Personality and Close Relationships:
Embedding People in Important Social Contexts

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ABSTRACT  This special issue of the Journal of Personality is predicated on the assumption that close relationships provide the central stage for the drama of human experience. This all-important context both shapes and conditions the expression of personality, and thus must play an integral role in any truly adequate account of human behavior. The importance of this agenda is perhaps overshadowed only by its difficulty. Contributions to the present issue, therefore, take stock of past research, highlight current state-of-the-art research, and offer a vision of the next generation of research on personality and close relationships. The conceptual and methodological approaches highlighted in this issue remain faithful to the dynamic, interdependent, and multilayered nature of the processes linking personality and close relationships.

We are born into relationships, we live our lives in relationships with others, and when we die, the effects of our relationships survive in the lives of the living. .


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As Berscheid (1999) so eloquently indicates, relationships provide the central stage on which we lead our lives. Thus, it is difficult to imagine that any truly adequate account of human behavior could ignore this all-important context. Yet, in their search for universals, personality psychologists have historically done just that. Echoing this sentiment, Winter and Barenbaum (1999) concluded a recent review of personality psychology on a cautionary note: The field of personality can continue to ignore matters of context only at its own peril. Regardless, they argue, of the evolutionary or biological origins of personality, or the physiological substrates that may underlie it, both the level and expression of personality are fundamentally shaped by the social context. Although other important social contexts exist (see, e.g., Reis, Capobianco, & Tsai, this issue), this special issue of the Journal of Personality is predicated on the assumption that close relationships provide the most central context for our daily lives. Thus, the present issue is motivated first and foremost by a desire to highlight this perspective and its potential to move personality psychology forward both conceptually and methodologically.

The concept of relationship refers to two people whose behavior is interdependent, in that a change in the state of one will produce a change in the state of the other (Kelley et al., 1983). The most profound human experiences, however, occur within the context of “close” relationships. Close relationships encompass many different types of relationships (parent-child, spouses, siblings, friends) and thus cannot be reduced to a single type. What does distinguish close from less close relationships, according to Kelley and colleagues (1983), is the degree of interdependence. Partners in close relationships are highly interdependent: they influence each other’s behavior frequently, their influence is far-reaching and strong, and it extends over time. Indeed, partners in highly interdependent relationships alter their very self-concepts to incorporate aspects of the other (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995), and, not surprisingly, experience their most intense emotions with one another and in regard to their relationship (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000).

The present issue focuses on a single type of close relationship—one involving a romantic other, be it a spouse, a lover, a boyfriend or girlfriend. Although many types of close relationships sustain us throughout our lives, most people settle upon a single romantic partner who will serve for years, if not for the remainder of life, as their primary attachment figure. Thus, both the conceptual and empirical contributions to the present issue focus on romantic relationships,
though many of the issues and themes raised apply equally well to other types of close relationships.

Embedding the study of personality within important relationship contexts is a crucial direction for future research on personality, but one that poses formidable conceptual and methodological challenges. Unfortunately, these challenges cannot simply be circumvented because they arise from quintessential features of the processes that link personality and close relationships. Thus, a second motivation for this special issue is to present innovative conceptual and methodological approaches that take account of these properties and thereby point the way toward more fruitful avenues of investigation in the future.

Overview of the Special Issue

The present special issue consists of nine articles. The first (Cooper & Sheldon) provides a quantitative review of publication trends in the field of personality and close relationships over the past 70 years. The results of this analysis portray a robust and growing area of research with nearly 500 studies conducted to date, but one that is also plagued by many of the same methodological limitations that characterize the broader fields of personality and social psychology. As a group, the five empirical contributions to the present issue (Collins, Cooper, Albino, & Allard; Kennedy, Bolger, & Shrout; Kumashiro, Finkel, & Rusbult; Neff & Karney; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt) stand in stark contrast to the modal study in the existing literature. Each of these articles raises what have been called second-generation (Zanna & Fazio, 1982) research questions; illustrates innovative, state-of-the-art techniques for address-ing these questions; contributes important new insights to our understanding of personality and close relationships; and in the end leaves us with important new questions for future research. Gonzalez and Griffin contributed a methodological article in which they raise the provocative question of whether couple-level personality exists independent of the personalities of the individuals comprising the couple and offer a method for testing and modeling this notion statistically. Conceptual articles were contributed by Reis, Capobianco, and Tsai, and by Zayas, Shoda, and Ayduk. These articles, rather than describing where the field currently is, are largely prescriptive in nature and offer a vision of where we might go, both theoretically and methodologically. Indeed, they describe what may be viewed as a “third-generation” of research.
The Empirical Contributions to the Special Issue:
Second-Generation Questions

According to Zanna and Fazio (1982), progress in any area of research tends to follow a predictable course. Early efforts focus on documenting the existence of an effect and are a necessary first step to ensure that a reliable phenomenon exists. Once these questions have been asked, however, second-generation questions concerning “how” and “when” typically follow. “How” questions are mediator questions that seek to identify mechanisms that bring about an effect; “when” questions are moderator questions that seek to identify specific conditions under which an effect can be demonstrated or will be strongest (i.e., boundary conditions).

