Minding the Close Relationship

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In this theoretical analysis, we argue that a process referred to as minding is essential for a couple to feel mutually close and satisfied in a close relationship over a long period. Minding represents a package of mutual self-disclosure, other forms of goal-oriented behavior aimed at facilitating the relationship, and attributions about self’s and other’s motivations, intentions, and effort in the relationship. Self-disclosure and attribution activities in minding are aimed at getting to know the other, trying to understand the other’s motivations and deeper dispositions as they pertain to the relationship, and showing respect and acceptance for knowledge gained about other. We link the concept of minding to other major ideas and literatures about how couples achieve closeness: self-disclosure and social penetration, intimacy, empathy and empathetic accuracy, and love and self-expansion. We argue that the minding process articulated here has not previously been delineated and that it is a useful composite notion about essential steps in bonding among humans. We also argue that the minding concept stretches our understanding of the interface of attribution and close relationships. We present research possibilities and implications and consider possible alternative positions and counterarguments about the merits of the minding idea for close relationship satisfaction.

One of the most daunting questions facing theorists of close relationships is what accounts for the demise of long-term close relationships that at one time involved considerable mutual closeness and satisfaction? In general terms, over time what is it that couples do, or fail to do, that contributes to relationship breakdown? We suggest that a never-ending reciprocal knowing process involving a complex package of interrelated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors represents an essential condition for creating and sustaining closeness in mutually satisfying relationships. We use the word mind to stress the centrality of the mind in the process we describe, and we use the gerund minding to emphasize our focus on the importance of its continuously unfolding nature.

In our analysis, minding involves five components:

1. Behaviors aimed at knowing the other, which include self-disclosure on the part of one and listening, observing, and questioning on the part of other.

2. Attributions about and perceptions of a partner’s qualities and predispositions to behave in certain ways and attributions about outcomes that denote or connote a relationship-oriented, caring foundation for the partner’s acts.

3. Acceptance of and respect for what is learned via the knowing and self-disclosing processes.

4. Reciprocity in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors between partners.

5. A final criterion of well-minded relationships is that the minding process must never end and will not be established until a substantial period of time has passed involving the process outlined here. Once established, a well-minded relationship will be ongoing at some level continuously, whether carried out consciously or in a more scripted way.

For convenience in discussion, we will refer to a dichotomy between a high and a low degree of minding in relationships or between relationships that are well-minded and those that are not well-minded. Our general assertion is that a high degree of minding is conducive to a close, highly satisfying relationship, whereas a low degree of minding is not. Our focus is on nonfamilial, romantic relationships. However, we believe that friendships and family relationships also may achieve a high degree of minding. In courtship prior to a couple’s commitment to have a long-term and exclusive relationship, the knowing part of minding is focused on making a decision about whether to continue the relationship. In this article we consider only relationships after such a commitment has been made.

While growing up, most of us learn relationship skills and knowledge often incidentally and vicariously by watching our parents, caretakers, the media, and others in our environment. Our culture emphasizes factors such as “having chemistry” as necessary to achieve success in intimate relationships (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993) rather than skill in thinking about and
interacting with others. Burleson (1995) argued that people develop their relationship skills and for each phase of relationship development, people either develop the prerequisite skill to pass through a filter and thus be available for further, more intimate development or they fail to develop the prerequisite skill for such a passage. We believe that this type of skill development involves the minding process. The better minded a relationship, the more filters through which each individual partner has likely passed. The skills suggested by the minding concept include observing and listening to one’s partner, self-disclosing and eliciting self-disclosures from one’s partner, care in attributional activity regarding one’s partner, the partner’s behavior and the relationship, and care in planning and taking acts that have the goal of facilitating the relationship. The intricacy of minding is implied in this logic because each of these skills could be broken down into several subskills.

As an example of this intricacy, in a well-minded relationship the act of soliciting self-disclosures from one’s partner will be done with care in consideration of the new relationship meanings and implications for interaction that may emerge from such disclosure. Further, the solicitation of disclosure from a partner will be timely in terms of the partner’s willingness and interests to engage in such behavior. These calculations by the soliciting party are no small matter because they may touch on areas that cause anxiety or embarrassment to a partner. In close relationships, people make such calculations quickly. In well-minded relationships, people often will have learned how to carry out these calculations and others pertinent to the meaning and merit of such activities for the relationship while in the stream of interaction.

We divide our analysis into four parts: (a) a more detailed description of the nature of the minding process; (b) a review of related concepts, with commentary on the relation of minding to these concepts; (c) commentary on possible research implications of this concept; and (d) consideration of possible alternative positions to and counterarguments about the cogency of our conception.

Components of the Minding Process

Behaviors Facilitating Knowledge of Other

At a commonsense level, perhaps there is no act more endearing to a partner than that of trying diligently over time to know the partner and use that knowledge toward enhancement of the relationship. This is an act that makes people feel special, treasured, and nurtured. Many of us will live our lives having few if any experiences with others who made us feel this way. It is the thesis of this article that minding offers such experience.

Minding emphasizes the encouragement of self-disclosure, leading to increased feelings of closeness and intimacy. Derlega, Metts, Petronio, and Margulis (1993) defined self-disclosure as “what individuals verbally reveal about themselves to others (including thoughts, feelings, and experiences)” (p. 1). Reis and Shaver (1988) suggested that intimacy is created by the process of escalating reciprocity of self-disclosure in which each person feels his or her innermost self validated, understood, and cared for by the other. This latter position is consistent with work by Chelune and colleagues (e.g., Chelune, Robinson, & Kommor, 1984), which suggests that the association between self-disclosure and intimacy is one of mutual influence. McAdams (1989) took a somewhat similar position in defining intimacy as the “sharing of one’s innermost being [with other]” (p. 46), but that also recognizes one another’s individuality.

