What are the characteristics of an intimate relationship?

Abstract

At least seven characteristics distinguish intimate relationships from ordinary relationships. Intimate relationships (1) emerge over time from interactions, (2) are mutual and reflect one unit instead of two individuals, (3) thrive on emotional self-disclosure and associated processes like validation, (4) depend on trust in order to protect privately shared knowledge, (5) require care and affection, (6) tend to be committed relationships, and (7) intertwine partners' lives, ensuring closeness. These seven characteristics are reviewed, shedding light on the complex and multi-faceted nature of the intimacy process.

What are the characteristics of an intimate relationship?

Intimate relationships are special relationships, but attempting to pinpoint what makes intimacy so special is not a straightforward process. One problem is that lay definitions of intimacy abound. To some, "intimate" implies sexual relations between lovers; to others, intimacy involves candid self-expression, loyalty, and trust, like between best friends or childhood chums; to others, intimacy is reserved for the kind of nurturing, safe bonds that exist between parents and children. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these definitions; myriad descriptions of intimacy exist because they are all, in part, true. Intimacy is a complex and nebulous constellation of qualities (Prager & Roberts, 2004), requiring the perspectives of diverse academic disciplines to fully understand its nature. There is no "one-size-fits-all" intimate relationship.

Acknowledging intimacy's breadth of meaning, considerable effort has been expended to define what intimacy is and what it is not. The net effect of these efforts is that intimate relationships can be distinguished from ordinary relationships by acknowledging at least seven general characteristics, elaborated below. These characteristics can vary in strength and importance relative to each other and over the course of relationships, and intimacy can exist with only a minimum of them being present. But it is likely that the most satisfying and meaningful intimate relationships are characterized by all seven components (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000).

1. Characteristic #1: Intimacy builds from interactions and it emerges over time.
Intimate relationships take time to develop, but intimacy is not a "stage" of relationships reserved for specific "types" of relationship (e.g., friendship, family, or spouse). Intimacy is best conceptualized as a dynamic process that affects the course and conduct of two individuals relating to each other in interactions (Clark & Reis, 1988). Interactions, then, can vary in their intimacy levels, independently of how close the participants might be, and independently of whether the participants are teammates, siblings, or newlyweds. Indeed, intimacy can be manufactured between strangers in laboratory settings, in the short span of 45 minutes (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1999), or it can be shared between strangers on a plane, who never see each other again. Over time, an intimate relationship might be said to emerge when interactions have evolved to establish a reciprocal and shared understanding: Partners realize they "know the innermost, subjective aspects of another, and [are] known in a like manner" (p. 14, Chelune, Robinson, & Kommor, 1984).

When exactly a relationship might qualify itself as "intimate" will vary from dyad to dyad, but it seems as if the best description for *how* intimacy manifests is as an "emergent" property of repeated interactions (Hinde, 1981). Emergent phenomenon exist at a more complex level of analysis than can be explained by solely analyzing its constituent parts. Colloquially, this has been expressed as "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." In the context of intimacy, it means that intimacy cannot be reduced to a formula, equation, ratio, metric, or rubric. Intimacy is not an aggregation of many intimate interactions. Intimacy is a novel and coherent property of relationships, arising from observable and measurable qualities of interactions over time but not directly attributable in an orderly or linear fashion to any interactions in particular (Duck & Sants, 1983).

2. Characteristic #2: Intimate relationships are mutual and reflect cognitive overlap.
Intimate relationships do not emerge without mutual and consensual agreement of the depth and nature of the relationship, and mutual desire to maintain the relationship (Levinger & Snoek, 1972). One consequence of mutuality is that intimate dyads often speak of their relationship using language that connotes a single unit (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). For example, couples speak of "we" or "us" and not "he" or "me" or "mine," more often than non-couples do. Language use such as this reflects cognitive overlap between persons; the two selves have merged into one coherent and cohesive unit (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Cognitive overlap has other advantages, including heightened ability to infer partners' thoughts and feelings, or mindreading, allowing partners to efficiently satisfy needs without being asked.

Another consequence of cognitive overlap is diminished need for record-keeping in the relationship. In most relationships, member vigilance ensures that parties input equally (e.g., a dinner check is divided equally) or equitably (e.g., those who ordered more pay more). In intimate relationships, however, communal norms are adopted: Benefits are exchanged according to need, without keeping track of inputs and outputs, and without expectation of repayment. Marriages that operate according to communal norms fare better, and last longer, than marriages that revert to equality or equity rules (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010).