Once an initial foundation has been established indicating the existence of an effect in a given area of research, further progress ultimately depends on asking and answering second-generation questions. Given the numerous studies devoted to the topic of personality and close relationships, surely it is time to focus on such second-generation questions. In the present special issue, each of the empirical contributions raises one or more second-generation questions and demonstrates the gain in knowledge that can result from framing our research in terms of questions such as these.

Mediation. Collins et al. and Kumashiro et al. address a core issue in personality research by examining the mechanisms whereby presumably stable features of personality exert their influence on the ongoing day-to-day lives of individuals. Collins et al. show that attachment styles assessed during adolescence influence relationship functioning in young adulthood via two distinct pathways. Avoidant adolescents engaged in fewer pro-relationship behaviors that both directly and indirectly (via decreased partner pro-relationship behavior) predicted relationship quality. In addition, avoidant adolescents selected partners who had less healthy personalities, which in turn predicted fewer partner pro-relationship behaviors and lower relationship quality. Similarly, Kumashiro and colleagues found that individual self-respect influenced relationship outcomes via both self- and partner pro-relationship behaviors. Thus, by moving beyond the simple fact of an association to address potential underlying processes that explain the association, these articles not only enhance our understanding of the meaning of the connection between specific
personality variables under study and relationship functioning, but also instantiate the general processes whereby stable properties of the individual bring about specific conditions in their lives. By focusing on underlying processes, possible points of intervention are also highlighted. Once we know why individuals with a specific personality characteristic experience poor relationship outcomes, interventions targeting the intervening problematic cognitions and behaviors can be developed.

**Moderation.** Robins and colleagues address an important moderator question by seeking to determine whether personality traits prospectively predict relationship functioning among individuals who stay with the same partner, as well as among those who switch to a new partner. Their finding that it does is important because it suggests that at least some aspects of relationship functioning are due to relatively stable and enduring properties that an individual brings with him or her into the relationship; otherwise, people would not create similar conditions with new partners. Neff and Karney also address a moderator question by examining the breadth and importance of traits as potential determinants of when individuals in a well-functioning relationship will perceive their partners accurately vs. when they will idealize their partners. Their findings offer a potentially heuristic resolution to the longstanding debate between theorists who argue that perceivers are more strongly motivated by accuracy motives and those who argue that they are more strongly motivated by enhancement motives.

Finally, articles by Kennedy et al., by Kumashiro et al., and by Collins et al. address a fundamental moderator question by testing whether the effects in which they are interested generalize across men and women. The parental modeling effects on the quality of adult romantic relationships, explored by Kennedy and colleagues, differed in direction as a complex function of parent-offspring gender matching. Similarly, Collins and colleagues found that effects of an avoidant attachment style on later relationship functioning were consistently stronger among men than women, and were in some cases, present only in men. Thus, the effects of interest would have been completely missed in the former case and systematically underestimated in the latter, had the authors focused solely on first-generation main effect questions.
Reciprocal influence. The contributions to the special issue address what can be considered a third type of second-generation question—one that focuses on reciprocal influence and asks whether a given variable can be both cause and consequence. In this issue, Robins and colleagues explicitly examine the possibility of reciprocal causal influence between personality and relationship functioning over time. Although their results provide stronger support for the effects of personality on relationships than the reverse, they nevertheless report a number of findings indicating that both staying in (vs. leaving) a relationship and being in a maladaptive relationship can shape one’s personality over time. Such findings provide a cautionary tale about the risks of assuming one-way causal flow between any two variables, even when one of them, by definition, is considered to be a relatively stable and immutable property of the individual.

Summary. Thus, the empirical contributions to the present special issue focus on three distinct types of second-generation questions—mediation, moderation, and reciprocal influence—and illustrate important conceptual and empirical gains that can result from framing research questions to address these issues. As previously discussed, forward movement in any field depends critically on asking and answering important second-generation research questions such as those posed by the authors of the empirical contributions to the present special issue.

Personality and Close Relationships: A Dynamic Interactional Perspective

Reis et al. and Zayas et al., in their respective conceptual contributions to the special issue, however, push us to consider a more dynamic, process-oriented model of persons in relationships. Although these authors approached the conceptual issues surrounding the study of personality and close relationships from rather different theoretical traditions, their views are remarkably consonant. Indeed, three themes can be seen to underlie much of what each has to say. In essence, both argue for a more (1) contextualized, (2) fine-grained, and (3) process-oriented approach to the study of personality and relationships.

First, consistent with the overarching goal of the special issue, both sets of contributors maintain that interpersonal situations provide a context—perhaps the most important context—for the expression of
personality. Building on the earlier work of Thibaut and Kelley (1959; Kelley et al., 2002), Reis and colleagues maintain that interpersonal situations present individuals with various behavioral options, each of which has tangible consequences for the self and the other. Choice between these options depends on which of the individual’s preexisting personal attributes are activated at a given time and place (i.e., in a particular situation). It is in this sense, the authors argue, that situations reveal the impact of person factors. Zayas and colleagues raise the same issue, though in stronger terms, when they ask whether “personality” even exists without an interpersonal context, real or imagined. Reminiscent of central tenets of Harry Stack Sullivan’s theory of interpersonalism (1950), they argue that human behaviors commonly attributed to the individual are inseparable from the contexts in which they occur and that some behaviors are neither meaningful nor observable without placing individuals within contexts, particularly ones that involve interpersonal relations. This idea, they suggest, leads to the notion of a “personality in context” approach to understanding personality. Thus, key propositions advanced by both authors point to the need to embed efforts to understand personality in the context of significant interpersonal relationships.

