuals. Thus, it seems that researchers in this area recognize that important questions cannot be answered by restricting inquiries to undergraduate students—many of whom are not yet prepared to commit to a single romantic partner—and have therefore gone outside the walls of the university to study adult couples in ongoing, committed relationships. Indeed, the fact that even fewer studies on personality and close relationships have used experimental designs than in the field of personality as a whole (see Endler & Speer, 1998; Mallon et al., 1998 for comparative data) may also be explained by the belief that questions of central concern to this area are best addressed within the context of ongoing relationships in naturalistic settings.

Similar to findings reported by Reis and Stiller (1992), the present review provides evidence of increasing conceptual complexity. If, as Mallon and colleagues (1998) argue, researchers will adopt more complex methods when their questions demand it, we are heartened, for this trend will inevitably generate pressures toward the use of novel and ever-more sophisticated methods.

**CAVEATS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Several limitations of the present review should be acknowledged. First, coding from abstracts rather than the full articles led to elevated rates of missing data on several variables. Analysis of patterns of missingness, however, showed that data were, for the most part, missing at random and thus should not bias our findings in any particular direction. Of the few systematic patterns we did observe, only the missing personality data appeared likely to have introduced systematic bias into our results. Because personality content codes were disproportionately missing for earlier than more recent articles, the proportion of studies examining content areas that were heavily studied in recent years (like attachment styles and self-constructs) may have been overestimated, whereas the proportion of studies examining
less frequently studied content areas (such as sexual behavior) may have been underestimated. Importantly, however, analyses by decade essentially control for the differential rates of missing data across time and thus are largely unaffected by this issue.

Our data further indicate that some methodological features and secondary substantive foci of studies were missed due to coding from abstracts, though the base rate of these omissions appeared to be a small percentage of the total codes assigned. Nevertheless, even a small number of omissions could substantially alter estimates of the prevalence of rare study features. For example, missing even seven studies that used diary methodology would effectively double our estimate of the prevalence of this important method. We are inclined to think, however, that, in writing an abstract, authors are motivated to portray their research in the best possible light and are therefore unlikely to gloss over innovative aspects of their studies. Thus, it seems unlikely that we would have missed a large number of studies using innovative and costly methods, such as experience sampling, in-home observation, or physiological measures.

Much like the earlier review of publication trends in personality and social psychology by Reis and Stiller (1992), we were also limited to a relatively small number of fairly concrete indicators of research methods and content. We were unable, for example, to examine more detailed indicators of research trends, such as the number and quality of measures used to assess personality and relationship constructs or the types and appropriateness of statistical techniques. Thus, we cannot comment on progress along several important dimensions.

Likewise, our method precluded direct assessment of the complexity of conceptual models proposed by authors. We instead relied upon indirect measures of complexity, such as the number of constructs examined and their distribution across somewhat arbitrarily defined categories. Although more complex models clearly require consideration of more variables, indicators such as the ones used here cannot distinguish studies that examine many constructs in a haphazard way from those that integrate these constructs into a larger and more meaningful whole. Our approach also is insensitive to studies that test highly complex models using multiple variables, all within the same construct domain. Nevertheless, the fact that we replicated previously reported findings (e.g., Reis & Stiller, 1992) of increasing conceptual complexity in the field using these indicators lends support to their validity.
In closing, we would like to return to the characteristics of an ideal study we outlined initially. We argued that studies should (1) include both couple members; (2) adopt designs that are sensitive to the dynamic and time-dependent nature of relationship processes, such as diary and longitudinal methods; (3) bring to bear data sources independent of self-reports, including the direct assessment of interactions; and (4) be guided by a broader, more integrative framework for studying personality and close relationships, yet one that is attentive to the complexities in both domains. Our portrait of research in this area indicates that only a very small percentage of studies meets these criteria. This is not surprising, for such research is neither easy nor cheap. Nevertheless, continued progress in this area of research demands that more such research be done.

To be clear, we do not mean to imply that all research must meet these standards, but rather that a much larger percentage of what is done should conform to at least some of these standards. Much like the portfolios that granting agencies attempt to keep, research in any given area should reflect a balance of designs, methods, and samples—each with its own unique strengths and limitations. Likewise, studies guided by broad theoretical frameworks, though essential to moving the field forward, can be complemented by narrowly focused, in-depth explorations of specific issues within that field. Thus, we offer these prescriptions not as a bar that must be passed by all research, but rather as a counterweight to prevailing approaches that are overly reliant on a limited set of methods and tend to focus narrowly on a single personality or relationship construct in isolation. To be sure, the optimal balance of different methods and approaches shifts as the knowledge base in an area accumulates. Simple, straightforward approaches like cross-sectional, self-report studies play a critical role in the early stages of inquiry when little is known about a phenomenon, but must be increasingly balanced by more sophisticated approaches as a field develops. We believe that continued progress in research on personality and close relationships now depends on movement in this direction.

REFERENCES