As Aron and Aron described their concept of love as self-expansion, they argued that the process mostly involves an escalation of self-disclosure (citing Reis & Shaver, 1988). They stated, “When people first fall in love there is often a rapid, exhilarating expansion of self. People stay up all night talking, sharing, just doing everything they can to merge selves” (Aron & Aron, 1996, p. 340). Minding involves just such sharing and associations between knowing one’s partner and feelings of intimacy and closeness.

This component of minding is most obviously seen in the sharing of stories about one’s past with a partner. Pennington and Hastie (1991) have argued that in general, people develop social judgments by piecing together meaningful stories from observed and inferred databases. These judgments are facilitated by the self-disclosure, understanding, and information seeking that occur as partners tell stories of past experiences in relationships (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman, 1997; Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990). In close relationships, stories are communicated about the past of each partner, the history of the current relationship, and how the relationship is presently faring. Stories inform, guide thoughts, and contribute to interactions in the relationship.

For some couples, verbal self-disclosure may appear to be absent. This does not mean that there is no minding occurring. It has been found that couples often communicate feelings and thoughts nonverbally (Mehrabian, 1972). Much of the process of minding may go on at nonverbal and implicit levels. This quite subtle activity may be just as effective in leading to mutual satisfaction for some long-term couples as would a more regular verbal forum.

Minding also emphasizes the interaction of partners requesting for and sharing information about each other, as opposed to an emphasis upon the need for self-revelation. Self-disclosure by one partner is encouraged, even induced, by acts of minding on the part of the other.
Self-disclosure activity additionally can produce a sense of meaning in relationships (Jourard, 1971). In concluding a valuable review and analysis of self-disclosure and intimacy research, Derlega et al. (1993) noted, “In sum, the theme found throughout the literature on intimacy and disclosure points to considering their association to be a process of mutual influence. ... Self-disclosure and relationship definitions are mutually transformative” (p. 22).

This definition is consistent with the dynamic quality of minding. We agree with Derlega et al. that self-disclosure is a mutually transformative activity in creating meaning and intensity in a relationship. In our conception, meaning can change over time; thus continued positive meaning requires vigilance. Self-disclosure and minding activities are infused with unavoidable uncertainty about meaning. Well-minded relationships involve mutual work to reduce ambiguity in meaning and increase tolerance of the anxiety that may accompany acts of disclosure.

This first component of the minding process thus facilitates intimacy and meaning and may also increase partners’ abilities to “read” each other’s feelings from behaviors. Ickes and colleagues have reported that some people develop the ability to infer certain others’ thoughts and feelings with a relatively high degree of accuracy (Ickes, 1993; Ickes, Stinson, Bissinnette, & Garcia, 1990). This “empathic accuracy,” which Ickes and colleagues have linked to Rogers’ (1957) articulation of the importance of empathy for therapeutic personality change, appears positively related to mutual self-disclosure and increased intersubjectivity.

All the benefits of this knowing or disclosing activity do not necessarily lead to a well-minded relationship. More than self-disclosure and relationship definitions are needed for the full transformation to closeness to occur. Our position suggests that a combination of attribution and goal-directed behavior needs to accompany the self-disclosure process.

Attributions

Partners’ attributions about behaviors and their causes determine whether or not behaviors are perceived as promoting the relationship. Attributions that occur at all points in a couple’s history of interaction are essential parts of minding.

How do we judge whether our romantic partners really care about us? This judgment requires, to use Jones and Davis’s (1965) term, a correspondent inference. The correspondent inference process examines actions and outcomes and makes inferences about an actor’s intentions and dispositions.

Correspondence inference theory was based on Heider’s (1958) commonsense psychology and involved this central proposition: “It is an important principle of common-sense psychology, as it is of scientific theory in general, that man grasps reality, and can predict and control it, by referring transient and variable behavior and events to relatively unchanging underlying conditions, the so-called dispositional properties of the world” (Heider, 1958, p. 79). The person we are portraying as minding a close relationship is operating very much like Heider’s (1958) portrayal of the “naive scientist” synthesizing across different types of information to make attributions about his or her partner and relationship. Crucial to a well-minded relationship is the inference that each partner’s acts relevant to the relationship are based on caring and positive dispositions and intentions. In the stream of interaction, people make many attributions, which in well-minded relationships will form part of the foundation for continued satisfaction, closeness, and motivation for behavior that reflects such satisfaction and closeness.

Kelley (1979) imported basic attribution theory logic to his interdependence analysis of personal relationship structures and functions. He suggested that people interpret relationship events in terms of partners’ intentions, attitudes, and traits. Kelley argued that such interpretation is subject to error and distortion along many dimensions. For example, people misinterpret the role of their own behavior in influencing their partner. Consistent with Heider’s (1958) idea that behavior sometimes engulfs the perceiver’s field, Kelley noted that people also may weigh certain behaviors inappropriately in making inferences about a partner’s feelings and dispositions. Or partners may cling to dispositional inferences in the context of behavior that regularly contradicts such inferences.

In a well-minded relationship, error in attribution and perception will be redressed over time because of the diligence involved in the partners’ pursuit of knowledge about one another and the relationship. Partners may not always be correct in their deductions and understandings but will be open to working on them. Further, this very work will be taken by couples as evidence that they care for one another. This latter process may develop via self-perception and self-persuasion mechanisms, as articulated by Bem (1972).

