How Do We Relate?

Psychologist Harry Reis puts human relationships under the microscope.

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Illustrations by Michael Osadciw

Relationships—with partners and friends, coworkers and siblings, roommates and neighbors—can bring moments of pure delight. But they can also take you on a bumpy ride. And often the last thing it all feels like is something systematic.

But there are patterns underlying the day-to-day drama, and it's the life's work of psychologist Harry Reis to understand them. Since joining the faculty in 1974, he has contributed prominently to creating the field of relationship science.

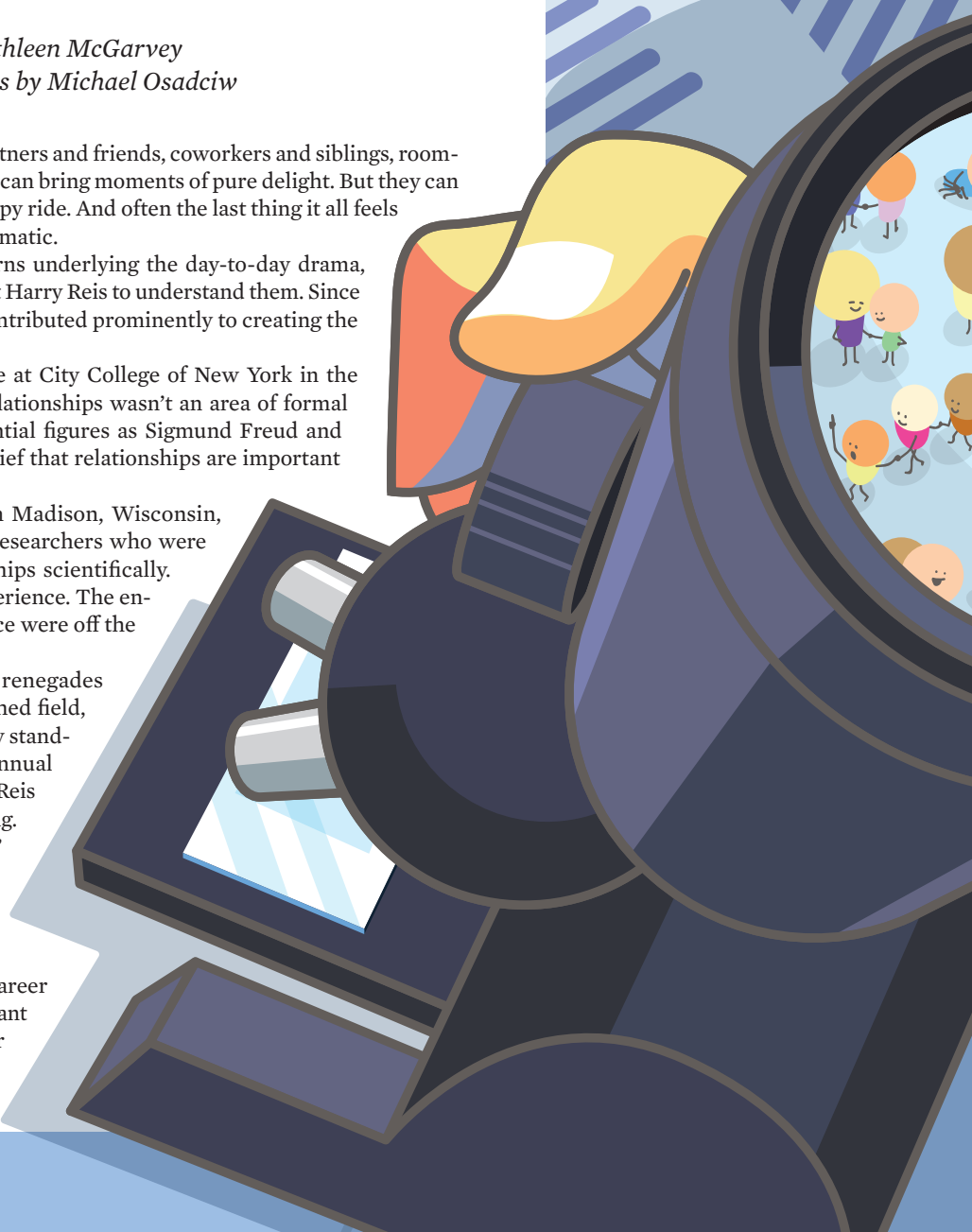
When Reis was an undergraduate at City College of New York in the 1960s, the study of interpersonal relationships wasn't an area of formal research—even though such influential figures as Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson had indicated their belief that relationships are important in shaping personality.

