UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL INTIMACY: A REVIEW OF CONCEPTUALIZATION, ASSESSMENT AND THE ROLE OF GENDER

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Over the past three decades, researchers have begun to investigate emotional intimacy as an essential feature of adult personal relationships. The social psychological perspective has been particularly useful in this endeavor because of its emphasis on the role of intimacy in relationship processes and outcomes. The focus of this review is the current conceptualization, assessment, and definition of emotional intimacy as a vital component in relationships. Although much of existing research has highlighted intimacy within romantic relationships, this review will examine emotional intimacy as it functions a variety of interpersonal relations. Also addressed are the frequently reported gender differences regarding intimate expression. Based on the contention that social expectations associated with gender may influence the expression of intimacy, a social psychological model for understanding the gender dynamics of intimacy is proposed. It is suggested that this model is useful in explaining the finding that women often report romantic relationships characterized by more intimacy than do men. Further research using a variety of perspectives is recommended to understand more fully the dynamics of intimacy within personal relationships of all kinds.

Introduction

Emotional intimacy has long been considered a critical need for healthy human development. In fact, it is believed that the reported benefits of close relationships, such as better overall health and well being, have their roots in the experience of intimacy that results from relational involvement. Therefore, social psychological research has begun to examine emotional intimacy as an essential ingredient of adult relationships. Researchers have begun to define and assess emotional intimacy within a variety of interpersonal relationships, including marriage, the dating relationship and friendship. Several studies have developed instruments to measure the degree to which individuals experience intimacy within a relationship, whereas others seek to identify specific components of the intimate experience.

Still, an understanding of emotional intimacy has eluded scholars. Researchers have found difficulties in delineating between emotional intimacy and similar constructs such as self-disclosure, relationship satisfaction and commitment. L. K. Acitelli and Steve Duck have commented that despite ongoing research in this area, they continue to view intimacy as the “proverbial elephant,” suggesting that researchers must become aware of all dimensions of the concept to understand its true nature. As a result, these researchers, among others, have encouraged scholars to view intimacy as a multi-dimensional construct, and to conduct examinations from a variety of perspectives. With this in mind, this review has three primary purposes: first, to highlight a variety of ways in which intimacy

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has been conceptualized, assessed and defined; second, to examine intimacy within a
broad range of relationships by conceiving of intimacy as an essential component of all
adult relationships, not only romantic relationships, as is often the case; finally, to explore
recent additions to the literature regarding the frequently reported gender differences in
the expression of intimacy. As with any review, this is by no means an exhaustive compi-
lation, but a selection by which to obtain a more complete perspective of emotional inti-
macy in various types of adult relationships.

What Emotional Intimacy Is Not

The term intimacy often brings to mind intimacy of a sexual nature, or intimacy expe-
rienced solely in the context of romantic relationships. Though sexual intimacy plays an
important role in some relationships, it is believed that emotional intimacy is far more crit-
ic to relationship satisfaction than sexual intimacy.¹ In fact, most research has found that
when participants are asked to define intimacy, they frequently say that intimacy is “more
than sex,” or “does not have to involve sex.”² Therefore, in this review, the term emotional
intimacy will be used to refer to any reported experience of psychological intimacy
within a close relationship, and does not necessarily involve sexual activity or even the
possibility of such.

In order to understand what is meant by emotional intimacy as experienced in a close
relationship versus a one-time emotional experience with an acquaintance, it is important
to recognize that researchers have detected differences in what individuals report about
each. To distinguish between what is meant by an intimate experience and an intimate
relationship, D.H. Olson described an intimate experience as a feeling of closeness pos-
ible with a variety of persons that does not necessarily involve an intimate relationship. On
the other hand, an intimate relationship is one in which intimate experiences occur with
the expectation that such episodes will continue over time.³ For the purposes of this paper,
intimacy will be discussed within the realm of personal relationships, involving intimate
experiences that are expected to recur.

What Emotional Intimacy Is

Emotional intimacy, or what is sometimes labeled psychological intimacy, has been
identified as the “glue” of all relationships and is thought to be experienced in all types of
close, personal affiliations.⁴ According to the 1986 Webster’s New World Dictionary, the
word intimacy derives its meaning from the Latin intimus, meaning innermost, or “per-
taining to the inmost character of a thing; fundamental; essential; most private or person-
al.” Along these lines, a variety of theorists have studied emotional intimacy and how it is
that individuals proceed in the establishment and maintenance of intimate ties. A number
of the early theorists in this area used a clinical perspective to study and discuss the role
of intimacy within adolescent development, such as Erik Erikson and Harry Stack
Sullivan. Others, such as Mary Ainsworth and Harry Harlow, examined intimacy as a fea-
ture of attachment theory, and used the laboratory to assess the importance of intimate
relationships for early development. A brief history of early research is described below.
More recently, scholars have begun to use interview and questionnaire methods to define
intimacy and to assess the degree to which intimacy is a part of an individual’s relation-
ship experience.⁵
Early Beginnings