There has been considerable research on attributions and close relationships (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Harvey, 1987, for reviews). This literature, although complex and containing some inconsistent findings, does indicate that partners’ attributions of dispositions and intentions and responsibility to one another for relationship-related outcomes are associated with relationship satisfaction and functioning. It has been argued that causal attributions may play a moderator role among affect, perceived control, and behavior in various types of close relationships (Bugental, 1987). Research also points to the possibility that people in close relationships use attributions about the causes of conflict to try to influence their partners toward certain conclusions and positions (Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976).
MINDING THE CLOSE RELATIONSHIP

We posit that in well-minded relationships, the attributional processes that unfold over time will support the quest for knowledge about other and promote the relationship. Consistent with Fincham and Bradbury's (1992) attributional analysis of and evidence from couples in distressed versus nondistressed relationships, we argue that couples who are minding their relationships well will emphasize attributions that enhance the relationship. In general, they should attribute positive relationship outcomes to their partner's behaviors and negative outcomes to causes external to the relationship. They will not, however, engage in such attributional tendencies without regard to what appear to them to be the facts surrounding different events. In a well-minded relationship, there should be ample grounds for making relationship-enhancing attributions.

As described earlier, an indirect derivative of the minding process may be an increased empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1993; Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990) toward one's partner. In Mead's (1934) terminology, the individual should be able to take the role of other in anticipating other's responses to situations. A hypothesis that might be derived from combining the minding logic with the empathic accuracy notion is that long-term couples who engage in minding to a high degree will be more accurate judges of their partners' thoughts and feelings than will long-term couples who engage in minding to a low degree. Thus, in well-minded relationships, one's attributions for a partner's behavior are more likely to match the partner's self-attributions for that same behavior.

Murray and Holmes (1993) proposed and provided evidence to indicate that relationship satisfaction is associated with idealistic rather than realistic perceptions of one's partner. People may develop storylike representations of their romantic partners that quell feelings of doubt engendered by their partners' faults. In fact, Murray and Holmes showed that dating couples can be so flexible in their construal activity regarding their partner that they transform the meaning of negativity in their stories, seeing virtues in faults. Hence, they may entertain positive representations of a partner, not in spite of the partner's faults but because imperfections have been construed to fit into positive overall meanings. Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) extended the above findings by focusing both on dating and married couples.

This evidence on "positive illusions" would seem to contradict our notion that satisfied couples develop mutual understandings of each other's behavior. However, this research is not incompatible with minding's premise of relationship-enhancing attributions. We are not contending that minding will lead to a perfectly rational processing of information. It has a rational direction in its focus on continuing exploration, but how information is subsequently used is also critical in the process. It may be used to protect one's partner from being mutually recognized as having certain faults. This type of illusion may cave in due to its self-deluding basis, or it is conceivable from the minding position to posit that a couple may spend a lifetime "covering" for one another's deficits. We suspect any and all such possibilities exist in the world of couples.

It has also been contended that people rely on personal theories of change in the reconstruction of memories (Ross, 1989). Ross provided data and arguments to the effect that memories are shaped by people's assessment of their current status (e.g., given a well-functioning current relationship, a couple might de-emphasize a past situation involving high conflict in their relationship) and implicit theories about how change occurs over time. Holmberg and Veroff (1996) used Ross's work as a foundation to suggest that reconstructed memories are one means by which a couple attempts to see their present in a positive light. As an example, if the couple is presently well functioning, they may reconstruct their past to have involved growth toward the present happy state, even if other observers might disagree that such growth occurred. This research also is compatible with the necessity of attributions and explanations that enhance the relationship, or put it in a positive light, regardless of what those outside the relationship might view as "reality."

What is critical to the minding idea is the reciprocity of these attributional patterns. If one member of a couple ceases to construe in a positive direction or, relatedly, if one member begins to doubt previous attributions of other's sincerity or motivation, then closeness may begin to erode. If behavior fails to comport with stated beliefs or explanations (e.g., a person verbally protects her or his partner but shows contempt or doubt nonverbally), then again the closeness will begin to be eroded.

We believe that there are advantages at the conceptual level in bringing attribution more thoroughly and clearly into the arena of thought about what leads to closeness. What is valuable about this introduction is the aspect of attribution that speaks directly to causality and responsibility. We suggest that a person seeks to attribute much of the locus of causal action for a partner's relationship-relevant acts to the partner's intentions and dispositions toward the person and relationship. For the perceiver, there is clear-cut causal reality in the process that is important to the ultimate development of closeness.

In a well-minded relationship, for example, rubbing a partner's feet is facilitative of the relationship because the receiving person attributes positive motivation to her or his partner. In a poorly minded relationship, however, such an act may be misattributed to a partner's ulterior motive of placating a person's anger over a perceived misdeed (Jones, 1964). It is our position that the attribution of causality for a specific act at a particular time depends on the context of meaning
Acceptance and Respect

The two concepts of acceptance and respect are high on the list of prototypical features of love (Fehr, 1988). In time, minding takes on more and more of a feeling of deep intimacy because each person recognizes the high amounts of sincerity, effort, and care being exhibited by the partner and by self. On the other hand, a person who belies this trust by making public the contents of intimate knowledge so as to embarrass or deme- grate a partner is committing an act of bad faith that is not in keeping with the minding of a relationship.

It might be asked if this criterion applies to information gained about other that involves negative outcomes or that may be construed to reflect poorly on other. Yes, acceptance indicates that “what happened then does not diminish my love for you.” Similarly, a well-minded relationship will involve collaboration in addressing dispositional or situational qualities that both partners agree should be changed. Although there always may exist issues that can divide couples and create anger and hostility, minding is a process to recognize such possibilities and lead to constructive problem solving.