But an early-1980s conference in Madison, Wisconsin, brought together about 100 young researchers who were interested in scrutinizing relationships scientifically. Reis remembers it as a "visceral experience. The energy and electricity at that conference were off the charts."

What a collection of academic renegades brought forth is now a well-established field, with the usual apparatus of scholarly standing: an international society, semiannual meetings, and research journals. And Reis has been there from the very beginning.

"It was the light bulb going off," Reis says of the Madison conference. "I've been studying it ever since."

In 2012, the International Association for Relationship Research presented Reis with its Distinguished Career Award, the association's most significant honor. And in 2015, the Society for Personality and Social Psychology



gave him its annual Career Contribution Award.

"He has been a true pioneer in the field for four decades," said Andrew Elliot, a professor of psychology at Rochester, when the award was announced. In December, Gloria Culver, dean of the School of Arts & Sciences, appointed Reis to a Dean's Professorship, the highest honor a dean can bestow on a faculty member.

Reis helped transform social psychology research as one of the Rochester investigators who developed the use of daily experience records, a now widely adopted technique that's still known as the Rochester Interaction Record. Researchers value the method because it lessens the impact of flawed recollections and other forms of bias on reports people provide of their own behavior.

New directions for research have opened since Reis began his work. His and other researchers' findings about men and women's interactions "need to be investigated in nonheterosexual couples, and that's an exciting area for research," he says—but adds that indications so far are that the psychological processes of committed, monogamous relationships are fundamentally alike for all couples.

"The experience of being in a same-sex couple in the U.S. is very different than being part of a heterosexual couple. But issues of intimacy and commitment, and what people fight about—that's the same," he says. "We need to understand and appreciate the differences, but what's striking is the similarity."

For the last 25 years, Reis has been zeroing in on the issue of "responsiveness" in relationships. "It's the idea that your partner 'gets' you, that they understand you in a fairly deep way, and that they appreciate the person they understand. It's a combination of understanding and what we call 'validation'—but appreciation is just as good a word for it."

Responsiveness is a theme that comes up repeatedly in Reis's research, but his career has been characterized, as much as anything, by a wide-ranging curiosity. "I don't follow the model of 'take one thing and stay with it until you've beaten it into the ground,'" he says. "That's not my approach at all."

Probing friendship, examining marriage's effects on health, investigating what social benefits men and women accrue from physical appearance: it's all fallen under Reis's scrutiny.

As Margaret Clark, a professor of psychology at Yale, noted in her nominating letter for his career award in 2012: "If you look at his vita, you'll see that his contributions in recent years are actually speeding up, not slowing down."

"This guy," she wrote, "is amazing." R

Looking for a partner? Try online dating—but don't mistake it for science

Reis has turned his researcher's eye toward the phenomenon of online dating, which by 2012 had surpassed all forms of matchmaking in the United States other than meeting through friends.

His team found that online dating has lost the stigma once attached to personal ads, and it provides convenient access to potential partners. But they also found that despite the insistence of some of the biggest players in the online dating industry that their algorithmic matching offers a "science-based" approach to dating, such claims haven't been substantiated and should be given little credence.

"The Internet holds great promise for helping adults form healthy and supportive romantic partnerships, and those relationships are one of the best predictors of emotional and physical health," Reis said when the study was published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*.

But the researchers also concluded that online dating can promote a "shopping" mentality—people can become judgmental and picky, focusing exclusively on factors like attractiveness or interests. And corresponding by computer for weeks or months before meeting face to face has been shown to create unrealistic expectations, he says.

They further found that men and women behave differently online—men look at more profiles than women do and are more likely to initiate contact.

The researchers cautioned that online sites can encourage search for a "soul mate," convincing would-be daters that a partnership is "meant to be." People driven by such a conviction are especially likely to bail on a relationship when problems arise and to become vengeful in response to partner aggression when they feel insecure in the relationship, Reis and his colleagues found.