Erik Erikson was one of the first theorists to write about the role of intimacy in human development. A student of Anna Freud who was trained in psychoanalysis, Erikson created a stage theory that has as its focus inner social drives and conflicts. From his work with psychoanalysis, frequently with children and adolescents, Erikson developed a life-span theory consisting of eight psychosocial stages, with each stage characterized by a different type of psychosocial conflict to be resolved. In Erikson’s description of the sixth stage of psychosocial development occurring during adolescence, an individual must resolve the conflict of intimacy versus isolation. The young adult struggles to expose and share the innermost self so as to fuse his or her identity with others in a variety of ways, including peer friendships, sexual relations, relationships with teachers, and others. If this fusion is not successfully achieved, the young adult faces social isolation resulting in “self-absorption.” This fusion of the identities of two individuals who have a deep concern for one another is what Erikson called intimacy.10 Erikson also stated that intimacy is the “capacity to commit [one] self to concrete affiliations and partnerships and to develop the ethical strength to abide by such commitments, even though they may call for significant sacrifices and compromises.” Complete, fulfilling intimacy, however, cannot be achieved outside the context of adult heterosexual relationships.11

Another theoretical psychologist, Harry Stack Sullivan, viewed the psychiatrist as an active participant in therapy. As a psychiatrist, Sullivan placed the need for interpersonal intimacy at the beginning of preadolescence. Intimacy is a need that must be fulfilled for individuals to feel validated and worthy. Friends share their innermost thoughts and feelings, while at the same time seeking validation for their beliefs and values. Since friendship groups usually consist of children who share comparable characteristics, it is in these circles that individuals receive confirmation about their beliefs. At this time in development, the preadolescent is most likely to become friends with same-sex peers, who Sullivan believed are best suited to understand one another. Similar to Erikson, Sullivan suggested that heterosexual relationships eventually would be the most fulfilling.12

Abraham Maslow was a clinical psychologist who worked to understand the motivational processes of psychologically healthy people. Maslow classified intimacy as a motivational need essential to healthy emotional growth. In order to become a self-actualized person, or psychologically healthy, Maslow held that a person must first meet four hierarchical needs. Though not a basic need in Maslow’s hierarchy, such as food, clothing or shelter, having the need for intimacy met is necessary before an individual can meet higher needs, such as those associated with self-actualization, the pinnacle for Maslow. The achievement of intimacy results from the establishment of relationships with others. Though Maslow’s approach is similar to Erikson’s and Sullivan’s in its clinical foundations, it is believed that his theory is somewhat less deterministic.13

Whereas Erikson, Sullivan and Maslow were clinical psychologists who based their theory on conversations with clients, John Bowlby, Harry Harlow, and Mary Ainsworth developed their ideas about Attachment theory in the laboratory. Bowlby, a child psychiatrist, identified the importance of the emotional bond between child and caregiver, or what is known as attachment. Bowlby’s descriptions of attachment are very similar to what is now considered an intimate relationship. Though his work was primarily with children who had been separated from their parents during World War II, Bowlby’s research has had a great influence on the understanding of intimacy as it functions in adult relationships.14
Another researcher in the area of attachment, Harry Harlow, studied the effects of maternal deprivation in Rhesus monkeys. Through his research, Harlow and his colleagues demonstrated the critical need for "contact comfort" and intimacy in the early stages of life. In the same vein, Mary Ainsworth and others systematically studied the value of intimacy in early development using her laboratory observation technique called the strange situation, developed to assess the degree to which children have established an intimate attachment with their caregiver. Identifying three primary attachment styles, Ainsworth continued the dialogue concerning how caregiver response can affect an infant's attachment bond.

**Later Conceptualizations of Emotional Intimacy**

Contemporary research on intimacy has its roots in the early theories described above. For instance, J.L. Orlofsky, J.E. Marcia & I.M. Lesser used Erikson's concept of ego identity and theory of psychosocial development to create a structured interview to determine what they called the intimacy status. According to this theory, intimacy can be classified into four categories: (a) Intimate, which is characterized by the establishment of mutual relationships (including a romantic partner) where self-disclosure takes place. This person is characterized by self-awareness, a genuine interest in others, and a lack of defensiveness in interactions with others; (b) Preintimate, sharing some characteristics with the Intimate individual, this person is different in that he or she has not yet experienced a love relationship, but has had experience with dating and close friendships, and may be unsure about commitment, but possesses qualities that predispose one to intimacy; (c) Stereotyped Relationship, where a person has relationships somewhat lacking in depth. A person with this status may treat others as objects, seeming to be more interested in what can be gained from them, than in having close, mutual relationships. Characteristics of this status include shallowness, and lack of self-awareness. Pseudointimacy is considered to be a subtype of the stereotyped relationship status. An individual who is in the Pseudointimate status may seem similar to the intimate individual in that a romantic relationship is often maintained; however, this relationship is superficial. At times, the Pseudointimate person seems only to be "going through the motions" of a romantic relationship. Erikson called this relationship a "'folie a deux,' or a mutual isolation in the guise of intimacy;" 17 (d) Isolate, generally lacking in genuine personal relationships. Since this person has difficulty establishing long-term relationships, withdrawal and isolation from others usually results. Characteristics of the Isolate also include anxiety, a lack of assertiveness and social skills, and a general appearance of being "self-satisfied" or "smug." 19

Another theorist in this area, D.H. Olson described seven types of intimacy: (a) Emotional Intimacy (experiencing a closeness of feelings), (b) Social Intimacy (the experience of having common friendship and similarities in social networks), (c) Intellectual Intimacy (the experience of sharing ideas), (d) Sexual Intimacy (the experience of sharing general affection and/or sexual activity), (e) Recreational Intimacy (shared experiences of interest in hobbies or mutual participation in sporting events), (f) Spiritual Intimacy (the experience of showing ultimate concerns, a similar sense of meaning in life, and/or religious faiths), and (g) Aesthetic Intimacy (the closeness that results from the experience of sharing beauty). 20