3. Characteristic #3: The gateway to intimacy is self-disclosure.
Self-disclosure refers to verbal and nonverbal communication of self-relevant feelings, facts, and experiences. Self-disclosure has strong relationships with liking: We like people to whom we disclose, we like people who disclose to us, and we like people more as a result of having disclosed to them (Collins & Miller, 1994). Self-disclosure is categorized as descriptive (revealing facts) or evaluative (revealing feelings), and evaluative self-disclosure is especially likely to promote intimacy because it is more personal than descriptive self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure is often labeled the "gateway to intimacy" for two reasons. First, self-disclosure tends to be reciprocated. By extension, reciprocated self-disclosure encourages re-reciprocation, and so forth. Combined with the close association between liking and self-disclosure, a positive feedback loop often emerges, in which positive feelings of closeness can develop quickly over the course of only a few conversations. Some sensitivity is warranted: Revealing too much too soon impedes relationship growth by increasing discomfort in listeners and by inhibiting reciprocal disclosures (Cozby, 1972).

Second, as self-disclosure increases in breadth (partners discuss greater varieties of topics) and depth (self-disclosures tend toward evaluative and personal), partners gain exclusive and intimate access to each other's personalities, preferences, and character flaws. Partners become confidantes, which increases vulnerability of speakers and trust in listeners. This process of mutually exposing people's innermost selves has been likened to the "peeling of an onion" (Altman & Taylor, 1973), with self-disclosure being the mechanism for intimacy development through the process of revealing one's true self to an engaging, understanding, and validating partner, who willingly discloses intimate knowledge in exchange.

Discovering similar attitudes is a rewarding part of the self-disclosure process, but partners need not agree with everything they see or hear in order for intimacy to develop. Validation, in which

partners actively listen, openly accept personal information even if they disagree, and regard the information as an acceptable form of truth, is more important for intimacy than agreement. Validation allows speakers and listeners to exchange personal and emotional information in a supportive context, without requiring identical points of view (Reis & Shaver, 1988).

4. Characteristic #4: Increased knowledge is protected by trust.

Trust is defined as the expectation that partners are reliable, predictable, and dependable. Trusted partners are seen as being concerned with one's welfare and motivated to act in one's best interest, and not in their own self-interest (Simpson, 2007). Trust motivates intimacy development as breadth and depth of self-disclosure increases, for two reasons. First, speakers confide personal information only if they expect listeners to respond warmly and supportively. Second, listeners experience pressure to respect the sensitivity of the information to which they have been entrusted. This experience derives in part from attributing speakers' motivations for disclosing to the listener's unique and desirable qualities (e.g., "he told me this because he trusted me more than others"). Perceiving oneself as having a special role in the eyes of the speaker fuels intimacy development by encouraging reciprocal disclosures, further fueling the need for trust, and so on (Wortman, Adesman, & Herman, 1976).

Trust can also fluctuate as a consequence of partners' actions. Trust builds during the self-disclosure process to the extent that listeners respond warmly, with understanding, and with validation. Trust builds when partners are observed behaving in ways that conflict with their own interests. Trust increases when desire for intimacy is high; that is, trust both motivates closeness and is a product of intimate interactions. Trust diminishes when partners behave badly, cause one to feel rejected, or act on their own self-interest during a time of need. In these cases, partner forgiveness is one mechanism for re-establishing trust in relationships.

5. Characteristic #5: Intimacy requires care.

Intimacy is affectionate. As relationships grow, motivations to protect, nurture, and support one another grow in strength and normalcy. Responses to speakers that signal warmth and affection drive processes of emotional attachment, as partners learn to depend on each other and to expect availability, especially during times of need (e.g., when frightened or confused) (Reis & Patrick, 1996). During these moments, partners' support alleviates distress and reinforces bond strength, strengthening attachments and increasing trust in future availability (Feeney & Collins, 2003).

Support that validates a person's feelings and their emotional well-being is prioritized over support that suggests solutions to problems or that offers pragmatic advice for problems. The latter form of support, known as tangible support, is less affectionate than emotional support and is therefore not a particularly potent driver of intimacy.

Care can be shown not only by assisting partners through difficulties but also by celebrating their joys (Gable & Reis, 2010). Support for positive life events is similar to support during distress, in that the most effective support involves active listening, reflecting ideas back to speakers, and validating listeners' feelings. But there are also important differences. For example, providing passive support (e.g., allowing partners to work through their feelings without providing much feedback) is seen by recipients as a sign of loyalty in the context of negative life events but is perceived as dismissive in the context of sharing positive events.

6. Characteristic #6: Intimate relationships are often committed relationships.
All relationships can dissolve. Those in intimate relationships have usually worked hard toward ensuring the relationship endures. Commitment refers to the belief in the longevity of one's relationship, the intent to persist in one's relationship despite obstacles, and the trust that one's partner desires the same. Commitment is both an antecedent of intimacy, and a consequence (Rusbult, Coolsen, Kirchner, & Clarke, 2006).