Based on his extensive research with couples, Gottman (1994, 1995) argued that couples who are happily married for years are good at repairing conversations when they become corrosive and negative. They do not let negativity become habitual or a common reaction to stress. They are good at soothing and neutralizing tensions and anger. At the core of their behavior over a long period is respectful negotiation. They are essentially rewarding one another more often than they are punishing one another. Such is true also in well-minded relationships. Couples who are minding their relationship well will be alert to the potential corrosion of a continued period of negativity in communication, feelings, and family atmosphere. They will recognize that each partner needs to have voice (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982) in developing constructive lines of action and feel affirmed in the decisions that are made.

The component of acceptance and respect involves not only avoiding negative responses but also acting in positive ways that acknowledge what has been learned about the other via sharing and disclosing. Behaviors that overtly demonstrate acceptance of a partner’s preferences, past history, or emotional needs facilitate the relationship by providing public acknowledgment of commitment and self-perceptions of commitment to the relationship (Bem, 1972).

Reciprocity

As we have defined minding, it cannot involve one person engaging in minding and caretaking while the partner focuses mainly on his own agenda and needs. Such a relationship cannot be satisfying very long to the partner making the effort to know the relationship dynamics and comprehend other.

Acitelli and colleagues (e.g., Acitelli & Holmberg, 1993) have found women to be more aware of relationship patterns than are men. Although we do not necessarily posit that this gender difference is found overall in minding activity, we do believe that minding requires a high level of relationship awareness and communication about troubling matters in both partners. As Berscheid (1994) suggested, women may possess more highly developed relationship schemas because they appear to spend more time in social interaction and in talking about relationships than do men. We would suggest that men who have learned well their lessons of relating will be responsive to the “We need to talk” requests. If they are not, they risk possible secondary issues developing, including the woman’s attributions that they do not have the motivation or ability to engage in dialogue about relationship problems. Women, in turn, may become more attuned to a male partner’s nonverbal expressions of relationship commitment through use of the minding process.

Each partner will be involved in the process, even if part of the time the representative behaviors are carried out in a scripted manner (Schank & Abelson, 1995). Scripts can help people cope with time and energy pressures, but both partners must be wary lest the scripts replace the process that produced the comfort of closeness, which then permitted the scripts to become part of their lives. For example, this wariness will take the form of behaviors of asking questions about a partner’s feelings, listening to the answers, and recognizing when there is a need to talk about troubles (Tannen, 1990).

As referred to previously, reciprocity is also crucial to the effectiveness of relationship-enhancing attributions. In part, what people are doing in minding is learning about other’s attributions regarding relationship patterns and making adjustments according to what they learn. The adjustments may involve reciprocal challenges of these attributions or accepting and taking the attributions into account in relationship dialogue (see Berley & Jacobson, 1984, for description of a couples’ attributional therapy that mirrors this reasoning). The power of reconstructed memory also involves the couple’s mutual sharing of memories and perspectives on the past and how the past is relevant to their interactions in the present. The reciprocal conveyance of respect, acceptance, and attribution of constructive intentions and motivations must go hand in hand with acts of sharing.

Continuing Process Over Time

This criterion relates to a major touchstone for closeness advanced by Kelley et al. (1983): “The close
relationship is one of strong, frequent, and diverse interdependence that lasts over a considerable period of time” (p. 38).

Because people and situations change, the knowledge base gained in minding cannot remain static, a point that Kelley (1967) also made about attributions that mirror the data appropriately. Each and every person represents an intricate set of experiences, personal qualities, dispositions, hopes, plans, and potential reactions to environmental stimuli. Being and staying close to any person over an extended period requires personal planning and action aimed at acquiring and updating knowledge on a regular basis.

A social constructionist position would hold that people’s ways of characterizing their relationships and related linguistic conceptions cannot be the sole property of individual minds. The minding theory is compatible with the idea that relationships are the product of a relational process that occurs over time and situation. This process also involves a negotiation of the identities of partners, which may change during the course of the relationship.

This line of reasoning is consistent with Miller, Galanter, and Pribram’s (1960) conception about the recurrent interaction of plans and behaviors designed to test and implement those plans. Minding is the “cementing” process that gives people their best chance at remaining knowledgeable, and knowledge is imperative to people’s plan to be close and execute related forms of behavior.

We do not believe that our focus on time is trivial. As implied by Miller et al. (1960), the planning–testing parts of the process we are describing represent sophisticated forms of human behavior that probably are learned over a substantial period of shared experience. Given the complexity of each person, it stands to reason that the minding process will require a lengthy period to become fully a part of the couple’s repertoire.

Minding in the Context of Relevant Literatures

Social Penetration Theory

One of the first models of relationship development that emphasized self-disclosure was Altman and Taylor’s (1973) social penetration theory. The analogy of peeling back an onion skin has been used to describe the penetration process by which people often “peel back” layers of one another’s characteristics in moving toward intimacy. The layers include knowledge of one another’s body, personality, attitudes, beliefs, and, at a quite deep level, other’s most profound fears and hopes. At a certain point, a partner achieves a great amount of depth and breadth of knowledge of other. Both escalating movement toward greater knowledge, hence greater intimacy, and deescalating movement away from knowledge and intimacy are posited in this model.

Our idea of minding borrows part of its essence from social penetration theory. However, we argue that for closeness and satisfaction to continue, the social penetration process must never end because aspects of the layers change over time. Further, accompanying attributions (e.g., that other is sincere) and actions (e.g., acknowledgments that show one’s commitment and well-conceived acts that show strong caring for one’s partner) form the scaffolding to support the mutual social penetration.

