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# Dyadic closeness in marriage: From the inside story to a conceptual model

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──────── ABSTRACT ────────

Despite considerable attention devoted to theory and research on close relationships, the construct of dyadic closeness has remained vague. This article attempts to clarify the concept of closeness in couple relationships and presents a conceptual model of "dyadic closeness." Qualitative analysis of detailed interviews indicates that dyadic closeness is perceived as a whole, indivisible, and rewarding experience. It may be conceptualized by three major distinctions: A relatively stable relationship *trait* versus a fluctuating situational *state*; emotional versus physical closeness; and the constructed meanings of closeness versus its expressions.

KEY WORDS: closeness • conceptual map • marital relations • qualitative research

I had a busy day with meetings one after the other all day long, I knew I would come home late in the evening. I had a small break between meetings in the middle of the day so I rushed home, gave her a big hug, a kiss, and I brought her a flower ... For me this is closeness. (Michael, 43, married for 13 years)

Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to defining what is meant by a "close" relationship and how to measure it (Aron & Fraley, 1999; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Birtchnell, 1993; Kelley et al., 1983; Parks & Floyd, 1996), but the concept and the nature of dyadic closeness remain ambiguous. Scholars have used the term closeness in two different ways: As a relationship *type* (e.g., dating, marriage) and as a

relationship *quality*. Certain types of relationships, such as friendship or marriage, are labeled "close relationships" but there is considerable variation in the degree of closeness within these relationship types. The term "close relationship" is applied most commonly to intimate relationships in which people's lives are closely intertwined in terms of their behavior, thoughts, and feelings toward one another (Harvey & Weber, 2002; Kelley et al., 1983). However, close relationships (as a category) may vary in the degree of closeness (as a characteristic) between partners. Moreover, "closeness," as an attribute of close relationships, describes, characterizes, and portrays the relationship. The two meanings, close relationship (i.e., relationship type) and relationship closeness (i.e., attribute of the relationship), are often used interchangeably.

What, then, is *closeness* in a relationship? As commonly used in language, the term *closeness* denotes physical characteristics (i.e., spatial proximity) and emotional characteristics (i.e., the feeling of being intimate and belonging together, as in a close or warm friendship). The literature presents different, and at times contrasting, perspectives on the conceptualization of interpersonal closeness. These differences are evident in the variations in the term itself, such as emotional closeness (Mills, Wakeman, & Fea, 2001) or psychological closeness (Kreilkamp, 1984), and in its substantial overlap with other constructs, such as intimacy, love, empathy, and security (Harvey, 1995; Parks & Floyd, 1996). Some researchers mention closeness as an important ingredient of relationships without further discussion of its meaning (Kovacs, 1988; Rokach, 1998). Others have noted that closeness is whatever people call closeness, and they measure it by asking people to rate the degree of closeness they feel within a specific relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 1988) or to position themselves in relation to other individuals within a circular "closeness" space (Popovic, Milne, & Barrett, 2003).

Several scholars have attempted to clarify the concept of closeness in interpersonal relationships. Clark and Mills (1993) and Mills, Clark, Ford, and Johnson (2004) refer to the degree of responsibility toward communal partners as a defining attribute of closeness. Birtchnell (1993) defines closeness as a state of relatedness and distinguishes between relating (i.e., donating closeness) and being related to (i.e., receiving closeness). Berscheid et al. (1989) conceptualized closeness as a multidimensional construct consisting of the amount of time spent together (frequency), the variety of interactions engaged in together (diversity), and the perceived influence one has on the other's plans, decisions, and activities (strength). This conceptualization has been criticized for overlooking the cognitive and affective qualities associated with closeness (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Parks & Floyd, 1996). These scholars argued that although frequency, diversity, and strength provide a measure of closeness that applies to a wide range of relationships, they do not capture the underlying core meaning of the term. Aron and associates (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron et al., 1992; Aron & Fraley, 1999; Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004) suggested that interpersonal closeness can be understood as overlapping selves. Given this conceptualization, they developed a measure of dyadic closeness, the Inclusion of Other

in Self (IOS), in which interpersonal closeness is represented graphically with increasing overlapping areas between circles.

Just as scholars have developed multiple conceptual and operational definitions of closeness, they have studied it from a number of perspectives. Specifically, scholars have used both the dialectical and attachment perspectives as frameworks for understanding dyadic closeness.