Relationship problems? Don't blame gender differences

No matter how inscrutable men and women sometimes seem to each other, odds are that gender difference is only a small part of the picture.

"'Boy or girl?' is the first question parents are asked about their newborn, and sex persists through life as the most pervasive characteristic used to distinguish categories among humans," Reis says.

But in a 2013 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, he held up for statistical scrutiny 122 different characteristics—from empathy and sexual attitudes to science inclination and extroversion—in men and women. And he found that the sexes, by and large, don't fall into categorically distinct groups.

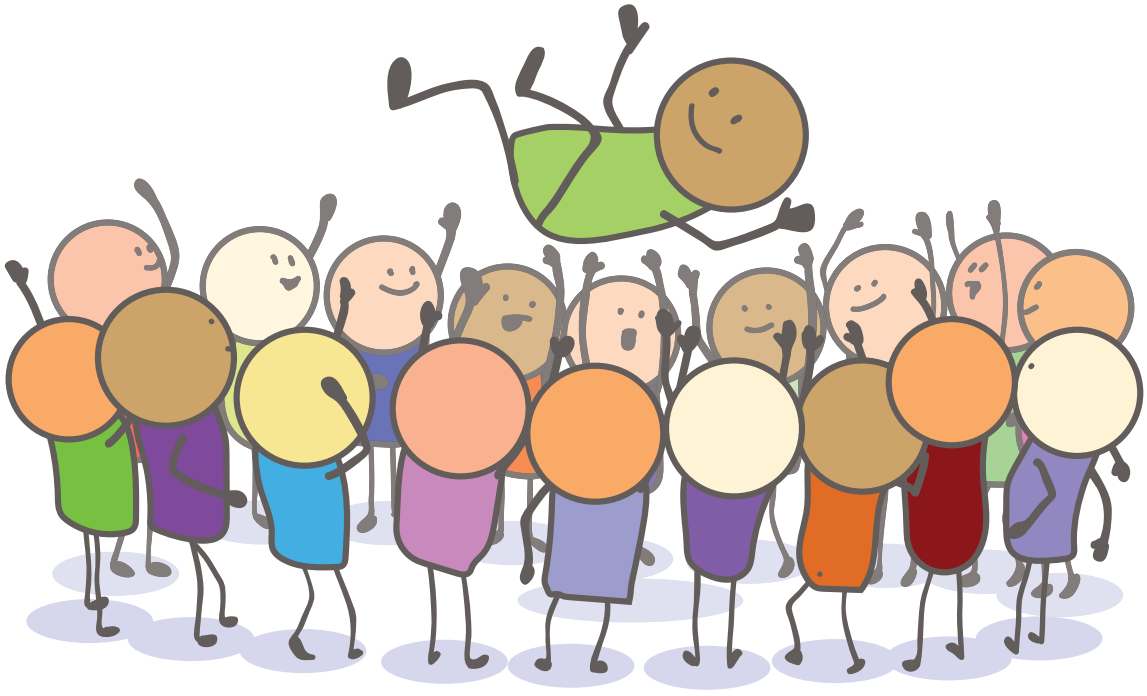
Reis and his collaborators—including lead author and then doctoral student Bobbi Carothers '03 (PhD)—reanalyzed data from studies that had shown significant sex differences. They also collected their own data on a range of psychological indicators. And they reopened studies of the "big five" personality traits: extroversion, openness, agreeableness, emotional stability, and conscientiousness. In all that they examined, they looked for evidence of attributes that could reliably categorize a person as male or female.

The pickings were slim. Although men and women differ on average in many ways, it's not that men are one way and women are another. People differ, and gender is only one of many factors that contribute to the differences. And it's a relatively small one, at that.

"When something goes wrong between partners, people often blame the other partner's gender immediately," says Reis. That reaction prevents people from seeing their partners as individuals with their own proclivities and idiosyncrasies.

"When psychological and intellectual tendencies are seen as defining characteristics, they're more likely to be assumed to be innate and immutable. Why bother to try to change?" Reis says.

Gay and lesbian couples, he adds, "have much the same problems relating to each other that heterosexual couples do. Clearly, it's not so much sex but human character that causes difficulties."



Make lots of friends, then make good friends . . . and then reap the benefits

It turns out that those college friendships bring bonuses years later—even if you never attend a reunion.