Second, both authors suggest that successfully embedding personality in a relationship context will require adopting a more nuanced, fine-grained, and relationship-specific conceptualization of personality. Reis and colleagues maintain that overreliance on broadband, decontextualized personality traits like the Big 5 (Costa & McCrae, 1985) leads to systematic underestimation of the importance of personality in relationships. They point out that the issue in certain respects harks back to Snyder and Ickes’s (1985) axiom that personality variables are most influential in ambiguous situations. In the context of ongoing relationships, ambiguity is reduced by experience with that partner, as well as by experience with other similar interpersonal situations. Thus, they advocate the need to consider predispositions more closely linked to the type of relationship under scrutiny and to the person’s history with that particular partner.

Building on Mischel and Shoda’s (1995) Cognitive-Affective Processing System (CAPS) theory of personality, Zayas and colleagues also argue for greater specificity in the conceptualization of personality. CAPS theory conceptualizes the “mind” of an individual as a distinctive network of interconnected cognitions and affects (referred to as the CAPS network). Each CAPS network is assumed to differ in the
availability of specific cognitions and affects and in the pattern and strength of associations among these elements. A person’s CAPS network mediates the relationships between situations encountered and his or her behavioral reactions by guiding how the situation is construed and the cognitions and affects that are automatically activated. A critical implication of this approach is that “personality” is best conceived in explicit person X situation terms, or in terms of conditional cognitive, affective, and behavioral response tendencies associated with specific environmental stimuli (so called if . . . then contingencies), rather than in general, cross-situationally invariant terms. Over time, Zayas and colleagues argue, couple members come to share a set of specific, well-rehearsed if . . . then contingencies that embody the dynamics of their relationship. Thus, according to both authors, personality effects in relationships will be best revealed if personality is conceptualized (and measured) in terms that are more specific to the relationship and the recurring situations encountered in that relationship.

Third and relatedly, both authors argue for a more process-oriented approach to the study of personality and close relationships. Consistent with earlier formulations by Kelley and colleagues (1983), Reis et al. view the relationship between two people as residing in neither person, but rather in their interactions. Thus, to understand the role of personality in relationships, one must understand how both partners’ personalities shape and are shaped by the dynamic and recurring interactions between them that constitute the relationship. Zayas and colleagues also stress the centrality of interactions to an adequate understanding of what we commonly think of as personality. They argue that behaviors normally attributed to “personality” arise out of the interactions between individuals, rather than from the qualities of the individual alone and posit a model in which two individuals create a dynamic and continuously interactive interpersonal system, from which each person’s behaviors, as well as the behavioral patterns of the dyad, emerge. Thus, according to both authors, relationships and personality can be viewed as emergent phenomena, best understood from a dynamic, process-oriented, interactional perspective.

Methodological Issues Highlighted in the Special Issue

As the review by Cooper and Sheldon (this issue) shows, past research on personality and close relationships has been dominated by the use
of cross-sectional and self-report methodologies, with a full 60% of all studies relying solely on these two approaches. At the same time, they found that more than half of all studies included data from both couple members, though this trend unfortunately appears to be on the decline.

The empirical contributions to the present special issue stand in stark contrast to the modal study in the field and, in this way, also represent a second generation of research on personality and close relationships. As a group, they used more informative designs, included both couple members, drew on broader, more representative population samples, and used more innovative statistical techniques. In the following sections, these methodological strengths and the gains associated with their use are described in a series of prescriptions for research. The methodological implications of the conceptual perspectives articulated by Reis et al. and Zayas et al. are also considered, and some of the challenges their perspectives pose for current state-of-the-art techniques are discussed.

The importance of studying couples. Studying couples is crucial for both conceptual and methodological reasons. As Reis and colleagues argue, studies of individuals can provide only limited insight into the nature of relationships, and the role of personality within those relationships. This is much like the East Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant in which each man is presented with a different part of the elephant (leg, body, tail) and thus concludes that an elephant is like a pillar, a wall, or a piece of rope—relying on data from a single individual will inevitably provide a partial and misleading perspective from which to view persons in their social relationships.

From a methodological vantage point, enhanced construct validity is a chief benefit of studying couples. Multiple sources of shared bias (e.g., features of the testing situation, transient mood states, common attributes of the measures themselves) can give rise to overlap between ostensibly distinct constructs such as personality and relationship functioning when both assessments are provided by the same individual. Overlap may also arise from stable properties of the individual that color his or her perceptions of the self and the social world, as well as from the objective realities in which we are typically most interested. In short, correlations between self-report measures of personality and relationship functioning may arise for any or all of the above reasons, thus rendering the meaning of their covariation ambiguous at best. By obtaining self-report measures from both
partners, however, we can begin to evaluate the plausibility of alternative interpretations of the overlap between two measures and to separate fact from other sources of shared influence.