## The dialectical perspective

Dialectical theory generated a great deal of work and thinking on dyadic closeness. The dialectical theory of interpersonal relationships states that partners are constantly adjusting to the presence of two opposing forces: Autonomy and connection (Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter & Simon, 1993; Feeney, 1999; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998; Rawlins, 1989, 1992). Baxter (1988) has argued that the autonomy–connection dialectic is the primary exigency of relating: Without connection, relationships have no identity and cannot exist but without autonomy, individuals have no identity and therefore cannot exist in a relationship. Thus, neither pole of the opposition is seen as inherently positive or negative.

Considerable research focused on distance regulation, that is, individuals' needs for closeness and distance and the strategies used to simultaneously meet these needs (Birtchnell, 1993). Distance regulation involves seeking opportunities for both separateness and closeness at the same time. Family system theory considers the emergent property of joint distance regulation to be the core dimension regulating family dynamics (Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

## Attachment theory

Partners' need for connection and autonomy, and the strategies used to regulate distance within relationships, have been linked to the attachment security of both partners (Feeney, 1999; Pistole, 1994; Weiss, 1991). Attachment styles are likely to be highly relevant to issues of dyadic closeness and distance because proximity seeking is a central feature of the attachment system (Bowlby, 1969, 1988). In particular, individuals who are highly anxious about their relationships typically seek extreme closeness to, and become over-dependent on, partners (Feeney & Noller, 1996). In her theoretical analysis of distance regulation in couples, Pistole (1994) noted that proximity seeking is constantly changing. In any given relationship, issues concerning closeness and distance reflect not only the general activation of the attachment system, but also the nature of individual differences in responses to attachment-related events.

The need for closeness and distance may change over time. The nature of the need for autonomy and connection changes constantly, and the process of managing these needs is ongoing. The intensity of experienced tensions, however, varies over developmental stages of the relationship, with tensions between autonomy and connection more intense during maintenance phases (Baxter, 1990). In a study of dating relationships, Feeney (1999) found that issues of closeness and distance, the amount of time spent together vs. apart, and involvement in individual vs. joint activities were

salient to young couples and changed over time during the course of the relationship.

Research has generally found that women want more closeness in their intimate relationships than do men (Christensen & Heavey, 1990), likely reflecting patterns of gender role socialization. Women are socialized to be affiliative and nurture relationships; men are socialized to be independent and self-reliant (Surra & Longstreth, 1990). Gender differences may also surface in the *meanings* attached to closeness. Men may regard practical care-giving acts as creating closeness, whereas women may equate closeness with emotional expressiveness (Feeney, 1999).

Research has focused on both variation of dyadic closeness and the consequences of closeness for personal and relational wellbeing. Closeness covaries with the partners' psychological wellbeing and marital satisfaction (Cramer & Donachie, 1999; Kendig, Coles, Pittelow, & Wilson, 1988; Merves-Okin, Amidon, & Bernt, 1991; Tower, Kasl, & Moritz, 1997), with cognitive indexes of including the other in the self (Aron & Fraley, 1999), and with gender and attachment styles (Feeney, 1999). Major life events, such as severe illness or death of a child, also affect the parents' dyadic closeness, although it increases in some couples and decreases in others (Dijkstra & Stroebe, 1998; Lavee & Mei-Dan, 2003).

Despite the extensive literature on dyadic closeness, there is no agreement among scholars as to what "closeness" means within the context of marital relationships. As recommended by previous research (e.g., Berscheid et al., 1989; Parks & Floyd, 1996), the present study explores the constructed meanings of dyadic closeness from the standpoint of couples' daily living and attempts to develop a conceptual model of this construct.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited from a representative sample of 303 couples from a project on couples' emotional transmission (see Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2004). From this larger sample, 22 Jewish Israeli married couples were invited to participate in indepth interviews concerning their daily experiences. A theoretical sampling procedure was employed in selecting couples for interviews (Creswell, 1998): Couples were selected so that they represent a wide range of life experiences, age, marital duration, educational level, level of religiosity, and marital satisfaction.

Couples were married for an average of 17.78 years ($SD = 8.94$) and had between one and four children ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 0.88$). The average age was 45.74 ($SD = 7.41$) for men and 41.8 ($SD = 8.58$) for women. Average schooling was 14.7 years ($SD = 3.54$) for men and 14.2 years ($SD = 2.44$) for women.