Other definitions that have been used in the study of intimacy include that of Clyde and Susan Hendrick, who stated that intimacy is "the degree of closeness two people
achieve." 21 R. A. Lewis stated that emotional intimacy is "defined in behavioral terms as mutual self-disclosure and other kinds of verbal sharing, as declarations of liking and loving the other, and as demonstrations of affections." 22 Categorizing intimacy as a process, Elaine Hatfield described it to be when we "attempt to get close to another; to explore similarities (and differences) in the ways we think, feel, and behave." 23

From a review of literature, it is apparent that some early theories centered on understanding intimacy as a developmental process or as a feature of attachment, whereas other theories addressed the assessment and categorization of individual levels of achieved intimacy. Still others developed definitions of intimacy and its subtypes. More recently though, a relatively different approach to the study of emotional intimacy has emerged. Researchers in the area of social psychology have begun to center on the role of emotional intimacy specifically within adult relationship processes. In fact, research has indicated that people today may consider emotional intimacy more important in their lives than individuals did 30 years ago. 24 This may have resulted from events such as changing gender roles, increased geographic mobility, greater awareness about sexuality, and also the fact that men and women tend to experience relationships in different settings than historically has been the case. As a result, individuals find themselves having to adapt to changing social norms and expectations regarding intimate relationships. 25

Towards a Social Psychology of Emotional Intimacy

S.B. Levine suggested that emotional intimacy first necessitates self-awareness and begins with a self-disclosure of an individual’s inner experience. At least two people are required for the establishment of intimacy, thereby setting the stage for a situation in which an individual’s disclosure may be followed by a response from another. 26 This understanding of intimacy as resulting from an interaction between people led to its examination in the context of relationships from a social psychological perspective. Initially, social psychological investigations centered on intimacy and its determinants, including eye contact, distance, and other nonverbal behavior, often employing the tenets of equilibrium and equity theories. 27 Soon, however, the focus of research shifted from specifics of nonverbal behavior to a broader perspective, including various features of the intimate experience (e.g., self-disclosure, touching, emotion, etc.). It became clear that the social psychological approach to the study of emotional intimacy fortified early psychological research in two distinct ways, one regarding the focus of current research and the other concerning methodology: (a) Since many early theorists examined the role of intimacy in human development with a primary focus on the individual, and contemporary social psychological theorists seek to understand intimacy primarily in the context of interpersonal relationships, the modern study of emotional intimacy can benefit from both perspectives. For instance, intimacy can be viewed as a product of the person and/or the situation, as has been suggested, rather than one-dimensional; 28 and (b) The use of new qualitative data collection methods used in the field by social psychologists (e.g., narrative, interviews) adds to the previous research using clinical samples and laboratory methods. These methods have been especially fruitful in identifying how laypersons define and experience intimacy in their relationships. Not only do these methods afford an additional perspective as has been recommended, but also produce rich, contextualized material that can be derived from a variety of populations.

Taking advantage of a multi-dimensional perspective and a variety of methodologies,
several new developments regarding the definition and assessment of intimacy have surfaced. These innovations can be categorized into two primary divisions: (a) Developments specifically involving theoretical models and assessment, and (b) Empirical investigations that center on identifying specific qualities or characteristics of intimacy, often using open-ended questions or narrative format.

**Theoretical and Assessment Developments**

M.T. Schaefer and D.H. Olson developed the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships Inventory (PAIR) in an attempt to create an instrument that specifically measured the degree to which an individual experiences intimacy with another person. Before this time, many instruments purported to assess intimacy, yet were actually measures of relationship satisfaction, self-disclosure, or group cohesion. Moreover, since the term intimacy has most often been used in the context of romantic relationships, or has implied sexual activity, the authors of the PAIR aspired to fill a gap by creating a scale that assessed intimacy in a variety of heterosexual relationships, including friendship, dating relationships and marriage. Having five subscales, based on the types of intimacy described by Olson, each consisting of six items: (a) Emotional Intimacy, (b) Social Intimacy, (c) Sexual Intimacy, (d) Intellectual Intimacy, and (e) Recreational Intimacy, the PAIR can assess the level of expected versus realized intimacy in these areas. This instrument also affords therapeutic use in that the scores can be plotted and feedback given about the relationship partners’ perceptions and expectations regarding intimacy. At the same time, the PAIR does not assume any ideal level of intimacy. Though primarily developed as an instrument to assess a specific quality of relationships, further benefits of the PAIR Inventory include applications for clinical use, such as marital therapy or enrichment programs. Although the PAIR had proved useful in some settings, the requirement of heterosexuality is a limitation in understanding all intimate relationships. Furthermore, although the PAIR was created to examine intimacy in a variety of relationships, the research using the PAIR inventory has primarily focused on romantic couples and the role the PAIR might have in couple therapy.

