

The Sociocultural Context of Romantic Relationships

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The social ecology of relationships (Huston, 2000) argues that three levels of analysis are required to understand the dynamics of romantic relationships: the individual(s), the dyad, and the society. Over the past several decades, relationship scientists have meticulously documented the individual and dyadic levels of analysis. For example, in the past ten years, the *Advances in Personal Relationships* series has published volumes on health, power, technology, interdependence, relationship maintenance, personality, and intimate partner violence. Each of these volumes documented either individual or dyadic level processes in great detail. The lost cog in relationship science, however, is the societal or macro level of influence. Very little attention has been paid to the social and cultural forces that operate on close relationships despite the critical importance of this level of analysis. Indeed, one might argue that relationships and the very individuals who make up those relationships cannot be understood without the sociocultural context in which they exist.

Thus, relationship science has a “context problem.” A systematic review of 559 relationship-focused papers (771 studies) published between 2014 and 2018 showed that the average participant in relationship research is a thirty-year-old, college-educated, White American who is from a middle class background and engaged in a different-sex, same-race relationship (Williamson, 2022). Only 10 percent of the studies reviewed in this article focused on traditionally marginalized and underrepresented groups such as non-White, low-income, and/or gender and sexual minorities. This issue is further supported by findings from a systematic review of 198 articles on relationship maintenance spanning two decades (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022). Results of their analysis showed that Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) samples dominated relational maintenance research, participant intersectionality was often disregarded, and that contexts such as political climate, culture, and socioeconomic status were not considered.

This problem is one that the social sciences have contended with for decades. Arnett's (2008) analysis of six prominent psychological journals between 2003 and 2007 found that over 70 percent of authors and 68 percent of samples were from the United States. Additionally, when ethnicity was reported, the samples were predominantly of European–American heritage. Thus, this research was inherently American, which neglects approximately 95 percent of the world's population. A follow-up analysis of the same journals ten years later showed little change, with American authors and samples constituting just over 60 percent of publications (Thalmayer et al., 2021). This change was primarily due to increased authorship and sample selection from other English-speaking or Western European countries. Therefore, the more recent analysis still shows that 89 percent of the world's population continues to be underrepresented in psychological research. This is especially problematic due to a tendency to generalize research results to all individuals and populations; however, WEIRD countries have been shown to have some of the least representative populations compared to other countries (Henrich et al., 2010). It also narrows the field of topics studied to those most relevant to the authors in those countries.

There are several reasons why more diverse backgrounds are not represented in the literature. Karney et al. (2004) found that recruitment of ethnically diverse samples was limited by a lower likelihood for non-White couples to respond, a lack of eligibility for non-White couples in the study criteria, and a lower likelihood for non-White couples to participate after being told they were eligible. Furthermore, it is no surprise that less work in relationship science has been done at the macro level due to the difficulties inherent in studying large structures and systems. Embedded within the sociocultural context are features such as race, culture, neighborhoods, the legal system, and governmental policy. Understanding the complex interplay between relationships and structural systems requires large, diverse, costly, interdisciplinary studies that are exceedingly rare. Yet, the time has come for us to overcome these hurdles rather than simply stating them as absolute truths. One suggestion is to diversify the voices of researchers and participants in the field by striving to include individuals of diverse genders and sexual orientations, racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, socioeconomic statuses, and relationship approaches (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022; Williamson et al., 2022). It is especially important to approach diversity and inclusion through an intersectional lens.

On the basis of these shortcomings, the goal of this volume is to do just that – to spotlight the topics that are often excluded or forgotten in relationship science. In doing so, the field can then continue to promote more diverse and generalizable research programs to help facilitate advances in theory. In each chapter, the goal of the author(s) was to synthesize the work in each area by providing a critical analysis of the state of the current research as well as

directions for future research. Thus, this book as a whole paints a picture of the diversity of sociocultural forces that operate on romantic relationships. Chapter authors are from the fields of psychology, communication, sociology, law, gender and women's studies, ethnic studies, and family studies, to reflect the inherent multidisciplinary nature of the research in this area. Taken together, it is our hope that this volume be a preeminent resource for understanding the sociocultural context of romantic relationships. In the following section, we provide a brief introduction to each of the chapters.

INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

The historic and systemic marginalization of individuals with minoritized racial and ethnic identities impacts various aspects of their lives, including romantic relationships. In Chapter 2, Landor and McNeil Smith investigate how systemic racism influences romantic relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution. The authors focus specifically on the experiences of Black Americans in romantic relationships to explain how racialized experiences affect how individuals understand and conduct romantic relationships within a broader sociocultural context. The chapter reviews and critiques the existing literature and provides recommendations for the future of relationship science.

Much of the research pertaining to relationship initiation, maintenance, and dissolution has been dominated by White, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic samples, omitting other cultural groups and creating a monocultural perspective in relationship science. In Chapter 3, Cross and Joo broaden the scope of relationship science and explore how sociocultural factors affect East Asian romantic relationship paradigms compared to European heritage contexts. The chapter first explains broad social, ideological, and institutional factors that shape the East Asian *Confucian* cultural model of marriage and then describes how East Asian ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving form relationship processes that differ from those found in Western contexts.