A more recent version of social penetration is found in Knapp and Vangelisti’s (1991) staircase model of relationship stages. As implied by Altman and Taylor’s (1973) model, Knapp and Vangelisti proposed complementary processes of union and separation. In the coming together, Knapp and Vangelisti identified these steps: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding. Minding is like initiating and experimenting that each involves asking questions and gradually moving into topics that are more important to both individuals. Intensifying is defined as a significant enhancement of self-disclosure with sexual relations and acts of commitment. Integrating involves continued movement toward greater breadth and depth in self-disclosure and the accompanying recognition by the individuals’ network of friends that they now constitute a couple. Bonding is defined by mutual commitment acts such as marriage ceremonies, living together, or other acts designed to indicate to others that the pair have formed a close relationship. We propose that a high degree of minding is conducive to these integrative and bonding experiences.

Knapp and Vangelisti posited a complementary set of coming-apart steps from differentiating, or psychological separation, to circumscribing (avoidance of certain topics), to stagnating (continued creation of distance), to avoiding other, to termination of the relationship. These steps correspond, in part, to each partner’s de-emphasizing their desire for knowledge and understanding of other and the relationship and, hence, their de-emphasizing of minding activity as well. Thus, we also propose that in a relationship that is floundering or in disarray, a low degree of minding will be occurring.

As noted, parts of the coming-together sequence theorized by Knapp and Vangelisti are similar to what we propose as ingredients of minding. Again, though, the key part of minding that sets it apart from these conceptions is that minding cannot end and has only the ultimate stage of “doing it.” Bonding corresponds in part to the public, mutual acknowledgment of a close relationship that emerges because of continued mutual behaviors aimed at enhancing the relationship.

A related idea is that couples develop an inventory of taboo topics that should not be discussed if mutual
satisfaction is to be maintained (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). The notion of taboo topics has been explored mostly in the context of college students’ romantic relationships. We would question its meaning as it might be applied to long-term close relationships that are mutually satisfying. We suggest that through mind-ing, people in such relationships often have dealt with the “whats” and “whys” of their private lives and may have few areas in which taboo topics exist. Or taboo topics might continue to exist in a well-minded relationship because after a period of exploration, the partners may agree that further discussion would not be in the best interests of the relationship. Minding makes available potentially delicate topics for exploration because partners make positive attributions about each other’s acceptance and respect for one another and sincerity in broaching such topics. Partners’ attributions of these qualities may open up almost any aspect of a person’s history and personality for mutual consideration and constructive attention when that seems required.

Intimacy and Attachment

As they have been articulated in theoretical analyses, the concepts of intimacy and attachment may be conceived as products of the minding process. Intimacy has received considerable attention in recent years (Prager, 1995; Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988), and we discuss it at length here.

Reis and Shaver (1988) offered this definition of intimacy and intimate relationships:

Intimacy is an interpersonal process within which two interaction partners experience and express feelings, communicate verbally and nonverbally, satisfy social motives, augment or reduce social fears, talk and learn about themselves and their unique characteristics, and become “close” (psychologically and often physically: touching, using intimate names and tones of voice, perhaps having sex). Under certain conditions, repeated interactions characterized by this process develop into intimate relationships. Within an intimate relationship, some interactions will be intimate in the sense of our process model and many will not. If the frequency and quality of intimate interactions decline below some level which is probably unique to different couples and individuals, the relationship will no longer feel and be perceived as intimate by one or both partners. (pp. 387–388)

Reis and Patrick (1996) refined the earlier analysis of intimacy by Reis and Shaver and in so doing differentiated between intimacy and attachment. They defined attachment “as an affective bond in which partners feel close and affectively connected to each other” (p. 525). They further articulated common components of attachment and intimacy as follows:

(1) Both processes involve emotion and both describe the regulation of emotion through interpersonal means. … (2) Both processes emphasize the importance of having responsive interaction partners. … (3) Both processes highlight the influence that experiences in significant prior relationships may have on current relationship beliefs, emotions, and behavior. In both domains, the vehicle for such influence is a highly complex network of interconnected mental models, or representations, of self and self-in-relationship to others that guides expectations, perceptions, and feelings about relationships and particular partners (both potential and actual). (p. 525)

Prager (1995) also offered a multilayered conception of intimacy, differentiating intimate interactions (e.g., communicative exchanges) and intimate relationships in which people have a history and anticipated future of intimate interaction. Although Prager offered many possibilities for the various components of intimacy, she argued that

intimacy [is] a superordinate concept and ..., as a concept, cannot be defined precisely enough for research purposes. Rather, basic intimacy concepts, within a clearly delineated superordinate structure, can be defined with more precision and are therefore more likely to be serviceable for the study of intimacy. (p. 26)

Prager then suggested that the two basic intimacy concepts that are addressed in her analysis are intimate interaction and intimate relationship.

This book’s working definition of intimate interaction includes both intimate behavior and intimate experience [italics added]. The former is any behavior in which partners share that which is personal and/or private with each other. Intimate experience is the positive affect and perceived understanding that partners experience along with or as a result of their intimate behavior. (p. 26)

Our analysis of minding is conceptually similar to the intimacy model offered by Reis and his colleagues, but it is our contention that we extend their logic in an important way. The major difference is that we posit that the experience of intimacy derives from the package of perceptions, feelings, and behaviors that we refer to as minding. Minding is the overall vehicle that is necessary to achieve the subcomponents of the intimacy process. Reis and colleagues’ analyses emphasize mutually escalating self-disclosure as central to the development of intimacy but are less explicit about the type of behavioral patterning and related perception/attri-bution that also may be necessary to achieve intimacy.

Our focus on the importance of minding being continuous over a substantial period as part of the package of needed ingredients represents another difference in comparison to Reis et al.’s position. Reis et al.’s discus-
sion of interaction patterning and responsiveness in interaction hints at the roles of continuity over time, but it does not squarely come to grips with the notion that the complex process that moves people along cannot stop if intimacy is to be preserved. A final apparent difference with Reis et al.’s conceptions concerns the emphasis in minding on attributional processes. We believe that this emphasis extends Reis and colleagues’ logic in an important way.