Several of the empirical contributions to the special issue clearly illustrate how including data from both partners can be used to clarify the meaning of an observed association. Collins and colleagues, for example, found that although both avoidant individuals and their partners viewed their relationship as less satisfying, they did not view the probable causes of this dissatisfaction in the same way. Specifically, although both rated the relationship behaviors of the avoidant individual as less adaptive, only the avoidant individual rated the partner’s behavior as less adaptive. Thus, we can infer with some degree of confidence that individuals with avoidant-attachment styles have objectively less satisfying relationships and behave less prosocially in their relationships. The adaptiveness of the partner’s behavior, however, is less clear. It may be that avoidant individuals (relative to their less avoidant counterparts) perceive their partners as behaving in a less pro-social manner, though, objectively, their partner’s behaviors do not differ, or avoidant individuals may choose partners who themselves misperceive or misreport their own relationship behaviors. As these data nicely illustrate, having data from both partners allows one to begin to tease apart alternative interpretations of the data and to place more stock in some interpretations than others.

Similarly, Kumashiro and colleagues were able to replicate links from an individual’s report of his or her own self-respect to partner pro-relationship behavior, using both self- and partner reports. Importantly, however, the magnitude of the within-reporter effects was almost twice the size of the cross-reporter effects, suggesting that shared sources of bias systematically inflated the within-reporter relationships. Thus, in both the Kumashiro and Collins studies, the inclusion of data from both partners enabled more nuanced interpretations of the observed patterns of relationships, as well as more confident inferences to the real world referents of interest.

A potential concern with including data from both partners is that they will disagree. As Reis and colleagues point out, however, partners may disagree for both artifactual and substantive reasons. Accordingly, researchers can treat disagreement between partners as a substantive variable in its own right. Neff and Karney, in their contribution to the special issue, did just that. They examined agreement in self-other ratings of personality traits by partners in
well-functioning relationships to determine whether the nature and extent of agreement systematically varied with trait breadth. They reasoned that both the ease of biasing and the motivation to bias partner perceptions would be greater for broad than narrow traits. Consistent with this analysis, they found that partners tended to be accurate (i.e., to agree more) in their specific perceptions of each other, but to enhance their global evaluations. Thus, Neff and Karney’s data not only provide a model for understanding how accuracy and enhancement motives work together to guide perceptions of intimate others, but also highlight the fact that disagreement between partners can provide a window onto meaningful psychological processes operating at the intra- and interpersonal levels.

_The importance of studying people in relationships across situations and time._ A second methodological theme concerns the limitations of single, cross-sectional designs and highlights the need for repeated assessments of the same individuals across time. Such assessments typically take one of two forms: (1) diary studies in which the same individuals are assessed repeatedly over a period of days or weeks; and (2) standard longitudinal designs in which people are assessed less frequently over a longer period of time. Although the Cooper and Sheldon review found that longitudinal designs were relatively uncommon, and diary studies virtually nonexistent, in extant research on personality and close relationships, both types of designs were used in the contributions to the present issue.

Kennedy and colleagues conducted a diary study in which couple members completed assessments twice daily for 28 days to examine associations between daily conflict and anger, and determined whether the strength of this association was conditioned by stable individual differences in childhood exposure to interparental aggression and personality. In contrast to a standard cross-sectional study in which anger level would be correlated with relationship conflict to determine whether individuals who are above average in anger are also above average in relationship conflict, the repeated assessments of anger and conflict obtained in the Kennedy et al. study permitted direct examination of whether and how much a given person became angry in response to conflict events. In other words, diary methods such as those used by Kennedy and colleagues are perfectly suited to modeling the sorts of if . . . then contingencies that are central to Zayas and colleagues’ model. Further, by linking these within-person changes to
stable individual differences, diary methods provide a powerful technique for characterizing personality in terms of predictable patterns of responding to environmental contingencies, or what Mischel and Shoda (1995) call behavioral signatures. In the Kennedy et al. study, for example, Big-Five personality dimensions were used to predict individual differences in reactivity to conflict, as assessed by the average within-person change in anger in response to consensually validated conflict events. Although Big-Five personality dimensions did not predict reactivity to conflict in their study, the approach utilized by these authors holds great promise for studying personality in context.

Two of the contributions in the present special issue used standard longitudinal designs. Such designs are crucial for illuminating the direction of causal influences, for modeling reciprocal influences over time, for examining change and stability in personality and relationships, and for placing personality and relationship phenomena within a lifespan developmental perspective. In the present special issue, Robins et al. assessed participants three times over 8 years, whereas Collins and colleagues assessed participants twice over 6 years. In both cases, initial personality assessments predated relationship formation for the vast majority of individuals, thus helping to rule out the possibility that personality characteristics were shaped by experiences within that relationship. Robins et al. also assessed both personality and relationship functioning at two (of the three) points in time and were therefore able to examine lagged reciprocal influences between personality and relationship phenomena, as previously discussed.