Gender and sexuality are essential to relationship experience and organization. Although there is a push to recognize the fluid nature of gender and sexuality, gender essentialism, cisnormativity, and heteronormativity continue to dominate relationship science research and paradigms. In Chapter 4, Few-Demo and Allen employ an intersectional feminist theoretical approach to examine micro and macro perspectives of gender and heteronormativity in romantic relationships. They also examine the social structures and constructions that impact relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution. The chapter reviews selected trends in the literature pertaining to diverse romantic relationships and how they are aligned with or critical of heteronormative, cisnormative, and mononormative ideologies.

Romantic relationships can be a major financial undertaking, especially when media representations and dating scripts discount social class when approaching romantic relationships. In Chapter 5, Mickelson examines the impact of social class on four stages of romantic relationships: dating, cohabitation, marriage, and divorce. The chapter reviews literature from 2007 to 2022 to reveal how social class impacts stages of a relationship, how heteronormative assumptions are dominant in the literature, and how gender role expectations dominate social class.

Religion is an integral part of religious individuals' lives, often guiding their actions and interactions with others; this can be especially true for how religious individuals approach romance and intimacy. In Chapter 6, Mahoney and colleagues examine how involvement in religion impacts relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution. The chapter then further investigates the religious/spiritual factors that are tied to enhanced relationship functioning as well as those that worsen the quality of romantic relationships and partners' well-being.

Work can be a very dominant aspect of people's lives; it is bound to influence personal and romantic lives in one way or another. The ongoing conversation around workplace romantic and sexual relationships varies from romanticized conceptions to sexual harassment allegations and company rules and regulations. In Chapter 7, Kramer and colleagues examine the impact of work and romantic relationships on individuals. The chapter covers consensual and nonconsensual romantic and sexual relationships in the workplace, how organizations seek to regulate romantic relationships at work, and how work impacts individuals' personal romantic and family lives.

Relationships do not exist in a vacuum; historic, societal, and political stressors can create variations in how individuals behave with regards to romantic relationships. In Chapter 8, Rice and Garnett-Deakin discuss how historic events and sociopolitical environmental shifts in the United States impact romantic relationships and create cohort effects in generations. The chapter provides examples of specific historic events and explains the impact of each on romantic relationship initiation, maintenance, and dissolution.

Contrary to contemporary beliefs and legal changes, which seem to imply that romantic and sexual partnerships are a private matter, laws, regulations, and court opinions (especially those pertaining to marriage and marital dissolution) suggest otherwise. In Chapter 9, Wilson and colleagues examine the laws and regulations related to sexual behavior and their lasting impact on marriage, cohabitation, and parent-child relations in the United States. The chapter provides examples of court cases relating to how sex can be a condition of marriage and how that impacts marriage and marriage dissolution. It also examines the responsibilities created between adults engaging in sex and the legal consequences of sex on parent-child relationships and obligations.

A cursory scroll through the contents of major streaming services reveals dozens of fictional and reality-based shows or movies about finding love. Indeed, traditional media such as books, letters, radio, newspapers, recorded music, television, and the telephone have long been used as a method of learning about romantic relationships, initiating romantic relationships, and communicating with partners. In Chapter 10, Fox and Frampton explore how traditional media impacts relational processes. This chapter discusses media use in relationships, how its consumption influences relationships, and how people cultivate relationships with media characters.

Social spaces have always been used to meet or meet up with potential or continuing partners; the transition of these spaces to online social media platforms is no surprise given how the world has changed in the past three decades. In Chapter 11, McEwan and LeFebvre examine the positive and negative ways that romantic couples use social media to find and seek information about potential and new romantic partners. The authors further examine how social media is used to perform and communicate maintenance behaviors throughout a relationship, and during relationship dissolution. This chapter elaborates on behaviors such as “online stalking” of a potential partner, ongoing partner social media surveillance, relational curation, and “ghosting.”

Although great strides have been made with research related to Latinx immigrant families residing in the United States, it is essential to consider how immigration laws and policies shape Latinx immigrant experiences in romantic relationships. In Chapter 12, Letiecq and Bermudez examine how the romantic relationships of undocumented and mixed-status Latinx immigrants in the United States are impacted by their illegality. The authors focus on how illegality conditions and constrains individuals’ experiences of and opportunities for romantic relationships while they reside in the United States. The chapter explores the systemic structures and sociocultural context that impact the lived realities of immigrant families and undocumented individuals in the United States through dating and commitment making, mixed-citizenship coupling, dating violence, and relationship maintenance strategies under structural oppression.

Pandemic-related restrictions had diverging impacts for people in romantic relationships that could push them together or pull them apart (physically and/or emotionally). The long-term ramifications of the pandemic on social interaction in general, and romantic relationships specifically, can already be seen in how individuals are choosing to “return to normal,” or not, even if they are able to. In Chapter 13, Pietromonaco and Overall investigate how pandemic-related stress has and continues to impact couples’ relationships, relationship initiation, and relationship processes and functioning. The chapter applies a vulnerability–stress model in its approach to post-pandemic relationship navigation.

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