The elements of mutual understanding/shared meaning, reciprocity, self-disclosure, respect, and acceptance appear to be common to both analyses. Consistent with minding, Reis and Patrick (1996) emphasized responsiveness and shared meaning systems as central to the experience of intimacy. They suggested that understanding need not imply agreement. As we discussed previously, this is a position that is congenial to minding. The process of working on understanding and acting in accord with shared meanings is critical to minding, but in no sense must partners who are minding effectively become clones in thought and feeling. They can agree to disagree but respect and accept one another’s position as well as attribute good will and honest differences in position to their partner.

Our analysis differs from Prager’s concept of intimacy in that we do not believe that minding is unambiguous to precise definition, including operational definition and empirical study. Certainly subcomponents may be studied separately, but the concept comes as a whole and at least theoretically must be keep intact if it is to be of value. We should stress that in no way have we comprehensively dealt with the varied conceptions of intimacy in this discussion. Prager lists over a dozen different conceptions of intimacy in the literature. Our objective is to relate minding to the models of intimacy with which it seems to have the most overlap.

Love and Self-Expansion

How does our conception relate to some of the major ideas about love in the literature? To the extent that these ideas involve a significant component of mutuality in thoughts, feelings, and behavior, there is overlap. One of the most useful analyses of love is presented by Hendrick and Hendrick (1992). Their own theory emphasizes styles of love that may not be mutual in a relationship and that may involve little ongoing thought on the part of the interactants. However, in general, they posit that the phenomenology of love may involve both a sense of “lived time together” and “bestowal” (pp. 111–113). Living time together is conceived of as feeling close and having access to other. It might be contended that both of these qualities exist most often when a couple is minding their relationship. Minding can make people feel that they are in a sense living together and have access to one another even if they are physically separated.

The concept of bestowal may be even closer to the idea of minding. Bestowal is seen as giving to one’s partner that which makes the partner feel valued and that her or his life is worthwhile. Such giving probably involves inquiring and learning about other and behaving in a way reflecting what is learned, with the partner being cognizant that this activity is going on. Over time, it also seems likely that for bestowal to create a feeling that someone is special, it will occur in the context of reciprocity between partners and mutual attributed effort and sincerity.

The Hendricks went on to mention a giving that almost seems divine, possibly suggestive of what they called an “agape love style,” which involves selfless giving to one’s partner. Such an idea also is relevant to Clark and Mills’ (1979) notion of “communal love,” which pertains to giving based on a partner’s needs and good intentions toward the giver, whether or not reciprocal giving occurs. Their analysis is most cogent with regard to familial relationships in which family members may feel communal love despite vast inequities in contributions to the relationship. This is why we chose to emphasize romantic close relationships and possibly very close friendships in our analysis of minding. In order for minding to contribute to closeness and satisfaction, it must be reciprocated. Promissory notes of giving in this way very likely will not be acceptable in the long run. Although minding may be felt as divine among those privileged enough to experience it over the course of a relationship, our view is that it is one of the most pragmatic of human potentialities.

Another important model of love that relates to minding was developed by Aron and Aron (1986, 1996). The Arons proposed that in close relationships, elements of the two persons’ cognitive structures overlap; the closer they are, the greater the overlap. Aron and Aron (1996) said,

We have argued at length that self-expansion is a fundamental human motivation. Self-expansion is the desire for enhanced potential efficacy—greater material, social, and information resources. Such self-expansion leads both to the greater ability to achieve whatever else one desires (i.e., both to survival and to specific rewards), as well as to an enhanced sense of efficacy. (p. 334)

How does this self-expansion occur in close relationships? We contend that the most effective long-term approach to expansion of selves is through the process we term minding. It involves more than the early merging activities described by the Arons. They acknowledged that after this early expansion, people sometimes “get used to one another,” leading to a diminution in expansion and interest. Consistent with our argument about how the idea of minding brings new, important elements to bear on how people achieve intimacy, we argue that a person’s feeling of other being “included
in the self" and related self-expansion activities are mediated over time by processes more intricate than escalating self-disclosure. Without minding, there will be a contraction rather than an expansion of selves within the relationship.

**The “Peer Marriage”**

Schwartz (1994) developed the idea of a peer marriage to reflect what she saw as a new kind of coupling that is more intimate and rewarding to both partners than the more traditional marriage. At the heart of a peer marriage is friendship. Schwartz suggested that peer marriages are a mix of equity and equality. Each person gives in proportion to what he or she receives and is equally responsible for emotional, economic, and household duties. Schwartz argued that peer marriages embody a profound psychological connection and that they involve mutual definition of the relationship as their highest priority. Further, such couples are likely to find one another irreplaceable and to describe their relationship as unique. Peer couples tend to focus on one another often to the exclusion of their friends and work to achieve their goal of coparenting activities when they have children. Finally, peer marriages can be fatiguing because they require so much negotiation and effort to solve problems without reverting to gender-scripted solutions.

We suggest that as Schwartz described the relatively new peer marriage, its typical pattern of activity involves and requires minding as we have defined this process. In order to achieve a balance of equity and equality, a couple will negotiate and engage in dialogue regarding one another’s desires and positions in areas of mutual concern. As they take these steps, they will engage in mutual attributions and behaviors conducive to achieving that balance. It is in a peer relationship, with its plethora of goals and demands, that the need for minding activity is most obvious and where the payoff, in terms of intimacy and a sense of meaning, is most dramatic. A well-minded relationship will involve each partner engaging in the necessary acts to understand one another and incorporating that understanding into interaction patterns.