### Procedure and data analysis

Trained researchers conducted the interviews in Hebrew with both the husband and wife present. The couples gave written informed consent. The

interviews took place in the couples' residences at their convenience to ensure that data would be collected without interference. To extract meaningful descriptions of the couples' daily experiences and develop a conceptual framework, the interview protocol included various topics related to daily experiences in the lives of ordinary couples (Creswell, 1998). All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The present analysis focuses only on issues pertaining to dyadic closeness (particularly on couples' experiences, expressions, and constructed meanings of closeness), and on how they relate to their overall subjective perception of the marital relationship.

We first identified interview transcripts that contained the richest descriptions of closeness or distance. We then read these successively until we reached a level of thematic saturation (Creswell, 1998), that is, until additional interviews added no new information to the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation. As a result, the analysis is based on data from 10 couples (20 interviewees) who provided the richest relevant materials directly related to dyadic closeness and distance. All quotations provided were translated from Hebrew, the abbreviations H and W designate husband and wife, and the numbers refer to the serial number of the interview.

We performed the analysis in three phases. In the *case analysis* phase the text was fragmented and deconstructed. Specifically two independent coders scanned the interviews for basic categories, concepts, and themes. Whenever disagreement occurred, the coders discussed differences to reach a single final judgment. In the second phase, *cross-case analysis*, the researchers created meaning clusters from the constructed categories based on the core themes. The last step in the analysis was *axial coding* of the categories and identification of the connections between them. This conceptual reordering of the themes provided the structural description of the experience. In this way, a conceptual framework was developed, describing and explaining dyadic closeness together with its constructed meanings.

To establish trustworthiness, several verification measures were performed (Creswell, 1998). First, the principal investigators performed *peer reviews*. Four independent coders, all trained in qualitative methodology, were involved in the analysis. Second, *member checks* were conducted by sharing initial findings and interpretations (e.g., relevant quotations from participant accounts to highlight the meanings and expressions of dyadic closeness) with four participant couples to obtain their views about the adequacy of the analysis.

## Findings

We used participants' expressions and meanings of closeness to develop a conceptual framework of dyadic closeness. This model provides an insider's perspective of marital relationships. It appears that relational closeness is difficult to capture. In many cases, participants began by describing a situation in which they felt emotionally close to their partners. When asked

what this experience was like, they would talk about feelings, thoughts, or expressions associated with closeness:

> Closeness is the most important thing, it is the *need to be close* to, it is *being together* and *doing things together*, it is still a special excitement, it is *a lot of fun*. It might be an extraordinary *wish for physical closeness* which is beyond the regular experience. The *emotional connection*, the *support*, the fun which comes with *spending time together* and *doing things together*, the fun associated with new ideas of *shared leisure* activities. Responding and *accommodating things that she likes* and expects to do, this is closeness. (H, 7)

This quotation demonstrates that the experience of closeness is complete and total. It is both the *meaning* of the experience and its *expression*; it refers to both *physical* and *emotional* proximity; it includes the experience of *being* close and *wishing* for closeness. Although the experience of closeness, its expression, and the various components of closeness were intermingled in most interviews, we discuss them separately for conceptual clarity. In particular, we distinguish between meanings and expressions of closeness. Indeed, in many cases it became apparent that interviewees did not knowingly differentiate between meanings of closeness and its expressions. We first present the separate manifestations. For this purpose, meanings of closeness refer to statements that convey a definitional aspect of the term, such as "for me, closeness is …;" expressions of closeness refer to statements that describe patterns of behavior when feeling close, such as "when I feel close, I …"

## Meanings of closeness

Participants' conceptions of closeness varied. The analysis found three common themes: (i) Closeness as *friendship*; (ii) closeness as *sharing*: The desire for, and the ability to share experiences, thoughts, and feelings; and (iii) closeness as *caring*.

**Closeness as friendship.** Friendship was participants' most prevalent notion about closeness. Most of the participants identified closeness with friendships when providing a definition of what closeness meant for them:

> Closeness is first of all feeling friends. We are very good friends. For me, above anything else, she is a friend. A friend for me is everything, a friend will give anything to me, will do anything for me, and vice versa. I'll do anything for her. You feel it, you feel friends. (H, 1)

Closeness as friendship was commonly associated with unconditional support, a strong belief that the spouse would always be there for them, a sense of mutual understanding, appreciation and respect, and a deep sense of trust:

> For us, friendship is that we appreciate each other and understand each other in the deepest sense. We are very open and trust each other, we strongly believe in each other. I could always trust in his ultimate support. (W, 7)

**Closeness as sharing.** The second notion of dyadic closeness has to do with sharing and talking about the spouses' thoughts and feelings. Participants alluded to their ability and tendency to engage in deep conversations and exchange ideas and experiences:

> For me, closeness is wanting to share with her so many things, things that I do, things that I am thinking about, everything that happens to me. I know I can tell her anything … I share with her 99% of my thoughts, feelings, things that happen to me. I tell her everything. There is only 1% that I keep for myself. When we are close we have deep conversations. We talk and so we can complete each other's thoughts. (H, 5)

His wife indicated that talking (i.e., sharing thoughts or feelings) was a way of showing closeness: "When I feel close, when I want to get close, I show it. That is my way, I am talking. He will get it, there is no chance he won't get it. He knows when I want to get closer" (W, 5). As this couple showed, feeling or seeking closeness facilitates individuals' ability to engage in emotional communication. Sharing thoughts, experiences, and feelings appeared both as a conception of closeness ("closeness *is* wanting to share with her") and an expression of it ("*when we are close* we have deep conversations").

**Closeness as caring.** Caring surfaced as another notion of closeness. It was manifested primarily as recognizing what the partner's needs and preferences were and providing for them. It was also a way of showing attention by doing things for the other spouse: "For me closeness is caring. I'll check several times to see that he woke up in the morning. It is worrying about him, wanting the best for him, and I am making an effort so things will work out for him" (W, 5).

Participants referred to *providing* care, but not receiving it as a reflection of caring for a spouse. The very notion of caring implies that one party actively provides care while the other receives it. Caring is an individual activity and as such it is asymmetrical. Although in a relationship both spouses may provide care to each other, simultaneous caring is not required for an individual to feel closeness to one's spouse.

### Expressions of closeness

Expressions of closeness include those behaviors in which one or both spouses convey their sense of closeness. Data analysis identified seven themes concerning the expression of closeness: Spatial proximity, physical contact, showing affection, spending time together, joint leisure activities, sharing of thoughts and feelings, and caring and pampering. The last two were mentioned as conceptions of closeness. For the most part, expressions of closeness converge into two major categories: (a) Spatial proximity and physical contact, and (b) spending time together and joint activities.

**Spatial proximity and physical contact.** Expressions of closeness by physical contact were probably the most prevalent in the participants' accounts. In their descriptions, touching, holding hands, petting, caressing, and hugging

played a major role in sending messages of closeness to the spouse: It was the way to convey to the spouse that closeness was desired.

> I need to be around her physically all the time ... A day can't go by without me touching her, without talking to her. When I drive I like to hold her hand and pat her. I feel the need to touch. When I am sleeping I cannot not have my hands on her, I have to touch her, I need to express it [closeness] by touching. I have to kiss her everyday, to feel her, to touch her. (H, 8)

Such accounts of closeness were presented mainly as expressions of affection, with only infrequent mention of sexual desire or sexual contact. In only two occasions explicit reference was made to sexuality in relation to closeness. One woman provided an account of what constitutes closeness with her husband and described their daily routine, which implicitly referred to sexual relations:

> I'll sit with him, I'll serve him something, we'll talk about everything – work, friends, our parents, we'll laugh about things that happened to us in the past. Then we'll go to bed; if we are tired we'll go to sleep, otherwise, we'll continue ... [both spouses laugh in embarrassment]. (W, 4)

Another woman disclosed that when her husband felt close to her he indulged her and gave her special attention, including sex: "There are so many ways in which I get my special treatments, not only sexually" (W, 8). Sexuality is infrequently mentioned as part of closeness, and then only in an incidental manner, presented as a secondary expression of closeness and clearly not as the most significant one.

**Joint activities and spending time together.** Another common expression of closeness involved experiences in which both spouses enjoyed the other's presence and doing things together. When interviewees talked about joint activities and spending time together they emphasized the duration of time together and the nature of their mutual activity:

> When we feel close we like doing things together, travel for example. We would get into the car and just drive ... After spending the whole day together we would look for a hotel to spend the night. I like to be around her ... to get up in the morning and have breakfast together. This is a lot of fun. And it brings us even closer together. (H, 5)

Participants interchangeably referred to *feeling* closeness (e.g., "I felt that closeness when he came back early from work, unexpectedly, and we spent the whole evening together, just the two of us") and to *wishing* for closeness (e.g., "I wanted to lie down and put my head on his knees").