Reis coauthored a study released in 2015 that tracked college students for 30 years, beginning in the 1970s. He and his team assessed social activity at ages 20 and 30 and psychosocial outcomes—social integration, friendship quality, loneliness, depression, and psychological well-being—at age 50.

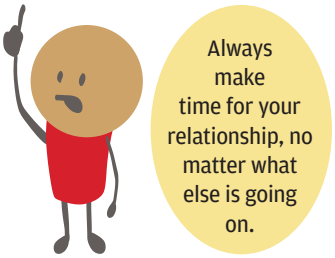
They found that the quantity of social interactions people have at age 20, and the quality of social relationships they have at age 30, can benefit health later in life. And it's not just psychological health that's involved—having few social connections has been shown to be as detrimental to health as tobacco use.

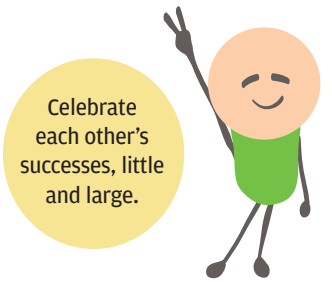
The researchers—including study leader Cheryl Carmichael '11 (PhD), then a doctoral student—hypothesize that frequent social interactions at age 20 help to build a social toolkit that can be drawn on later. As 20-year-olds, people figure out who they are and how to manage differences from others.

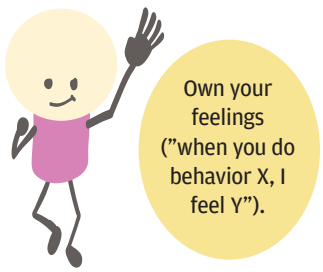
The study—published in the journal *Psychology and Aging*—additionally showed that a high number of social interactions at age 30 had no later psychosocial benefits. But 30-year-olds who reported having intimate and satisfying relationships also reported high levels of well-being at midlife. In fact, meaningful social engagement was beneficial at any age, but more so at 30 than 20.

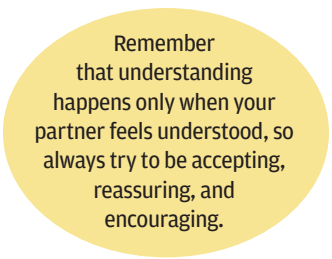
A few tips

Reis offers the following suggestions as you navigate your relationships, romantic and otherwise.









Understanding and appreciation are key to rekindling desire

When a relationship has passed a few anniversaries and the spark seems to be flickering, responsiveness could be a pivotal factor in renewing desire, says Reis.

A study he published with Gurit Birnbaum, who completed postdoctoral work at Rochester and is now a psychology professor at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya in Israel, suggests that responsiveness in even mundane interactions may reignite sexual desire. The study appeared in a 2016 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Their research began as an inquiry into what psychologists call the "intimacy-desire paradox": while people strive for intimacy in their relationships, such familiarity doesn't seem to foster desire.

"Adjusting to married life is a challenge, and many newlyweds don't do it particularly well," says Reis. "Here you've been dating, and that's all exciting—but now you've got dirty socks to contend with." And as the years tick by, those piles of dirty socks don't add to the mystery.

Previous studies hadn't established whether emotional intimacy promotes or undermines sexual desire. Now Reis and Birnbaum's research suggests that, at least in certain circumstances, there may not be a paradox at all.

What they found is that intimacy itself doesn't fuel or hamper desire—instead, it's what the intimacy signals that matters.

Responsive couples are willing to invest in their relationships, and they show a deep understanding of a partner. Responsiveness is actually a kind of intimacy—and likely it encourages desire because it conveys the impression that a partner is worth pursuing.

When men and women perceive their partners as responsive, they feel special and think of the partner as valuable, which boosts sexual desirability, the researchers found. They also found that women's perceptions of themselves and others were even more strongly affected by responsiveness than men's—an effect that translated into higher levels of desire for the responsive partner.

Marriage is good for your heart—and a happy marriage brings women big benefits

A bad relationship can cause heartache—but a good one can literally help your heart keep ticking.

A 2011 study by Reis and Kathleen King, a professor emerita at the School of Nursing, showed that happily married people who underwent coronary bypass surgery were more than three times as likely to be alive 15 years later as unmarried counterparts.