The Waring Intimacy Questionnaire (WIQ), created by E.M. Waring and J.R. Reddon, is another tool used in the assessment of intimacy. This scale was based on the conceptualization of intimacy of E.M. Berman and H.L. Lief, who described close, dyadic relations as being composed of three interpersonal dimensions: boundary, power, and intimacy. Since the dimension of intimacy is thought to be the best predictor of marital satisfaction and adjustment, researchers have identified eight distinct components of marital intimacy: (a) Affection (the expression of feelings of liking, loving, and positive affect toward the spouse); (b) Cohesion (expression of commitment to the marriage and the primacy of the marital relationship); (c) Expressiveness (the sharing of private thoughts, beliefs and attitudes, and the ability to communicate about the marriage); (d) Compatibility (the similarity of background, attitudes, activities and goals); (e) Conflict Resolution (capacity to resolve differences of opinion without criticism, refusal to resolve problems, or argument); (f) Sexuality (the mutuality and satisfaction of sexual relations); (g) Autonomy (the nature and quality of the relationships of the couples outside the marriage—e.g., with parents, children, friends); (h) Identity (the couple’s impression of themselves in comparison to what they believe about other couples). Research based on these eight qualities and two additional facets: (a) intimate behaviors, and (b) overall rating, was
conducted using the Victoria Hospital Interview (VHI).\textsuperscript{35} Findings indicated that the VHI could be used to distinguish between the constructs of intimacy and self-disclosure, a delineation that is often difficult in research. It was also found, though, that self-disclosure was a strong determinant of marital intimacy. Similar to the PAIR Inventory, however, the WIQ centers primarily on heterosexual intimacy within marriage.

To address the lack of instruments to assess intimacy in the context of all relationships, R.S. Miller and H.M. Lefcourt developed the Miller Social Intimacy Scale (MSIS). Items were generated by structured interviews in which participants explored and discussed the role of intimacy in all relationships, including those with friends, acquaintances, and family members. In addition to a 17-item social desirability scale, 2 categories of items resulted, 6 items describing the frequency of intimacy and 11 items concerning the intensity of the intimacy experienced.\textsuperscript{36}

C.J. Descutner & M.H. Thelen took a different approach to the assessment of intimacy. Based on the contention that the fear of intimacy is often a precursor to relationship problems, these scholars created the Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS).\textsuperscript{37} Since the aforementioned PAIR Inventory and the MSIS assess intimacy only in the context of a current relationship, the FIS was an innovation in that this scale measured a fear of intimacy regardless of whether or not an individual is presently involved in a relationship. Once again, though, this scale was developed to assess intimacy within the context of heterosexual dating relationships. The FIS items were based on the idea that the “fear of intimacy is the inhibited capacity of an individual, because of anxiety, to exchange thoughts and feelings of personal significance with another individual who is highly valued.”\textsuperscript{38} According to the authors, an understanding of the fear of intimacy must consider 3 dimensions: (a) Content (what personal information is conveyed); (b) Emotional Valence (strong feelings about the personal information communicated); and (c) Vulnerability (high regard for the intimate partner). For intimacy to exist, these three features must simultaneously be in place in a relationship. The conceptualization of intimacy as necessarily involving these 3 characteristics distinguishes between true intimacy and a simple, personal self-disclosure. This delineation is similar to D.H. Olson’s description above involving the distinction of an intimate relationship versus an intimate experience. Descutner & Thelen, however, would contend that the latter cannot even exist outside the context of an intimate relationship, and therefore, is simply a sharing of personal information. Research using the FIS has suggested a link between the fear of intimacy and overall well-being. For instance, studies have demonstrated that low fear of intimacy is associated with good psychological adjustment and healthy attachment.\textsuperscript{39} Furthermore, inverse relationships have been found between FIS scores and confidence with others’ dependability and comfort with closeness. A positive association was also found between FIS and fear of abandonment.\textsuperscript{40}

Another instrument created exclusively to assess levels of intimacy within all relationships is the Psychosocial Intimacy Questionnaire (PIQ) developed by S.A. Tesch.\textsuperscript{41} Not only can the PIQ be used in relationships outside those classified as romantic, but can also be used with adolescents as well as adults. The PIQ consists of 60 statements concerning persons with whom participants have relationships. Most of the items were written specifically for the PIQ; however, 16 of the items were derived from the Acquaintance Description Form (ADF) of Paul Wright.\textsuperscript{42} Participants are instructed to respond to the items while thinking of their best or closest friend, either male or female (excluding blood relatives). Initial factor analysis resulted in three interpretable dimensions of psychosocial intimacy (a) Romantic Love (items related to love, emotional expression, physical inti-
macy, and interdependence loaded highest here); (b) Supportiveness (items referring to respect, helpfulness, and acceptance loaded highest here); and (c) Communication Ease (items pertaining to being oneself, communication, and lack of ambivalence about the relationship loaded highest here).

**Using Narrative Methods to Understand Intimacy**

Many studies have sought to understand laypersons’ meanings of emotional intimacy using open-ended interviews and questionnaires. Rather than a focus on intimacy as a feature specific to romance as described in the studies above, these researchers were interested in what the term intimacy means to people, in general, in a variety of relationships. Such research has resulted in understanding intimacy as a combination of emotional expressiveness, self-disclosure, support, shared activities, and physical affection.

For instance, Mayta Caldwell and Letitia A. Peplau described an intimate friend as “a very close friend with whom one can really communicate and in whom one can confide about feelings and personal problems.” M. Monsour found seven categories: (a) Self-disclosure, (b) Emotional Expressiveness, (c) Unconditional Support, (d) Physical Contact, (e) Trust, (f) Activities, and (g) Sexual Contact (only mentioned in the context of cross-sex friendships). A. Celeste Gaia identified five themes related to intimacy: (a) Self-disclosure, (b) Emotional Expression, (c) Physical contact (e.g., hugs, handholding, pat on the back, etc.), (d) Support/Coping Aid, and (e) Sharing Activities. L.M. Register and Tracy Henley reduced their data to seven themes: (a) Non-verbal Communication (participants often used gestures and body movements to describe what intimacy was—e.g., “the meeting of our eyes, a kiss”); (b) Presence (“the noticeable existence of a person, or ‘spirit’ in the presence of another person.”); (c) Time (participants noted their hyper-observance of time during the intimate experience, often recognizing the duration of the intimacy); (d) Boundary (participants often spoke of the lack or removal of emotional boundaries between people); (e) Body (the idea of body awareness and touching, or noticing specific internal (e.g. butterflies) and external (e.g. touching)—sensations); (f) Destiny and Surprise (participants often used paradoxical explanations for the intimacy—they were surprised it happened, but felt it was meant to be); and (g) Transformation (this was used to describe how the experience “created something new through a movement or a merging”).