### Emotional closeness and physical closeness
For many interviewees emotional and physical closeness went together (one was not conceivable without the other), but some differentiated between the two. Some interviewees distinguished between the two in a variety of contexts. In one case, feeling emotionally close did not require the physical presence of the spouse. One woman said that being emotionally close to

her husband did not mean that she needed to be around him physically: "I can feel very loving while at the same time meet with my girlfriends. There is no connection between emotional closeness and physical closeness" (W, 7). The couple trusted their relationship and each other and respected their different individual needs for togetherness and autonomy. In another case, emotional distance led the spouses to seek physical closeness: "You know, there were times when there was tension between us; it made me want to be physically close to him. We can be physically close, sleep in the same bed, even when we want to stay away from each other" (W, 10).

A third context in which the distinction between emotional closeness and physical closeness appeared was a hierarchical one. Participants valued emotional connection more than physical closeness. They said that emotional closeness took precedence, that is, emotional closeness could exist without the physical aspect but not the other way around:

> It seems strange and somehow contrary to what you might expect. But on days that I feel very close to him, for example on weekends that we do a lot of things together, I feel that it would be perfectly okay that he goes out with his friends and I have a quiet night at home or spend an evening with my girlfriends. It is the emotional closeness that I cherish significantly more than just the physical closeness . . . I will not have the same feeling if he goes out after we had an argument or a fight. (W, 1)

The combination of physical distance and emotional distance causes pain. Physical distance that does not include emotional distance, however, creates less pain: "If there is physical distance but there is communication it is not as bad as without communication. When there is no communication there is also physical distance and it hurts, and I get even more into myself" (H, 9).

## Situationally induced closeness

Certain situations and daily occurrences appeared to be connected with an increased desire for closeness. These antecedent events or situations included, among others, such personal experiences as elevated mood due to personal achievement or experience (e.g., at work, with a close friend), family occasions like birthdays or holidays, and social activities like entertaining friends at home or going to a party together. For example, Rina – a part time self-employed yoga instructor, who has had difficulties finding a regular job – described her sense of accomplishment and self-fulfillment following successful evening classes. She and her husband (# 9) described these special evenings:

> *Wife*: There are nights when I come home after class fully energized and excited. I feel so happy, so complete . . . all I want is to hug him. It is so strange . . . I don't know why, but on these nights I just want to be with him, I want him around me so I can share with him my excitement, I want him to be a part of it.

> *Husband*: I love these Tuesday nights, I wait for them. I know she will come home so energetic . . . it is contagious . . . it makes us like a couple on a honeymoon.

Another interviewee, a man in his 40s, told us that he felt increased close-
ness toward his partner following social evenings, especially when they
entertained friends at home or when they went out with friends:

> It is during these nights that we have people for dinner that I feel especi-
> ally close to Ruth. I know that she knows how much I love having people
> over; I appreciate that she makes the effort after working all day, I know
> our friends enjoy her cooking, and I love the way she manages such events.
> Although we are exhausted after that, we feel especially intimate. (H, 5)

## Shared views of closeness

Generally, spouses presented similar views on closeness. When the first
spouse started to describe what closeness meant for him or her, in many
cases the other spouse agreed with the description and responded by saying
something like "it's the same for me."

It seems reasonable that spouses presented similar views on closeness.
The very nature of the concept implies that partners have been working
throughout their marriage on issues related to their mutual understanding
of closeness and to the directions this understanding might take in their life
as a couple. If a couple differ in their understandings of what closeness
means, or if they disagree on the constructed meanings of closeness, they
strive to reach a mutual understanding, which can also be considered as an
expression of closeness. For example, one couple found that the issue of
spending time together and apart caused argument and conflict. Over the
years, they learned to understand each other's different needs for together-
ness and separation:

> *Husband*: How we spent our time together was a cause for conflict or
> fighting. To what extent did we spend time together or by ourselves? We
> do not always agree on those kinds of things. One is always disturbed by
> it more than the other. One might feel deprived. It is mostly she who feels
> unsatisfied with how much time we spend together. At the beginning she
> did not like that I devoted time to my activities, that I wanted to spend
> time by myself. But she changed and now she sees things from a different
> perspective. This led to a dramatic decrease in the number and frequency
> of our fights. The quality of our time together improved significantly. She
> accepted the fact that I need to be by myself. She also learned to appreci-
> ate spending time by herself.
>
> *Wife*: I agree, he described the changes that took place over the years in
> how we both see spending time together and apart. It used to be a very
> loaded issue, it still is, but much less. Now it is significantly less intense.

Of all the couples we interviewed, only one presented different views of
closeness. In this case, the husband understood closeness as sharing, affec-
tion, warmth, and physical closeness, while the wife understood closeness
as caring:

> *Husband*: Closeness is about being affectionate … I am an affectionate
> person and I need to express it by touching, I need to be around her phys-
> ically … I also want to share with her so many things, things that I do,

things that I am thinking about, everything that happens to me, I know I can tell her anything.