The importance of studying interactions. The conceptual perspectives advanced by both Reis et al. and Zayas et al. view interactions as the core phenomenon in relationships. Yet Cooper and Sheldon (this issue) found that studies directly examining interactions were almost nonexistent in the extant literature on personality and close relationships. Traditionally, interaction data are obtained by having trained third-party raters code naturalistic or structured interactions occurring in the home or laboratory on a set of predetermined dimensions. Such data are costly to obtain and extremely labor intensive, no doubt accounting for their rarity. But they provide a window onto dynamic and reciprocal patterns that emerge during the course of an interaction that no other method can provide. In the present special issue, only Kumashiro and colleagues included interaction data. However, they used the data primarily as a source of information
uncontaminated by self-report bias, collapsing across, rather than analyzing, interaction sequences.

Reis and colleagues suggest a broader definition of “observational” research, one that includes any data in which specific interpersonal events are characterized from more than one actor’s perspective. The utility of such data are nicely illustrated by Kennedy et al. who focus on individual differences in anger response to the subset of consensually validated conflicts (i.e., events reported by both partners), thereby minimizing the possibility that observed differences were due solely to mood or other biases that colored the reporting of both events and subjective reaction to those events. Thus, observational data can be used to provide a crucial second source of information uncontaminated by self-report bias, but only interaction data can be used to reveal the dynamic patterns that unfold between two people over time.

The importance of assessing relationship context. Although a core theme in the present special issue is the need to embed the person in the context of important relationships in his or her life, little attention has been paid to the nature and meaning of context per se. In the present issue, however, Gonzalez and Griffin offer an innovative approach to conceptualizing and modeling relationship context. They argue that the common context created by relationship partners can be viewed as the “personality” of the relationship; that members of an entity with a personality act similarly due to some deeper level of organization and coherence; and that this coherence in turn should be reflected in correlated similarities across related traits. Accordingly, two measurement conditions must be met when a dyadic- or group-level personality exists: similarity across members on each trait and correlated similarities across traits. In essence then, Gonzalez and Griffin (in this issue) suggest that the meaning of group personality is analogous to the latent variable version of a nomological net—a network of variables and relationships, observed and unobserved, that define a construct. Building on this logic, they develop an extension of the Multitrait, Multimethod (MTMM) approach (Campbell & Fiske, 1959) in which group-level personality is represented by group-level variance constructed from the shared variance between relationship partners in individual difference factors such as attitudes, behaviors, or traits. This approach can be easily adapted to model homogeneity in couple members’ perceptions of the relationship (e.g., intimacy or
reciprocity)—an approach which would then share substantial conceptual ground with widely used techniques to measure climate or environment in family and work groups (Denison, 1996). Thus, Gonzalez and Griffin’s latent group model provides a straightforward, yet flexible, method for capturing factors that are located in neither partner individually, but rather in the conjunction of the partners’ attributes (e.g., attitudinal or personality similarity).

Relationship contexts can also be construed in ways that do not rely upon homogeneity in partner’s traits or perceptions. Context can be defined, for example, by relatively objective features of the relationship, such as its stage or duration; whether the couple is married or lives together; whether they are first-married or remarried; whether they are childless; whether one or both work outside the home; and so on. Although objective features of relationships have been largely ignored by psychologists, such aspects have been shown to reliably predict important psychological aspects of the relationship (e.g., Belsky, 1985; Kurdek, 1991) and, more important for the present purposes, to moderate the effects of individual difference variables on both individual and relationship outcomes (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998).

Finally, relationship contexts can also be viewed as a product of social interaction, and thus be characterized by recurrent patterns of interaction or prototypic situations encountered by partners. For example, relationships might be characterized as highly conflictual or highly emotive on the basis of complex, but reliable, patterns of interaction extracted from interaction sequences. Daily experience methods, such as ecological momentary assessment (partners carry a handheld computer or beeper and report on current activities and mood when prompted) and event-contingent reporting (partners complete assessments describing their experience each time a specific event type occurs [e.g., an argument]), also seem well-suited to this purpose. Such approaches hold great promise for identifying properties of the relationship that form a crucial psychological backdrop to the ongoing interactions within it, but may nevertheless lie outside explicit awareness of the participants and thus beyond direct assessment with self-report instruments.

Although contextual features of relationships have been largely neglected in past research, they can powerfully shape or condition the expression of individuals’ personalities within relationships and, indeed, may ultimately reveal, rather than conceal, the true impact of personality. Thus, it seems clear that efforts to directly assess important
features of the relationship context, by whatever method, and to relate these features to intraindividual and interactional processes within the relationship will ultimately yield a richer and more finely textured understanding of the role of personality in close relationships.