M. R. Parks and K. Floyd distinguished between closeness and intimacy by asking participants to give meanings for each. The rationale behind this inquiry was that the two terms are often used interchangeably, but the authors speculated that individuals may actually hold different meanings for each. Results indicated that participants frequently mentioned that some relationships could be close, but still not intimate. Respondents who described their friendships as intimate were more likely than those who said their friendships were close, but not intimate, to make references to four qualities when describing closeness: (a) Mutual Acceptance (being mutually accepting, non-judgmental, and feeling no need to impress the other); (b) Relational Expression (references to the explicit verbal or non-verbal expression of closeness or the value of the relationship); (c) Length of relationship (references to relational duration); and (d) Global affect (references to closeness as a generalized affective states, such as warmth, caring, liking or loving). Overall, findings suggested that closeness and intimacy are perceived as two independent features of a friendship. Closeness is usually a significant component of an intimate relationship; however, a close relationship can exist without intimacy.
The investigations to develop a conceptualization of emotional intimacy have utilized a variety of methodology. Theoretical models have led to the creation of assessment tools to measure levels of intimacy within relationships and researchers have also begun to explore what laypersons consider to be the essence of intimacy. Much work remains, however, before a thorough understanding of emotional intimacy is reached. For instance, of the instruments described above, few actually assess intimacy within different types of personal relationships. That is, most of the measures have been developed to assess intimacy within romantic relationships (e.g., The PAIR, The Intimacy Status Interview, the WIQ). Although some scales purport to assess intimacy within friendships, family relationships, etc., few have actually been used with these types of samples. An exception is the PIQ, which has actually been used to examine emotional intimacy with friends, acquaintances, and family members. Other scales were developed exclusively with the use of samples containing men (e.g., The Intimacy Status Interview). Therefore, there is a definite need for the creation of psychometrically sound instruments to assess emotional intimacy within all types of relationships if it is true that intimacy goes beyond sexual interaction.

It is also noteworthy that among those instruments that assess intimacy in relationships, including romantic intimacy, there has been a lack of attention given to different types of sexual orientation. In fact, some of the instruments actually were created to assess intimacy with heterosexual couples only. Though this in itself does not compromise a relationship-specific understanding of intimacy, the lack of instruments available to be used in gay and lesbian populations limits research. Researchers must take these two considerations seriously since they each restrict the degree to which a comprehensive understanding of intimacy can be achieved. In order to grasp fully the role of intimacy in interpersonal relationships, methods to assess intimacy at all levels of closeness and sexual orientation must be developed.

Another limitation regarding instruments used to assess intimacy is that existing measures have primarily used data collected by self-report from one individual, rather than assessing levels of intimacy between partners in a relationship. One known exception is the PAIR, which allows the assessment of both partners’ perceptions of the relationship, and yields scores reflecting individuals’ expected versus realized intimacy. If an important aim of a social psychological approach is to understand intimacy as it functions within relationships, then the methods used might usefully focus more on the relationship, rather than individual perceptions only. This criticism of instruments to assess intimacy as primarily focused on the individual can also be found in review by Acitelli & Duck. These authors contend that observational methods may offer insight into the manner in which emotional intimacy works within a relationship. It is suggested that future research focus on the development of such behavioral methods, and attempt to create a complete picture of emotional intimacy as an essential part of adult relationships of all kinds.

For all that, there is general agreement regarding what participants and theorists believe to be the specific components of intimacy. After a review of the literature, it seems sensible to say that emotional intimacy most commonly is described as consisting of at least some degree of the following qualities: (a) Self-disclosure (a sharing of personal information), (b) Emotional Expression (telling one another about the concern, worry or affection felt); (c) Support (experiencing physical and emotional support, especially during times of crisis); (d) Trust (feeling confident that the other person will not expose personal information); (e) Physical Intimacy or Touch (e.g., hugs, kisses, hand-holding, etc.). Feeling “touched” emotionally may also be included here. This does not always involve
sexual contact, but can; (f) Mutuality (the experience of intimacy seems to be described as a shared experience resulting from an interaction between two people). This often involves the removal of emotional and physical boundaries; and (g) Closeness (this term is often used by individuals in describing intimacy, yet is not the determining factor of whether a relationship is intimate or not). However, it seems that people consider closeness to be a definite antecedent of intimacy. Of course, it has not been found that all of these dimensions are simultaneously necessary for an intimacy to be experienced within a relationship, yet, they are recurring themes found in empirical work regarding the definition of emotional intimacy with friends and lovers alike.

**Gender Differences in Reports of Intimate Expression**

As has been mentioned, the role of gender in the expression of intimacy has been quite elusive. It has been suggested that a focus on gender as a variable in the intimacy puzzle may be unproductive and unnecessary since results are often interpreted out of context. However, it is difficult to ignore the frequency with which gender is found to be associated with the expression of intimacy. Some professionals argue that we must examine the effects of gender to understand the fundamentals of interpersonal relationships. It is also suggested that studying the impact of gender in interpersonal relationships has critical implications for professionals in clinical and counseling psychology.