An overly simplistic interpretation of commitment is that as long as partners love each other and are satisfied with how things are going, then the relationship will persist. This is only part of the story (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Commitment is also predicted by a person's quality of alternatives, which refers to the availability and desirability of the next best available relationship. In the face of a dissatisfying current relationship, if quality of alternatives is low, then the current, dissatisfying relationship will persist. Another factor predicting commitment is having resources attached to the relationship, known as investments. Investment resources may be immaterial such as staking one's personal reputation on the relationship. They may be material such as children, a marriage, or a house. The greater the investments (in terms of number and size), the higher the commitment, in part because investments increase the costs of dissolving the relationship.

7. Characteristic #7: The lives of intimates are interdependent and, therefore, close.
Close relationships are interdependent. Interdependence refers to the processes by which partners mutually influence each other's experiences, outcomes, and choices. In interdependent relationships, two sets of needs and preferences must be considered in order to maximize the rewards and minimize the costs of interacting. Interdependence contrasts with independence, in which only the needs of the self are accounted for and thus only the self is affected by one's decisions. Interdependence implies joint decision-making and, importantly, shared rewards or shared costs. Interdependence processes and conflicts emerge in decisions, also known as dilemmas, ranging from mundane (e.g., what movie should we watch tonight?) to extraordinary (e.g., should we try to have another child?).

To the extent that partners navigate interdependence dilemmas frequently (partners need each other or influence each other often), in diverse contexts (partners need each other or influence each other across many kinds of situations and tasks), and strongly (partners need each other or influence each other for important decisions and tasks), then the relationship is said to be close. In other words, closeness results from the kinds of influences that partners have on each other over time. Relationships are considered less close if mutual influence is low on any or all of these dimensions, or if the need for joint decision-making is time-limited (Kelley et al., 1983).

Importantly, as close partners coordinate their behaviors in order to accommodate each other's needs and preferences, the outcomes being obtained are not only material (e.g., convincing your partner to watch the movie you want to see) but also symbolic (e.g., the pleasure of perceiving that one's partner is willing to compromise their preferences for yours). Symbolic outcomes, by extension, further fuel satisfaction, commitment, and intimacy.

One of the central concerns of interdependence theory is understanding how partners navigate conflicts of interest, and the effects of navigating conflicts of interest on intimacy development. A conflict of interest occurs when obtaining rewards for the self directly interferes with a partner's ability to obtain their own rewards. Situations in which interests conflict are known as "strain tests," in that they "diagnose" the strength of the partner's motivation to accommodate (Kelley, 1979). Observing a partner behaving in ways that conflict with their own interests constitutes a "passing" of the strain test, resulting in increased trust, desire for intimacy, and likelihood of reciprocating the sacrifice at a later time. Observing a partner behaving according to self-interest in strain tests results in diminished trust and intimacy.

A controversial feature of this view is that closeness is not defined by positive sentiment. Closeness derives from navigating interdependence dilemmas independently of whether one likes or dislikes the person with whom their life is intertwined (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 2004). This does not imply that close relationships are not positively toned; in fact, interdependence theory predicts that joint pursuit of goals should be rewarding and more efficient than solitary pursuit, thus associating partners with love, gratitude, and pride. Interdependence theory proposes instead that closeness and positive sentiment comprise separate dimensions of intimacy, which is useful when accounting for relationships in which satisfaction and closeness are incongruent, such as couples who remain committed to each other's lives despite a lack of intimacy or passion.

8. The parable of the blind men and the elephant
Intimacy is a complex and multi-dimensional property of relationships. It unfolds from interactions over time and is mutual. It builds from reciprocated, emotional self-disclosures, requiring trust and care from both parties, in the context of ongoing interdependency. It often develops into commitment and closeness. And this does not scratch the surface of other constructs familiar to intimacy but not highlighted here, such as love (vs. liking), sex, and physical attraction. A truly diverse set of perspectives is required to fully understand intimacy in all its breadth.

The parable of the blind men and the elephant is often cited to illustrate this point. According to the parable, a group of blind men encounter an elephant for the first time and do their best to describe the animal to each other. Being blind, each man is limited in his ability to explain what he feels with his hands, and because the elephant is so large and complex, each man arrives at a different conclusion about what an elephant is. Each man, for his part, is correct. But because no man's descriptions match any of the other men's descriptions, and because each man can never touch all parts of the elephant at once, each man is simultaneously incorrect. In the same way, intimacy continues to fascinate and perplex those who attempt to view it from a single angle; a multi-dimensional perspective is required.

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