We agree with an implication of Schwartz’s analysis also. This is the conclusion that many young people have observed their parents and others implementing their close relationships in ways that were dissatisfying or demeaning to one or both partners. They want more. Schwartz suggested that finding “more,” whether it is in a peer marriage format or some other type, may be partially a matter of luck. But Schwartz also suggested that initially it depends on how one looks for a partner and then on the ongoing process of relating. We propose that minding provides a path to the “more.”

**Relationship Schemas and Scripts**

Planalp (1987) introduced the term relationship schema to reflect the expectations and cognitive sets people form regarding their interactions in close relationships. This term is similar to that of scripts (Schank & Abelson, 1977, 1995), which is defined as an event schema comprised of the expected temporal ordering of events in a situation. It has been suggested that scripts help people in relationships almost automatically perform and unconsciously process relationship information in ways that may facilitate interaction (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). It also has been argued that couples in times of potential relationship difficulty may fall back on scripts about what relationships such as theirs are supposed to be like (Surra & Bohman, 1991).

From our position, a couple who minds their relationship will be alert to the power of scripts to influence their relationship in undesirable ways. Returning to Surra and Bohman’s (1991) point about scripts, we suggest that when major stressors occur, couples in well-minded relationships recognize the importance of their own actions and dialogue in addressing the issues, quite apart from considerations of conventional scripts for such situations. Scripts in some areas of relating (e.g., who picks up needed groceries on certain days of the week) may simplify domestic problem solving for time-pressed couples. In more important areas of action and decision, however, relying on scripts may be highly problematical. Many couples would not want scripted decisions about parenting to prevail unless the matter has been subjected to thoughtful discussion. Even when couples agree on major scripts in their relationship, if they are minding the relationship they will recognize the need for regular reexamination of the viability of and mutual agreement with those scripts.

For example, one or both members of a couple may adopt the script of buying flowers on special occasions. However, the minding logic suggests that it is not the script of buying flowers per se that contributes to long-term feelings of goodwill associated with the act. Rather, it is the attribution about the intention and motivation behind this and similar acts—a determination to which couples in well-minded relationships will give regular, conscious consideration and acknowledgment.

Our argument about how couples should be alert regarding scripts is similar to Beck’s (1988) contention that couples need to be careful to avoid automatic negative thoughts that are detrimental to the relationship (e.g., “He started this discussion of the calories in cheese to hurt me because he knows that I am ashamed of how much I weigh.”). As suggested in our conception of minding, Beck emphasized the importance of careful interpretation of our partner’s acts and of the reasonableness to expect that our partner will likewise be careful in making attributions about our acts.
Social Construction

Schönbach (1992) and Gergen and Gergen (1988) emphasized what has been referred to as a social constructionist position regarding the nature and development of close relationships. This constructive process may involve projection and characterization that goes far beyond the knowledge one has learned about other via observation and other’s self-disclosure. To the extent that a construction of one’s partner is consistent with what one learns about the partner (and indeed the partner could attest to its consistency), such a position bears a lot of similarity to our minding argument. Indeed, we might suggest that the position is “social” to the degree that there is agreement. If, however, one’s construction is at great odds with what a partner would say about herself or himself, then the minding process has not been well done. In such a case, the construction of other is a private construction that is not confirmed by other.

The social constructionist proposition that relationships are creations of a relational process occurring over time is congenial to our analysis. By definition, minding is an interactive process that requires active involvement by both partners. Minding is a process of negotiating meaning, including identities. Similar to what a social constructionist position might argue, there is no assumption about accurate or inaccurate processing in the minding argument. A couple who is minding their relationship will evaluate and negotiate divergent interpretations of “facts” and states of affairs pertinent to the relationship. Given this reasoning, a person involved in minding her or his relationship would not be able to develop a private construction of the relationship that did not incur the review of the partner and discussion of its influence on the relationship.

Self-Verification

Another relevant body of evidence pertains to Swann and colleagues’ work showing self-verification effects in close relationships (see Swann, 1996, for a general summary). The general argument behind self-verification effects is that people desire feedback from others, especially close others, that verifies or affirms their view of themselves. If they have significant concerns about their attractiveness to others, for example, the self-verification logic is that they will like most those close others who do not kid them about how attractive they are.

This fascinating argument has been subjected to considerable investigation by Swann and colleagues. A recent finding by Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon (1994), that differentiates effects for dating versus married couples, showed that dating partners are happier when their partners flatter or idealize them. On the other hand, married couples appear to resist such flattery and are happier when their partners view them as they view themselves. Swann (1996) suggested that happily married couples will have come to grips with and redressed the self-and other-deluding perceptual and behavioral tendencies (that collectively form the “romantic ideal”) that may have characterized the dating stage for many couples. He wrote,

Why doesn’t the romantic ideal cause the majority of people with negative self-views to end up in relationships with the adoring dating partners whom it urges them to seek? Some may discover that their desire for self-verification makes them think twice about their inclination to embrace a favorable partner, thus dissuading them from choosing such a partner. Others may seek favorable partners but find that such persons become disappointed and either develop negative evaluations of them or leave the relationship entirely. (p. 119)

The minding position on this latter evidence and argument is that we would expect that on the average, married couples will have engaged in more minding activity and thus show more convergence in self- and other perceptions for most important personality qualities than will dating couples. Our logic may differ from the self-verification logic for long-term close relationships (for which only a modicum of evidence exists to date). If a person in a close relationship has been maintaining a constellation of highly negative self-views about qualities that presumably can be improved (e.g., rigidity in personality), effective minding would suggest that the couple will jointly acknowledge and constructively address these qualities over time and try to change them in a more positive direction. It also suggests that in a well-minded relationship, a partner with qualities less amenable to change will be respected and accepted nonetheless. When change in traits mutually is deemed possible, the reciprocal attribution of effort on the part of the individual working toward change is vital in this progression, as is the individual’s belief that a partner will not forsake him or her if a desired result is not attained. Thus, the minding process would not be quiescent about personal qualities that both partners view as negative and open to change. If both partners view them as negative and changeable, then they can deter or are deterring the functioning of the relationship. Minding indicates the efforts to implement these changes will be made and recognized by the couple.