Findings from a number of studies have indicated that women have reported a greater degree of intimacy within their interpersonal relationships than men. This difference is especially noticeable in the study of same-sex friendship. Studies have consistently indicated that women show a deeper level of intimacy experienced with same-sex friends when compared to their male counterparts. In these studies, women have also given more positive ratings to their same-sex friends than men on qualities associated with relationship dedication, disclosure, and support. Other related studies have found that women may actually engage in different patterns of behavior than do men within same-sex friendship. In fact, it has been claimed that the relationships of men, in general, are characterized by a lack of intimacy when compared to those of women. Since the identification of this distinction is based on gender, researchers have attempted to understand the role of gender in relationships, particularly in same-sex friendship. Findings such as these have often led to the characterization of women’s friendships as “face to face” and men’s friendships as “side by side.”

**A Brief History of Gender and Intimacy**

Before a discussion of the current research regarding gender and relationships, it is useful to understand the societal context of gender, intimacy, and close relationships throughout history. It should be noted that the idea that men are incapable of intimate expression, or choose not to be intimate, is a relatively new development. Until the late 1800’s, romantic, same-sex relationships of both men and women were common. In fact, same-sex friendships until this time were believed to be completely platonic, allowing men and women alike to freely express feelings of romantic love and attraction. The social climate of the nineteenth century middle-class of Victorian society was especially conducive to intimate relationships between individuals of the same sex. Contrary to contemporary stereotypes, friendships between men were considered especially close, and were thought
to be superior to friendships between women. This belief was prominent because the reproductive capacity of a woman was thought to make her a particularly sexual and desirous creature. Since the Christian teachings of the time emphasized the way in which sex interferes with a person’s spiritual calling, and men’s friendships were thought to be devoid of this, their relationships were believed to be somehow holier or more sacred than those between women.

It was not until the late nineteenth century that writers made a distinction between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Slowly, same-sex relationships began to be seen as less acceptable. This delineation soon led to the view of some intimate same-sex relationships as immoral. It is suggested that there is an association between the perception of same-sex friendships as unholy, and the increased inhibition of the expression of intimacy by men. It was not long after this that psychological research began to identify gender differences in intimate expression.

**Contemporary Findings**

Recent research has begun to identify gender differences regarding intimacy in personal relationships. Studies indicate that (a) women tend to talk more often about intimate topics (e.g., personal and family matters) than do men; (b) the daily interactions of men are significantly less intimate than those of the women; (c) women are more likely to be placed into the category of high-intimacy than men; (d) women report participating in more intimate activities with their same-sex friends than men; (e) women are perceived to be more disclosing than men by both female and male participants; (f) women yield higher intimacy scores on self-disclosure than men; (g) women score higher on dimensions related to intimacy and emotional expressiveness than men; (h) women yield higher scores on scales associated with intimacy and women report more intimacy than men.

**Gender Differences?**

Not all studies have reported gender differences in regard to intimacy. For example, in a meta-analysis conducted on gender differences in intimacy within romantic relationships, A. R. Linquist found that although women scored higher on measures of intimacy than men, the difference was insignificant. This finding suggested that gender differences in romantic relationships may be less noticeable when the results from different studies are compiled and analyzed. A lack of gender differences has also been found when comparing male and female college students’ understandings of emotional intimacy. P. G. Orosan and K. M. Schilling found that no significant differences existed between what men and women understood as intimacy.

Along these lines, Paul Wright has suggested that researchers be cautious in the interpretation of gender differences in relationships. Among several reasons, he noted that statistical significance can be misleading and that using gender as a subject variable can confound interpretations. For instance, the extent of within-gender variation is sometimes overlooked when research has gender as a primary focus. Furthermore, other variables (e.g., gender role orientation, intimacy motivation) have been found to outweigh gender differences regarding intimacy in relationships.

Although the role of gender in the experience and expression of intimacy may be unclear, the frequency with which research has indicated gender differences cannot be
ignored. A consistent pattern of gender differences has been indicated in the literature and has led to the following conclusions: (a) Women frequently have yielded higher scores than men on measures of intimacy or on variables related to intimate emotional expression (e.g. self-disclosure); (b) Women have indicated that they participate in what are considered to be "feminine" modes of intimacy (e.g., talking, physical touch), whereas men more often have reported engaging in activities together as intimacy; (c) Few significant gender differences in the ways in which men and women define intimacy can be found and (d) Caution should be used in the interpretation of gender differences since within-gender variations or other variables (e.g., gender role orientation) may help explain noticeable gender differences. It is suggested that women and men agree on what intimacy is, yet it is in their expression of intimacy, in their reports of intimacy, that they may differ. Furthermore, in any investigation of gender, the role of related variables should also be examined.

**Possible Explanations for Gender Differences in Intimacy**

The most common explanations of gender differences regarding intimacy can be classified into four categories: (a) Evolutionary and Biological, (b) Role Theories, (c) Gender Differences in Meanings of Intimacy and (d) Social Psychological Theories.

**Evolutionary and Biological Theories.** One explanation of gender differences in intimacy relies heavily on biology and evolutionary psychology. That is, since women are biologically prepared for childbearing and breast-feeding, they must also be innately predisposed to intimate interactions. Men, on the other hand, will achieve the most successful proliferation of their genes if they have as many female partners as possible. Consequently, men may limit intimacy with sex partners as well as same-sex friends, in order to move on to the next conquest.  