*Wife*: For me closeness is something different. For me closeness is caring, I'll check several times to see that he woke up in the morning … It is worrying about him, wanting the best for him. And I am making an effort so things will work out for him, but I am not as warm as he is.

Different views on closeness can also be understood in the context of the spouses' general perception of their marital relationships. It can be assumed that reaching a mutual understanding of closeness and its expressions was less important than investing in reaching a shared mutual conception of the construct. In other words, holding different views on closeness in itself can reflect the spouses' perceptions of their marital relationship.

## Discussion

In recent years, researchers have attempted to untangle the complexity of the term "close" in regard to interpersonal relationships, treating closeness either as a type of relationship (e.g., *close relationships*) or as an attribute of the relationship (e.g., *relationship closeness*). The current study explores the constructed meanings of dyadic closeness from the point of view of intimate partners.

Answering the question "what is 'closeness' for you?" respondents most frequently started with a description of a situation, a concrete detailed example of an experience, rather than with a conceptual definition. It seems that closeness lies more in the immediate experiential realm than in a cognitive arena, and it appears that it is difficult to define.

What, then, is closeness in the context of intimate relationships? Our interview data show that closeness is perceived as a total, complete, indivisible experience that captures both *physical* and *emotional* aspects of the relationship. Closeness encompasses both the experience of *being* close and *wishing* for closeness, referring to both "being" in a unique kind of relationship and "doing" for that relationship.

Using participants' accounts as a point of departure, we can now develop a conceptual map outlining the essential elements of dyadic closeness and their interrelations. Following the model, we discuss several methodological issues pertaining to the research process and its findings.

### Dyadic closeness: A conceptual map

Figure 1 presents a conceptual map of dyadic closeness. The model integrates the various themes that emerged from the data and depicts their relations in a scheme that portrays the essence of the phenomenology of dyadic closeness. Three major distinctions underlie the conceptual model: (i) *Meanings* and *expressions* of dyadic closeness, including participants' immediate accounts of the meanings and expressions of closeness (e.g., friendship, sharing, caring, spatial proximity, physical contact, etc.); (ii)

**FIGURE 1**
**Dyadic closeness: A conceptual map.**
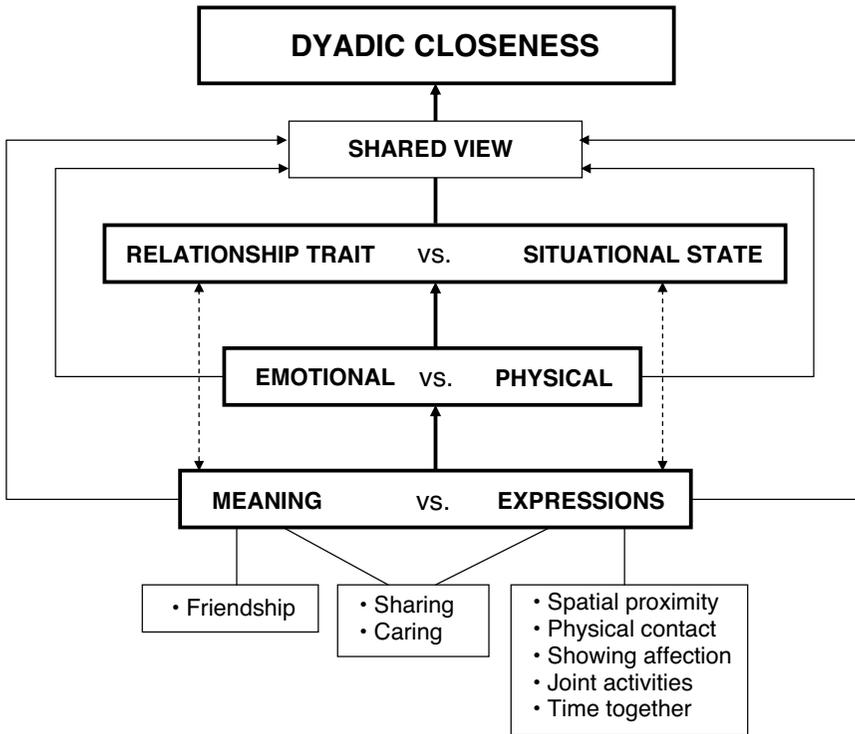


*emotional* vs. *physical* closeness; and (iii) closeness as a relationship *trait* vs. a situational *state*. These constructs are hierarchically ordered from lower-level descriptive themes, through participants' interpretations of their meanings and experiences of closeness, to a higher level of abstraction constructed by the researchers. *Shared view* – the essence of dyadic closeness – is constructed at the top level by adopting a reflective stand about the first two levels of the model.

