



Editorial: Introduction to the Special Issue “Well-being in Romantic Relationships”

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Positive psychology research has made significant contributions to understanding human well-being, flourishing, and positive emotions and this has had important implications for practice. However, one might argue that research on romantic relationships is still under-represented in the field of positive psychology and should be seen as an important supplement to research focusing on individual well-being and related areas (e.g., morally positively valued traits or positive emotions). Considering the profound impact that romantic relationships have on individuals' well-being, happiness, or life satisfaction, it is crucial to address this under-representation and have a stronger focus on what makes happy couples (i.e., what are mechanisms that promote or hinder well-being in relationships). This is also in line with what Christopher Peterson once proposed as a brief summary of what positive psychology is: “Other people matter.”

People desire to belong and typically strive to build and maintain relationships, particularly with a romantic partner (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Accordingly, the Positive Psychology movement also highlighted the importance of social relationships. For example, when Seligman (2011) introduced positive relationships as one of five pillars in the PERMA model (R is for relationships) of flourishing and well-being or when including strengths such as love or social intelligence in the VIA-classification of strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Relatedly, Seligman (2011) argues that living in accordance to one's signature strengths, “leads to more positive emotions, to more meaning, to more accomplishment, and to better relationships” (p. 24). Early studies called for the consideration of positive psychological approaches to romantic relationships; for example, Gable and Haidt (2005) noted that much is known about how partners deal with negative events and behav-

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iors, but less is known “about how couples respond to each other’s triumphs [...] and examining them having fun and laughing together” (p. 104; see also Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Since then, there has been growing interest in the study of positively valued traits and constructs in the domain of romantic life (e.g., Boiman-Meshita & Littman-Ovadia, 2022; Körner et al., 2022; Purol & Chopik, 2023; Weber & Ruch, 2012) including studies investigating how partners laugh together (e.g., Brauer & Proyer, 2018; Kurtz & Algoe, 2015). Theoretical accounts and empirical findings show that relationships *can* be a source of positive emotions and well-being, and are an integral part of what makes people *very happy* (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Moreover, the introduction of dyadic data analyses revealed that both partners of a couple can contribute to outcomes such as life- and relationship satisfaction (see Weidmann et al., 2016, for an overview), supporting the idea that couples are more than a mere sum of its parts, an interactive unit to which each partner contributes.

However, studies of what makes relationships flourish seem under-represented in journals that are considered the main outlets for positive psychology research. To illustrate this point, we have scanned the past five years of publications for the *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, and *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* and counted how many studies were published on (a) well-being in relationships and (b) used dyadic data (see Table 1).

Only 3.7% of the studies published in those four major outlets dealt with romantic relationships in the past five years—notably, with no studies being published on well-being in relationships or using dyadic data in the *International Journal of Applied*

Table 1 Frequencies of Publications in Total, Regarding Well-Being in Relationships (WBRs), and Publications Based on Dyadic Data in Four Main Outlets for Positive Psychology Research of the Past Five Years as of May 2023

	IJAPP	JoHS	JoPP	APHWB	Total
2023 (PP)	8	71	59	43	181
WBRs	0	5	2	0	7
Dyadic Data	0	2	2	0	4
2022 (PP)	19*	183	75	78	355
WBRs	0	9	3	1	11
Dyadic Data	0	5	4	2	11
2021 (PP)	15	163	72	51	301
WBRs	0	9	3	3	15
Dyadic Data	0	4	2	4	10
2020 (PP)	12	143	85	59	299
WBRs	0	7	2	1	10
Dyadic Data	0	4	2	1	7
2019 (PP)	4	136	76	30	246
WBRs	0	3	4	1	8
Dyadic Data	0	1	3	2	6
Total (PP)	58	696	367	261	1,382
WBRs	0	33	14	6	51
Dyadic Data	0	16	13	9	38

Note. PP=number of papers published. IJAPP=*International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*; JoH=*Journal of Happiness Studies*; JoPP=*The Journal of Positive Psychology*, and APHWB=*Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*. *We excluded the study by Herzberg et al. (2022) from this special issue from our count. Further, we excluded editorials and corrigenda from the count.

Positive Psychology. This is surprising, given the importance of relationships in our daily lives and put forward in eminent theories in the domain of positive psychology. Of course, there are specialized journals on social relationships, but we do hope that this collection of articles will stimulate further research in the area of positive psychology. Positive institutions such as couples can contribute to the understanding of human flourishing and its antecedents.

At the same time, dyadic data are under-represented: Table 1 shows that only 2.7% of the studies published since 2019 in four major outlets of positive psychology utilized couple data. Analyzing dyadic data helps capture the experiences of and interactions between both partners in a romantic relationship (see Kenny et al., 2006). More importantly, the reliance on individual-level data (mainly using self-reports) restricts our understanding of how partners mutually influence each other and jointly contribute to their well-being—or whether traits exist that may also have hindering effects on a partners' well-being. Of course, this has already been acknowledged in the field by, for example, studying dyadic coping strategies (Bodenmann, 2005) and highlighting that a couple should not only be seen as two independently functioning units, but as a dyad with reciprocal influences (see also Herzberg, 2013). Of course, this has consequences; most importantly, if we are interested in dyads, we ideally also must use dyadic data. They provide a more comprehensive picture about a couple (and its interactions) and allow for examining, for example, relationship dynamics, communication patterns, synchronicity, or the impact of shared experiences. Using advanced dyadic data analysis methods, such as Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIM) or one of its variants (e.g., extensions to mediation models; Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model, APIMeM), allows for a more nuanced understanding of the factors that promote positive psychological functioning and flourishing within romantic relationships. Their use has the potential to advance the field of positive psychology because recommendations derived from such analyses can have an even stronger impact on recommendations for practice than data derived from individuals only. Finally, such data can also be used to test whether predictions or implications would strongly differ from individual-level studies only. This echoes already earlier calls for more rigorous study designs and studies going beyond self-report data in relationship research in positive psychology (Lambert et al., 2011).