**Role Theory.** Another popular alternative holds that socially constructed roles prescribe behaviors appropriate for each gender. Traditionally, women have assumed feminine roles concerning nurturance and primary care giving, while men have held masculine roles portraying them as agents of action with less of a focus on people's needs. Women are primed for intimacy, whereas men are not, according to this perspective. Modern theories of gender roles have their origin in A. Constantinople's conception of sex-role orientation representing two separate continua, masculinity and femininity. Previous conceptualizations of sex-role orientation had viewed femininity and masculinity as polar opposites on a single dimension. Based on Constantinople's work, Sandra Bem developed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) to assess the degree to which individuals endorsed what are thought to be masculine and feminine characteristics. Bem's assessment results in four possible categories for individuals: (a) Feminine (the high endorsement of feminine qualities and the low endorsement of masculine qualities); (b) Masculine (the high endorsement of masculine qualities and the low endorsement of feminine qualities); (c) Androgynous (the high endorsement of both feminine and masculine qualities); and (d) Undifferentiated (the low endorsement of both feminine and masculine qualities). Feminine females and masculine males are often classified as sex-typed since they have highly endorsed characteristics that are thought to be typical of their gender. Gender Role theories recognize how individuals internalize characteristics of what behaviors are deemed socially appropriate for each gender. For example, children learn of expectations others have of them because of their biological sex at an early age. Boys are encouraged
in more rough and tumble play than are girls, who are treated in a more gentle manner by parents.\textsuperscript{72}

**Gender Differences in Perceived Meanings of Intimacy.** Wood has proposed another explanation for this gender difference—women and men actually define intimacy in different ways.\textsuperscript{73} Several studies, however, have discovered that few differences exist in what men and women believed emotional intimacy to be. As described earlier, M. Monsour found that students reported seven most common meanings. Though male participants were more likely to mention sexual contact with cross-sex friends than were their female counterparts (16 percent vs. 8 percent), a finding similar to his previous research, only weak gender differences surfaced.\textsuperscript{74} Furthermore, when asked to write about a time when they experienced intimacy, both men and women were likely to include an experience with a romantic partner. Only slight gender differences were found and these occurred with men being more likely than women to include persons outside their close circle in their intimate experiences. Women also used a greater number of words to describe their experiences than did men.\textsuperscript{75} Nevertheless, both studies suggested that men and women may be similar in what they believe to be the meaning of intimacy and that both genders may agree on which qualities create an intimate experience.

**Towards a Social Psychological Model for Explaining Gender Differences in Intimate Expression.** If research has demonstrated that men and women generally define intimacy in a similar manner, then Wood’s idea\textsuperscript{76} may lead to an additional possibility. Women and men may be socialized to believe that there are appropriate modes of expression for intimacy that are gender-specific. In fact, men may risk social rejection when they express or report a great degree of what are considered traditionally “feminine” characteristics such as strong emotions and intimacy. Men also may be homophobic and fearful of appearing vulnerable or weak, as Williams has suggested.\textsuperscript{77} Evidence for this has been found in studies assessing self-disclosure in conversations in which men were found likely to share victories and achievements, rather than failures and fears. Women, however, were found to be comfortable disclosing worries and information that may have made them appear vulnerable.\textsuperscript{78} Research has also indicated that men disclose less on “feminine” topics emphasizing personal concerns, whereas women disclose less on topics related to assertiveness.\textsuperscript{79} Evolutionary psychologists would also agree that courting rituals in which males compete for fertile females is consistent with men’s desire to avoid any display of vulnerability.\textsuperscript{80}

Of course, the examination of social expectations as an influence in the expression of emotion is not a novel idea. A. T. Beck and J. E. Young found that college students reported feeling more sympathetic towards women than men whom they believed to be suffering from depression.\textsuperscript{81} It has also been demonstrated that participants are more likely to reject depressed men than women.\textsuperscript{82} This possibility of social rejection could contribute to the finding that men are less likely to seek professional help for mental distress than are women. \textsuperscript{83}

Studies of loneliness have also found evidence that men may be inhibited in the expression of intimate feelings, since it may not be socially acceptable. It is also suggested that men may even fail to report the experience of intimacy to researchers because of the fear of social rejection. Borys & Perlman used the meta-analysis methodology to examine following confusion about gender differences in loneliness: Results indicated that when asked directly, such as “Are you a lonely person,” women scored significantly higher on loneliness than did men.\textsuperscript{84} However, on less obvious assessments such as the UCLA loneliness scale\textsuperscript{85}, where items focus on the quality of relationships rather than labeling one-
self lonely, gender differences were rarely found. When differences were significant on these measures, it was men who yielded higher scores on loneliness than women. To address the contradiction, Borys & Perlman hypothesized that it was social expectations that may have kept the men from overtly reporting feelings of loneliness, similar to research concerning depression. It may not be socially acceptable for men to express feelings of loneliness. Based on the prototype of the lonely person, Borys & Perlman created two profiles, both identical except for the name of the lonely person. In one profile, the name was female, in the other, it was male. To assess the degree to which participants regarded each lonely person as acceptable or unacceptable, they were to respond to eight questions concerning the acceptability of the target following each profile. Items included questions such as “How well do you think X would function as... a close friend, as a co-worker, as a romantic partner,” etc. As was expected, they found that both men and women were more accepting of the lonely female target than the lonely male target. Borys & Perlman concluded that, indeed, participants viewed lonely men more negatively than they did lonely women. If men are likely to be socially rejected when they express loneliness, then they may hesitate in openly labeling themselves lonely. Less obvious measures of loneliness, however, do not require participants to label themselves lonely. This, they thought, was a possible reason for the contradictory research findings in the loneliness literature. 