**Increased specificity in the measurement of personality constructs.** The theoretical contributions by both Reis et al. and Zayas et al. in this issue highlight the specificity of beliefs, expectations, and schemas that develop over time as a function of experience with one’s partner, and how these complement (if not supersede) broadband personality characteristics in their influence on relationship processes. As both past research (e.g., Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000) and empirical contributions to the present issue demonstrate, this position does not necessarily mean that broadband personality characteristics are unrelated to relationship phenomena, even in ongoing relationships. For example, Kumashiro and colleagues (this issue) show that a global measure of self-respect predicts both self- and partner reports of specific relationship behaviors among couples who have been married on average 6 years. Robins and colleagues (this issue) also show that the broadband traits of positive emotionality, negative emotionality, and constraint (the Big Three) prospectively predict relationship functioning across 3- and 8-year lags in clearly meaningful ways. Moreover, the Big Three predicted both general impressions of relationship quality and reports of specific abusive acts, as well as changes in relationship functioning over time. Together, these data strongly support the importance of broadband traits as important psychological features of the relationship landscape.

In contrast to the above findings, however, Kennedy and colleagues (this issue) found no relationship between the Big-Five personality dimensions and conflict experiences in close relationships. Although there are numerous differences between the three studies that might have contributed to their different results, the inclusion of other psychological variables in Kennedy et al.’s analyses clearly played a crucial role. In their data, both emotional stability (a reverse-scored form of neuroticism) and conscientiousness predicted aspects of anger experience in relationships before controlling for reports of exposure to interparental aggression, but not after. In other words, effects for broadband personality traits similar to those observed in other studies were eliminated by controlling for reports of interparental aggression. What one makes of these data, however, ultimately depends on the
meaning attributed to the interparental aggression measure. If this measure is assumed to reflect primarily one’s early childhood experience, then causal priority would be assigned to interparental aggression, and the lack of effect for personality in the presence of this presumed causally prior measure would suggest a spurious interpretation—that is, that early childhood experiences (or perhaps an underlying common genetic heritage) give rise to systematic ways of viewing and behaving in the world that are reflected in the measures of both personality and daily experience. On the other hand, if one assumes that the interparental aggression measures are proxies for internalized conflict schemas that derive at least partly from one’s core personality dispositions, then these data could be viewed as evidence for mediation of the effects of broadband traits on relationship functioning via specific conflict schemas.

Although these two interpretations have very different implications for our understanding of personality and personality processes in close relationships, we unfortunately cannot adjudicate between them on the basis of the data presented in Kennedy et al. (The mathematical equivalence of the two cases [spurious causation vs. complete mediation by a third variable] has been well established; Pedhazur, 1997.) Nevertheless, the broader issue raised here points to the potential utility of incorporating both broad and narrowly defined or situated features of personality within a single conceptual model. In doing so, however, we would be well advised to bear in mind McAdams’s (1995) caution that more narrowly defined dispositions are unlikely to be simple manifestations or derivatives of a person’s standing on broadband personality traits. In other words, the relationships across levels of personality will likely be various and complex, rather than simple and direct. Nevertheless, this seems to be an important step toward building models of persons in relationships that more accurately reflect the complexities of the real world phenomena we seek to understand.

The importance of measuring knowledge structures directly. The respective contributions by both Zayas and Reis point to the importance of relationship-specific knowledge structures or schemas in eliciting motivation and emotions and directing behavior within relationships. This perspective, in turn, suggests the utility of directly assessing knowledge structures in relationships. Relationship schemas, according to Baldwin (1992), include three discrete, though interlocking, components: a self-schema that represents how the self
is experienced in relation to the partner; an other-schema that represents important partner attributes; and an interpersonal script that specifies how self and partner will interact in given situations (thought to be represented as if...then contingencies). Schemas have been characterized in terms of their content (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990), valence (Showers, 1992), complexity (e.g., Linville, 1985), clarity (e.g., Campbell, 1990), level of integration vs. compartmentalization (e.g., Showers, 1992), and the strength of associations among specific elements (e.g., Baldwin, Fehr, Keedian, Seidel, & Thomson, 1993). Schemas are thought to include both conscious elements that can be accessed via self-report methods, as well as unconscious or nonlinguistic ones that must be accessed via indirect methods, such as projective tests, response latencies, or psychophysiological measures. The breadth and complexity of this construct, along with its somewhat amorphous nature, pose formidable measurement challenges and suggest that progress along this front will not come easily. Nevertheless, the centrality of this construct suggests that it is a critical direction for future research on personality and relationships.

The importance of using state-of-the-art statistical techniques. Several of the above methodological recommendations pose statistical issues that are not easily solved with the analytic methods most often used by personality psychologists. Dependencies arising from inclusion of both couple members, or from repeated assessments of the same individuals across situations or time, violate statistical assumptions that undergird familiar analytic procedures such as regression and between-subjects ANOVA. Fortunately, the increasing availability of software programs for estimating multilevel (ML) models offers powerful new techniques for addressing these issues. The defining feature of ML models is that the data are hierarchically arranged: outcome variables are typically measured at a lower level, and these observations, in turn, are nested under a higher level (e.g., individual partner’s scores within couples, or repeated assessments within individuals). Such models, in addition to dealing with dependencies among observations arising from the multilevel structure of the data, offer a number of other important statistical and conceptual advantages (see Kashy & Kenny, 2000, for a useful overview, and Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; Snijders & Bosker, 2000, for more detailed treatments). Empirical contributions to the present special issue illustrate several of these advantages, as well as
the tremendous flexibility of this approach, for modeling a diverse range of important psychological phenomena.