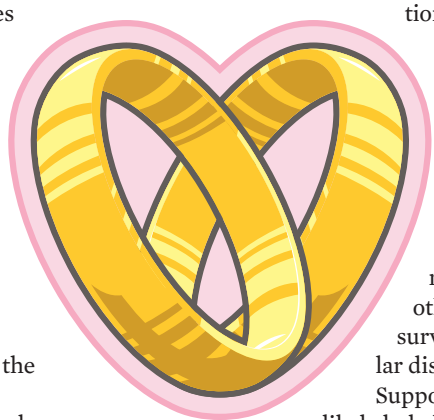
The effect of marital satisfaction is "every bit as important to survival after bypass surgery as more traditional risk factors like tobacco use, obesity, and high blood pressure," says Reis. The research was published in the journal *Health Psychology*.

"A good marriage gets under your skin, whether you are male or female," he says.

But the marriage advantage plays out differently for men and women. For men, marriage in general is linked to higher survival rates—and the more satisfying the marriage, the higher the rate of survival.

But for women, the quality of the relationship is even more important. While unhappy marriages don't add much to longevity for the women who've had bypass surgery, happy ones increase women's survival rate almost fourfold, the study found.

"Wives need to feel satisfied in their relationships to reap a health dividend," says Reis. "But the payoff for marital bliss is even greater for women than for men."



What's behind the benefit? The study adjusted for age, sex, education, depressed mood, tobacco use, and other factors known to affect survival rates for cardiovascular disease.

Supportive spouses most likely help by encouraging healthy behavior, such as increased exercise or smoking cessation, which are critical to long-term survival of heart disease. And a nurturing marriage also provides people with motivation to care for themselves and stay around to prolong a happy partnership, the researchers say.

Share and share alike

They say you can't buy happiness. But researchers have shown that when you are buying something, you're more likely to feel happy about spending your money on experiences than on material possessions.

Why? It seems to hinge on the fact that experiences are more likely to be shared with others than material goods are.

In a 2012 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Reis and fellow investigators set out to learn why recent research had shown that spending discretionary money on acquiring life experiences made people happier than buying tangible objects.

They found that social spending was favored over solitary spending, but experiences otherwise weren't favored over material goods. In other words, it's the sharing that seems to matter.

Appearance matters for more than first impressions

It's well established that people's attractiveness significantly influences the first impression that they make. But what about beauty's role in ongoing relationships? After all, most of our social encounters are with people whom we've met before.

In a study published in 1982 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Reis and his collaborators asked another question, too: why does physical attractiveness influence social participation? It was the first study to document connections between social competence and people's actual social experiences in everyday life, thanks to the team's use of the Rochester Interaction Record, a diary technique for gathering data that Reis helped develop.

They asked senior college students to record information about every social contact they had lasting 10 minutes or more. And they asked a class of psychology students at another university to view photographs of the study's subjects and rate their attractiveness on a scale of one to seven.

Here's what Reis and his team found:

Attractive men had more social interactions—and in particular, more social interactions with women—than unattractive men.

There was no difference in the quantity of interactions for attractive and unattractive women.

Pretty people of both sexes had better social interactions—longer, more intimate, and more pleasant.

Attractive men were more socially assertive and less worried about rejection by women. But attractive women were less assertive and less trusting of men. They were more likely to wait to be approached by others.

For both sexes, assertiveness led to more and better social participation.

The researchers wrote in their report that appearance had "diametrically opposite" consequences for social assertiveness for men and women. Attractive men had higher social self-esteem than unattractive men, but attractive women had lower social self-esteem than unattractive women.

Their results suggest that physical attractiveness is just as socially consequential for men as it is for women, at least in terms of the amount and type of social interaction they experience. "It's a finding that contradicts common notions that beauty matters only for women—a point that's now axiomatic in the literature," says Reis.

Why doesn't attractiveness affect the quantity of relationships women have? Researchers didn't arrive at a definitive answer, but hypothesized that attractive females may be more likely to wait to be approached by others—and most males, who don't earn "attractive" status, are leery of rejection. And they speculated that because attractive women tend to wait for others to come to them, they don't cultivate the social skills that less attractive women do.