## Meanings and expressions of dyadic closeness

The first distinction in the conceptual map of dyadic closeness relates to the meanings attached to closeness and its expressions. Three themes emerged from the interview data as constituting the meanings of dyadic closeness: Friendship, sharing, and caring.

*Friendship* emerged as the most prevalent constructed meaning of dyadic closeness. It includes a sense of trust, mutual respect, unconditional support, commitment and responsibility, and a general feeling that one is "there" for the other. Such characteristics have also been identified by several other researchers (e.g., Merves-Okin et al., 1991; Tower et al., 1997) as essential ingredients of dyadic closeness. Indeed, Grote and Frieze (1994) have noted

that feelings of closeness in marriage derive from perceptions of the spouse as a friend. Similarly, Kendig et al. (1988) associated closeness with having a spouse who is considered as a special friend.

*Sharing* refers to the perception of dyadic closeness as an ability to express feelings, experiences, thoughts, and ideas with one's spouse. It also includes the desire for meaningful conversations and the recognition that sincere talk is an essential part of the relationship. In the words of Birtchnell (1993), "people who are close want to share, and the experience of sharing reinforces their closeness" (p. 87). The very act of talking, Birtchnell noted, helps bind people together. In the interviews, *sharing* was used in two ways: One that expresses a basic notion of closeness (e.g., "For me, closeness means that I can share all my thoughts and experiences with her …"); and another that conveys ways of expressing closeness (e.g., "When I feel close to her, I want to share with her everything that happened to me"). As an expression of closeness, sharing is closely related to emotional communication, self-disclosure, and intimacy – an activity as well as a desire for an opportunity to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences with one's partner (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Harvey & Weber, 2002).

The third notion of closeness, *caring*, refers to being sensitive to the other's needs and preferences. It involves doing things for the other in recognition that such things are valued and appreciated by the partner. It also includes caring for the other spouse's health and welfare. Similarly, Feeney (1999) identified acts of care giving as reflecting a sense of dyadic closeness, especially among men. It may be illuminating to note that Parks and Floyd (1996) found somewhat similar findings in their study of closeness in friendship. These researchers found that closeness in friendship was associated primarily with self-disclosure and the provision of help, as well as support, shared interests, and the explicit expression of the value of the relationship.

*Expressions* of closeness, on the other hand, are considerably richer and broader than are descriptions of closeness. Experiences of closeness reflect seven major themes. *Spatial proximity* and *physical contact* were the most prevalent ways of both expressing, and expressing a need for, closeness. When feeling emotionally close, most participants alluded to a desire to be in the same space as their spouse. Touching, holding hands, hugging, caressing, sitting next to the spouse, desire for sexual contact, and the like were all ways of expressing closeness. Similarly, *showing affection* was a common way of demonstrating both emotional closeness as well as a need for it. Expressions of affection may include physical contact, but they also included a large variety of unique behaviors intended to demonstrate a desire for closeness. Such activities may include, for example, bringing a flower, writing a love note, calling the partner on the phone, or sending an e-mail during the work day telling the spouse that she or he was being missed.

*Spending time together* and *joint leisure activities* also emerged as ways by which intimate partners demonstrated closeness or that intensified a sense of dyadic closeness. Most often, such behaviors included mutual activities, such as traveling, picnicking, hiking, going to a concert, spending

time on the beach, reading or listening to music together, or having dinner together. Spending time together can also mean staying home together, doing nothing in particular. It is the joint decision to spend quality time together that shows and increases closeness.

## Modes of closeness: Physical and emotional

Intuitively, physical and emotional closeness seem closely related, but from our interview data, it appears that they may be independent. Although both physical and emotional closeness can characterize dyadic relationships, couples may experience emotional closeness while being physically distant and can be engaged in intense physical (and sexual) closeness while experiencing emotional distance. Emotional and physical closeness may also be valued differently. Our interview data suggest that emotional closeness is more highly regarded than physical closeness.