1 Overview of the Special Issue

We are glad to introduce this special issue devoted to extending the knowledge on romantic relationships and well-being, with seven interesting and important contributions on diverse aspects of romantic relationships. We are delighted to see that the articles in this issue use a variety of methods, from positive psychological interventions (PPIs) to analyses of individuals within family systems to full dyadic analyses with the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006) and its variations using data from cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental study designs.

Wang and colleagues (2022) provide findings from a savoring-based randomized control intervention study. Using a single-session intervention, Wang et al. showed

that engaging in savoring positive emotional experiences related to reduced relationship distress in the experimental group. Additional mediation analyses suggest that savoring increases positive affect and optimism, and thereby reduces relationship distress. Wang et al.'s findings support the notion that trainings and interventions aiming at improving positive psychological functioning can positively affect how people experience their relationships. It encourages future research on PPIs in the field of romantic relationships. The study also aligns with research into activities such as the “Best Self for Relationships” intervention (i.e., imagining one’s future life with a particular focus on relationships with thinking about the best possible romantic life one can imagine), which could be beneficial in increasing optimism and alleviating feelings of hopelessness (e.g., Huffman, 2014). Also, this aligns with findings from programs targeting happiness in couples (e.g., Hilpert et al., 2016). We believe that Wang et al.'s findings will prove to be of practical benefit, for example, in counseling settings.

Siegel and colleagues’ (2022) examined positive sexual minority identities in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. Their findings show that especially the facet of intimacy (e.g., feeling a sense of sexual freedom via engagement with the LGBT community; Riggle et al., 2008) relates to relationship quality above and beyond sociodemographic variables (country, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, relationship length) and psychosocial distress. Their study gives us a greater understanding of relationships and the positive experiences of identifying with a minority group; it is hoped that it will inspire further research on underrepresented groups in positive psychology and the study of social relationships.

Schirl and colleagues (2022) investigated the role of dyadic coping in the association between parenting stress and relationship quality among parents of children with or without attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Their findings show that dyadic coping robustly relates to parenting stress and relationship quality. Group comparisons reveal that negative dyadic coping is particularly relevant in parents with children diagnosed with ADHD. The authors suggest avenues for interventions that aim to reduce negative coping strategies in couples and improve the quality of their relationships.

Bulling and colleagues (2023) used an experimental approach to examine the role of dyadic coping during interactions of 187 opposite-sex couples. They induced stress in either the woman, man, or both partners of the couples and examined the externally observed and subjectively perceived coping of partners. Their study expands the understanding of dyadic coping as a resource in romantic relationships by using an innovative approach to assessing stress by means of vocal arousal, examining the roles of *who* is stressed, and how such patterns relate to partners’ satisfaction.

Herzberg and colleagues (2022) examined the associations between relationship orientation, relationship quality, and sexual satisfaction in 395 couples. Their findings showed that short-term relationship orientation related to lower relationship quality and more complaints about one’s partner, whereas being inclined to long-term orientations showed the opposite pattern of findings. Moreover, APIM mediation analyses revealed fine-grained effects such as an indirect effect of sexual satisfaction on the association between short-term orientation and relationship quality. Their findings help us to understand how inclinations to leading short-term vs. long-term-oriented

relationships relate to actors' and partners' well-being and the role of sexual satisfaction as a mitigating factor for the relation between short-term orientation and experiences of relationship satisfaction.

Rosta-Filep and colleagues (2023) studied goal coordination and goal progress as indicators of partners' flourishing in 148 couples across two measurement waves with a time-lag of one year. A dyadic approach *and* a longitudinal design with a comparatively long delay between measurements allowed Rosta-Filep et al. to assess long-term progress within couples' perceptions of their progress with achieving their individual goals. There were differential relationships between partners' project coordination and actual attainment one year later and their indirect effects on actors' and partners' life satisfaction. Again, we hope that the authors' innovative approach toward tracking how partners pursue their goals will lead to fruitful follow-up studies on the role of prospective thinking in partner experiences of relationships.

Brauer and colleagues (2021) analyzed the associations between four facets of playfulness along with partner similarity in single facets and their profiles with relationship satisfaction in 116 middle- and older age couples. Our study aimed at testing whether findings from younger couples (Proyer et al., 2019) would replicate in older age couples. Our findings highlighted that playfulness is associated with satisfaction even at older ages, with most findings replicating well across age groups. Moreover, the degree of partner similarity is even higher than in younger couples, but, as in younger couples, similarity is unrelated to partners' satisfaction when controlling for actor- and partner effects. The findings show that individual differences in playfulness appear to play a role for relationships across the life span. Given current trends in life expectancy, this seems to be an interesting field of application, and potentially one way to add more life to years rather than years to life.

The studies in this special issue cover different aspects of romantic relationships and point to possible areas for further research in positive psychology. We thank the *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology* for providing an outlet for their publication, and we extend our thanks to the external expert reviewers who provided thoughtful feedback on the submissions. We are convinced that the articles in this special issue contribute to highlight the role of antecedents, correlates, and consequences of positive psychological functioning in romantic relationships and hope that this stimulates further research, particularly utilizing dyadic study designs.

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