Kumashiro et al. (this issue) estimated a ML model (using HLM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) in which associations between individual self-respect and one’s own and one’s partner pro-relationship behavior were estimated at the lower level (Level 1), while dependencies arising from the inclusion of both couple members were modeled at the upper level (Level 2). In this way, the authors obtained unbiased (by couple-level variance) estimates of the individual and partner effects of interest from their Level 1 model. Neff and Karney (this issue) also estimated a two-level model in HLM to examine the association between multiple ratings of the breadth of a trait and the importance ascribed to those same traits by husbands and wives. Although they focused exclusively on within-person associations estimated at Level 1 of their model, accurate estimates of these effects were obtained by controlling for the dual sources of dependency (viz., multiple ratings from the same partner, inclusion of both partners) arising from the nested structure of their data.

Kennedy et al. estimated a similar model (using SAS Proc Mixed) in which repeated observations were nested within individuals while controlling for dependencies between couple members. Unlike Kumashiro and colleagues and Neff and Karney, Kennedy and colleagues were explicitly interested in cross-level effects. At Level 1, they estimated the strength of the association between experiencing conflict with one’s partner during the day and evening anger, controlling for morning anger (a within-person slope), and then examined variability in this slope as a function of intraindividual characteristics (e.g., gender, the Big-Five dimensions) at Level 2. Thus, Level 2 predictors were treated as moderators of Level 1 effects in their model.

Although the questions posed by the authors in the present special issue were primarily focused at the intraindividual (e.g., how a personality attribute affects one’s own behavior) and interpersonal (e.g., how one’s own personality affects his or her partner’s behavior) levels of analysis, both group-level effects on individual-level variables and interactions between group- and individual-level variables can be tested in ML models. For example, the plausibility of the notion that individuals with high intimacy needs select partners with whom they can establish more communal relationships could be evaluated by testing whether individuals in communal relationships
report significantly higher intimacy needs than those in exchange-oriented relationships—in other words, by estimating a group-level main effect on an individual-level variable. In addition, the possibility that individuals with high intimacy needs are more satisfied in communally oriented relationships (presumably because their environments are more conducive to need satisfaction) could also be tested by estimating a cross-level interaction with relationship type (at the upper level) and intimacy needs (at the lower level) predicting individual adjustment.

ML modeling techniques can also be used to analyze longitudinal data, and are especially informative for three or more waves of data. The approach is conceptually similar to the models used by Neff and Kennedy in their respective contributions to the present issue, except that in longitudinal models the focus is on estimating or describing a pattern of intraindividual change in a single variable across time (called a growth curve or trajectory), whereas in the former case the focus was on estimating a relationship between two variables (a slope). Growth curves characterize a person’s growth over the entire period of study and are captured by a set of fixed coefficients. These coefficients, in turn, can be explained by either stable aspects of the individual (between-subjects or time-invariant differences) represented at Level 2 of an ML model, or by time-varying processes or events (within-subjects predictors) represented at Level 1 of the model. Thus, for example, initial standing on a personality variable such as attachment style (a between-subjects factor at Level 2) can be used to predict the nature of change over time in perceived relationship quality (a growth trajectory estimated at Level 1). At the same time, the influence of changing life circumstances (a within-subjects factor at Level 1) on the relationship-quality trajectory can be estimated, as well as whether attachment style interacts with life circumstances to predict the form of the trajectory (a cross-level interaction). Although such models are rare in the literature, several recently published articles provide concrete illustrations of how growth-modeling techniques can be used to examine ways in which personality influences relationship phenomena across time (e.g., Davila, Karney, & Bradbury, 1999; Karney & Bradbury, 1997, 2000; Kurdek, 1999).

ML models can be readily extended to include the analysis of intraindividual change over time, nested not only within individuals, but also within dyads or larger social contexts. Three-level models such as this assume that intraindividual characteristics are highly influential in
determining the course of development, but that the expression of these characteristics can be conditioned or shaped by important life contexts. (See Raudenbush, 1995, for an introduction to three-level growth models incorporating both individual and social context effects.)

As the above examples, hopefully, illustrate, ML analytic techniques offer a powerful framework for conceptualizing and testing a broad range of models seeking to embed the person in his or her environment and to understand how person and environment mutually shape each other. Such analyses have the potential to integrate intraindividual, interpersonal, contextual, and developmental processes within a single framework and, as such, to cut to the core of psychological processes thought to link person and relational phenomena.

A final analytic challenge posed by the conceptual models proffered in the present issue concerns methods for analyzing sequential interactions. Indeed, it is the patterns of dependency (how one person’s behavior affects the other’s), as revealed in interaction sequences, that need to be explained or accounted for. Important advances have been made in the techniques available to both collect and analyze interaction data in the past decade (see Gottman & Notarius, 2000, for a review). Nevertheless, these techniques are complex and poorly understood by most psychologists. Thus, it is likely that such analyses will remain relatively rare, at least in the foreseeable future. The interested reader is directed to Berscheid and Reis (1998), who briefly discuss some of the statistical challenges inherent in this undertaking and, to Gottman (1995) who devoted an entire section in his book on the analysis of change to this topic.