Interviewees rarely referred to sexual interaction. There may be several reasons for this result. First, it may indicate that interviewees attached higher value to emotional when compared with physical closeness. It may also be considered more appropriate for couples to share their experience of emotional closeness with a stranger than their sexual desires. The relative absence of talk about the interviewees' sexual experiences may also be attributed the conjoint interviews in which partners may have felt uncomfortable talking about sexual experiences and desires or referring to their spouse as a sex object in the presence of both their partner and a stranger. Finally, the infrequent mention of sexuality as an expression of closeness may be attributed to cultural norms or to the characteristics of the interviewees (i.e., Jewish Israeli married couples in their 40s who have been married for a relatively long time).

## Closeness as a trait and a state

To date, most studies on closeness have dealt with dyadic closeness as a characteristic of the relationship (Aron & Fraley, 1999; Cramer & Donachie, 1999; Feeney, 1999; Kendig et al., 1988; Merves-Okin et al., 1991; Tower et al., 1997). In contrast, the current study suggests a dual nature of closeness: (i) As a general attribute of the relationship, and (ii) as short-term fluctuations in dyadic closeness within the relationship.

*Closeness as a trait* refers to a relatively stable relationship attribute and is often used as a defining feature of the positive nature of the relationship. This notion of closeness implies that different relationships systems can be evaluated by their overall quality and the levels of intimacy, trust, commitment, and caring that characterize them. Such characteristics are long term and relatively resistant to the effects of daily occurrences.

In contrast, *closeness as a state* refers to a situationally shaped condition that is sensitive to daily events and, thus may change or fluctuate by the day, hour, or even minutes. Fluctuations in this experience of state closeness normally take place in the lives of couples regardless of the overall trait relationship closeness. These short-term changes may not influence the overall quality of the relationship. For example, couple # 9 did not describe

their relationship as intimately close in the trait sense. Yet, they were aware of specific situations in which they both experienced increased closeness. Situationally induced closeness is often associated with a positive emotional state of one or both partners. Note, however, that increased dyadic closeness has been linked to shared negative occurrences as well (Lavee, 2004).

As indicated in the conceptual model, there are implicit relations (represented in Figure 1 by dashed lines) between closeness as a relationship *trait* and the constructed *meaning* of closeness, as well as between closeness as a situational *state* and the *expressions* of closeness. It appears that the meanings attached to dyadic closeness are strongly related to an attribute of the relationship, whereas the expressions of closeness are representations of changes and fluctuations in the relationship. Indeed, expressions of closeness can fluctuate from day to day due to local occurrences, whereas the meanings of closeness have been accumulated over many years and, therefore, have a lasting nature.

### Shared view

The partners' shared views of closeness, both its meaning and expressions, serve to enhance the experience of dyadic closeness. When closeness is perceived and understood similarly by both partners, expressions of closeness appear to create an escalation of felt closeness in a virtuous circle. This is consistent with Birtchnell (1993), who argued that for a shared experience of closeness to occur, there must be a resemblance between the subjective relating on the side of the donor and the perceived relating on the side of the recipient. Moreover, the accumulation of shared experiences contributed to a heightened state of we-ness.

### Methodological issues

Readers should interpret our results with several methodological issues in mind. First, we interviews both spouses at the same time, which provided an opportunity to observe the nature of spouses' interaction. At the same time, partners may have been careful about which experiences, thoughts, and feelings to express or conceal in the presence of their spouses. For example, it is possible that the interview context was responsible for sexual desires and expressions being mentioned so infrequently in relation to closeness.

Furthermore, readers must be aware that the interviews were conducted in Hebrew and translated into English. Although we made every effort to ensure an accurate translation, certain unbridgeable differences in language may result in interpretations that appear imprecise when read in translation.

The primary objective of qualitative studies is to gain detailed understandings of a phenomenon, rather than to enable generalization. Idiosyncratic effects of the research context, interviewees, and the researchers preclude any expectation of replicability (Creswell, 1998; Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). The ultimate test for internal validity is whether the various aspects of the data collected complement each other and create a consistently rich description of the phenomenon under investigation and a coherent

conceptual framework (Ward-Schofield, 1993). The themes that emerged in the present analysis, and their interrelations, suggest that they may not be atypical.

## Conclusion

Close relationships and relationship closeness have received considerable scholarly attention, but the nature of dyadic closeness has remained unclear. The current study adds to existing knowledge by the construction of a model of dyadic closeness with three conceptual levels. The model also highlights the central role of partners' mutually constructed view of their experience and meanings of physical and emotional closeness. Finally, it clarifies the distinction between closeness as an overall relationship attribute and as a fluctuating, situationally induced phenomenon in intimate relationships.

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