S. Lau & G. E. Gruen conducted a study to examine the reactions of lonely people toward other lonely individuals. Significant differences were found for gender of target, with lonely men being judged as less sociable than non-lonely male targets, whereas participants’ judgments of the differential sociability of lonely and non-lonely women although significant, was less extreme. Social acceptability ratings were assessed by an instrument revised from an Attribute Measure first developed by Monge that examines a broader array of attributes than the eight questions used by Borys & Perlman. Participants rated a target on four scales measuring (a) perceived adjustment, (b) sociability/congeniality, (c) achievement/competence, and (d) interpersonal attraction. 

The findings of Borys & Perlman and Lau & Gruen suggest that men, when compared to women, may feel more social pressure to be strong and appear invulnerable rather than actually being less lonely, or having a lower emotional capacity for loneliness. It is proposed that, in a similar manner, men may fail to express or report a great degree of intimacy because they fear social rejection, rather than lacking a capacity for intimacy. 

Overall, these findings may afford insights into the perceived social acceptability of the expressive characteristics in men and women. Borrowing from this paradigm, it is proposed that social forces similar to those found to influence the reports and expression of loneliness, depression and other traits that represent vulnerability, may also play a part in the expression of traditionally feminine qualities, such as intimacy. Social expectations for intimacy may be dependent upon the gender composition of dyadic interactions as well. Future research regarding gender differences should examine the role that social expectations may have in the expression of intimacy.

**Summary and Conclusions**

Over the past 20 years, much progress has been made in the understanding of emotional intimacy, with a great deal of contemporary research centered on identifying laypersons’ meanings for intimacy. Largely through the use of open-ended questionnaires and
narrative format, a variety of studies have identified common themes most often mentioned by participants when describing intimacy. If fact, it has been discovered that the participants hold very similar definitions of intimacy. The convergence of the empirical research in this area makes a unique contribution to the understanding of intimacy as a whole. Based on a review of this literature, emotional intimacy may be described as consisting of seven components, both nonverbal and verbal: (a) Self-disclosure, (b) Emotional Expression, (c) Support, (d) Trust, (e) Physical intimacy or Touch (e.g., hugs, kisses, hand-holding, etc. Feeling “touched” emotionally may also be included here), (f) Mutuality, and (g) Closeness.

There is frequently confusion about whether or not gender differences exist in the expression of intimacy. Though there are studies that report finding no differences in this area, a large number have indicated that women tend to experience a greater degree of intimacy in their relationships than do men. This is especially true in the context of same-sex friendship. This gender difference has remained relatively consistent, and has led researchers to study its origin. Some critical research questions have been raised in an attempt to find the root of these gender differences. First, studies have investigated ways in which men and women have defined and conceptualized the intimate experience within adult relationships. Although it has been suggested that men and women may define intimacy differently, empirical findings have indicated that, for the most part, women and men report similar meanings of emotional intimacy and also qualities of the intimate experience. It has been suggested that if this is the case, then the gender difference must lie in the behaviors of intimacy. It is possible that there are gender-specific behaviors in the expression of intimacy. That is, women and men may have the same idea of what intimacy is, but find different modes of expression appropriate. This idea has led to the social psychological model that was suggested here earlier by which to study gender differences in intimacy. It was proposed that it is social expectations that may account for gender differences in the intimate expression. Perhaps men are inhibited by social norms to engage in what has been traditionally been a feminine domain. If men do express intimacy, they could risk social rejection.

Furthermore, a social psychological approach to the study of intimacy primarily aims to view intimacy as more than a state or an individual perception, but also as a product of the existing relationship. Assessment techniques, however, have been largely based on self-report, neglecting the dynamics of the relationship. This transactional view, behavioral observations, and other techniques are recommended to understand more fully the complexities of intimacy as it functions within a relationship. Understanding the development and evolution of intimacy within a relationship may allow insights into the relational interactions that take place not only to establish intimacy, but also as a result of existing intimacy.90 It is believed that the identification of social rules and expectations for the expression of intimacy would be a critical part of the way in which intimacy is created and maintained in a relationship.

Theoretical conceptualizations of intimacy have led to several instruments for its assessment. However, these conceptualizations and assessment techniques have largely emphasized intimacy within romantic relationships, often neglecting intimacy experienced with friends, family members and others. Research in this area is also limited by the focus on heterosexual couples' experience of intimacy. Still, recent research has successfully identified the components of intimacy that seem to be common to most individuals. Further research should target all types of intimate relations, paying special attention to
historically neglected populations. It is also recommended that the suggested model be used to determine the extent that social expectations for gender are associated with intimate expression. Such research may add to existing paradigms that are used to examine intimate interactions in all types of relationships, so that behaviors that typify emotional intimacy as the product of a relationship can be identified. Despite its limitations, research in the area of emotional intimacy has come several steps closer to seeing the proverbial elephant, by using a variety of perspectives. As a result, researchers are closer to understanding the vital role that intimacy may play in adult relationships of all kinds.

ENDNOTES

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48 Schaefer, “Assessing Intimacy.”
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