The importance of using larger and more representative samples. Although concerns about overreliance on the use of undergraduate samples in psychological research have been frequently voiced, the review by Cooper and Sheldon (this issue) suggests that research on personality and close relationships is somewhat less prone to this problem. As is true in the larger field as well, however, there appears to be almost no attention given to recruiting representative samples.

In the present special issue, two of the empirical contributions used population-based samples, and none relied exclusively on data from undergraduate psychology students. Robins and colleagues’ sample used data from 712 individuals, drawn from a nationally representative birth cohort from New Zealand that has been followed for over 25 years
with remarkably low rates of attrition. Collins et al. used a smaller sample of 224 couples, drawn from an ongoing longitudinal study of a randomly selected, community sample of Black and White adolescents.

The remaining empirical contributions used samples that included both graduate student couples and non-student couples from the community. Each of these studies, however, had a relatively small number of subjects (in all cases, fewer than 75 couples) who self-selected from a much larger pool of potentially eligible couples. Although lower cooperation rates may be an inevitable consequence of the need to gain cooperation from two individuals instead of one, and of the high demands participation in certain types of studies (e.g., diary studies) places on couple members, the threat to generalizability of findings is, nevertheless, cause for concern. Indeed, substantial bias has been documented in a number of methodological studies associated with selection and attrition as well as with certain widely used techniques for recruiting couples. Karney and colleagues (1995), for example, found that couples recruited through newspaper advertisements relative to those recruited through marriage licenses differed along a number of important dimensions, all of which pointed to the conclusion that couples recruited through newspapers were at greater risk for negative marital outcomes. They also found that couples who were solicited through marriage licenses and who agreed to participate, compared to their non-participating counterparts, were better educated and less traditional along several dimensions. (See Krokoff, 1990, for additional data on self-selection biases in couples research.)

Although the presence of such biases does not automatically mean that one’s findings will not generalize, potential threats to external validity nevertheless warrant more attention than they currently appear to receive. Efforts to find creative ways to balance the demands of participation in research with its rewards and, when possible, to document the nature of selection biases are important first steps. Empirical evaluation of how participants differ from non-participants not only allows one to judge the nature and extent of bias, but with modern missing-data techniques (Schafer, 2001) to adjust parameter estimates to take these biases into account. In the end, however, it is important to remember that external validity is achieved not by any single study, but rather across a series of research studies that address a given question across different operationalizations, settings, and populations. Thus, the field as a whole needs to be attentive to these issues.
Toward a Third Generation of Research on Personality and Close Relationships

The present issue highlights important conceptual and methodological challenges that must ultimately be addressed if we are to develop psychologically rich and informative models of personality and relational phenomena. Although these challenges will not be easily met, contributions to this issue offer not only a vision of how this research agenda might be pursued, but also a rationale for why pursuing it is crucial. The broad outlines of this vision can be summarized in six recommendations.

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 both partners’ personalities shape and are shaped by the dynamic and recurring interactions between them. This view challenges simple linear models of causality, and compels us to seriously consider alternative causal frameworks in which independent and dependent variables are arbitrary and interchangeable—in which people’s behaviors are both cause and consequence of their social environments.

Second, if relationships are emergent phenomena, arising 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. Future research must therefore recognize and grapple 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. This is true both in the short term (e.g., days, weeks, or months) and over the life span. What may characterize associations between personality and relational phenomena at one life stage may not apply at another. Likewise, dynamics that characterize a relationship early in its life course may be irrelevant at a later stage of relationship development. Future research, therefore, needs to pay closer attention to the critical context provided by the developmental stage of the relationship, as well as of the individuals within the relationship.

Fourth, efforts to move this research agenda forward will be best served by building on, not abandoning, the fruits of past research.
Although the strategy of relating broadband personality traits to global aspects of relationship functioning or satisfaction is inherently limited, this does not mean that these variables have no useful place in future research. On the contrary, integrating broad constructs such as these with more narrowly defined relation-specific dispositions and processes offers the best of both worlds: Such strategies allow us to draw on the by-now substantial body of accumulated knowledge about the global aspects of personality and relational phenomena, while simultaneously deepening and broadening our understanding of these constructs by locating them within a larger nomological network that also includes relationship-specific dispositions and processes.

Fifth, moving this agenda forward will inevitably require the use of more sophisticated analytic techniques and complex, labor-intensive designs for which pragmatic limitations continue to exist. Nevertheless, future research must adopt techniques and methods that remain true to the complex, dynamic nature of the phenomena we seek to understand. In this regard, we can take heart at many of the recent methodological developments illustrated in this issue that begin to allow us to do just that.

Finally, although this special issue has focused on personality and close, romantic relationships, a more complete understanding of the psychological aspects of human experience will ultimately require embedding the person in all of the life contexts that matter to him or her. For, as Shoda and colleagues (Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1994) have convincingly argued, the true meaning of personality may be best revealed by patterns of variability in cognition, emotion, and behavior displayed by individuals across important life contexts.

Nevertheless, successfully embedding individuals within the context of their significant romantic partnerships is a crucial first step toward that larger goal. It is hoped that this special issue will contribute to that mission.

REFERENCES