Commitment, Investment, Resource Exchange, and Trust

Commitment, investment, resource exchange, and trust have also all been described as vital to relationship satisfaction (Brehm, 1992; Rusbult, 1980). Each is in-

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volved in the minding process. Acts of minding are committing, investing acts. Acts of minding are resource exchanges. They require considerable effort, whether it is mental or physical. No gift exchange can rival the act of showing consideration of and empathy with another person both in words and deeds. It has been suggested in various conceptions of resource exchange that attributions about the nature of exchanges mediate subsequent feelings and behavior (e.g., Foa & Foa, 1974; Mills & Clark, 1982). This reasoning is consistent with the present emphasis upon self-disclosure and attribution in the minding sequence as mediators of subsequent behavior and ultimate satisfaction in the relationship.

Trust, as defined by Deutsch (1973) and Holmes and Rempel (1989), requires the type of correspondent inference process that was described earlier. These scholars suggested that trust is “confidence that one will find what is desired from other, rather than what is feared” (Holmes & Rempel, 1989, p. 188). Yet, without a history of minding, attributions about a partner’s behavior and its meaning will be seriously limited and based more on faith and hope than knowledge. That may be necessary early in a relationship. Later on, if the relationship is well minded, the validity of attributions should improve, as should the ability to predict other’s feelings and behavior toward oneself or any object in other’s environment. Trust, then, builds over time through the process of minding. Trust, like respect and acceptance, becomes a major resource of the relationship that is well minded.

**Attention**

Is minding mainly an attentional process and hence subject to the literature suggesting that people are “cognitive misers” (Taylor, 1981) in their capacity to process information? To some degree, “yes” is the answer to both parts of this question. To achieve long-term closeness and satisfaction, people need to stay focused on major relationship issues and events (e.g., whether or not time together and time for intimacy are perceived to be sufficient). In this vein, they also need to pay close attention to their partners and their changing psychological landscapes.

It is not clear, however, that this type of attentional activity is the same as that highlighted in social cognition research in which persons are primed in particular test situations to attend to certain social stimuli and whose responses presumably reveal various cognitive-encoding and cognitive-accessibility processes. Minding involves many more instances of attention to a diversity of stimuli over a long period of time and probably permits considerable trial and error, not unlike the planning sequences for complex behavior suggested by Miller et al. (1960). No doubt mistakes in perception are numerous, but the minding logic suggests that couples will learn to regularly have dialogue about and check their perceptions on matters of moment to the relationship.

People who have the identity of experts are more focused on the “nuts and bolts” of their performance than are those who have the identify of novices (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). In the area of relating to a partner, people learn and implement the identity of “good partner” through continued focus, effort, and learning from their mistakes.

**Research Implications of the Minding Conception**

Comprehensive empirical analysis of minding will most likely involve detailed, longitudinal investigations of perceptions, feelings, and behaviors (or reports of behaviors) on the part of both partners in relatively long-term romantic relationships. Research involving cross-sectional designs focusing on both partners also may be fruitful in investigating aspects of the minding process.

One of the most systematic studies to date involving different kinds of couples is Blumstein and Schwartz’s (1983) “American Couples” study. These investigators examined patterns of reported interaction among married, cohabitating, gay, and lesbian couples from different regions of the United States. This work was influential in its yield of information about gender roles, work, and sexuality in close relationships. Unfortunately, however, much of the detail of ongoing social psychological processes involved in these relationships was not captured by the methodology. As Blumstein and Schwartz said, “What we have not shown is why so many couples can face up to extremely difficult problems and yet endure and be happy” (p. 329). The American Couples research suggests that empirical analyses of processes of close relationships need to take into account the fairly substantial literature on couples-related factors such as formal commitment, gender, and sexual preference.

Another related approach to investigating minding is suggested in Wallerstein’s (1995) research on what makes marriages work. Wallerstein studied 50 couples who had been married 14 to 40 years in an effort to ascertain factors involved in their continuity. These couples had expended the time and effort that we assume is involved when couples achieve a high degree of minding. However, Wallerstein’s method and interpretations were concerned less with couples’ ongoing social psychological processes than on the passages (e.g., emotional separation from childhood family) that need to occur in order for both partners to be satisfied.

The determination of couples who exhibit high versus low minding would involve questions aimed at
Table 1. Relationships Involving High and Low Degrees of Minding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Facilitating Disclosure</td>
<td>Behavior avoiding disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning Partner About Feelings/Behaviors</td>
<td>Poor listening behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilizing Effective Listener “Responses”</td>
<td>Lack of interest in other’s disclosures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accurate Repetition of Partner’s Disclosure</td>
<td>Distorted repetitions of partner’s disclosures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accurate, Detailed Knowledge of Partner’s Preferences/Opinions</td>
<td>Ignorance of other’s preferences/opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship-Enhancing Attributions</td>
<td>Relationship-disrupting attributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally Positive Attributions for Partner’s Behaviors</td>
<td>Overall negative attributions for partner’s behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Attributions for Negative Relationship Events</td>
<td>Partner attributions for negative relationship events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Attributions for Positive Relationship Events</td>
<td>External attributions for positive relationship events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributions for Partner Matches Partner’s Self-Attributions</td>
<td>Non-matching attributions (self and partner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance &amp; Respect</td>
<td>Negative perceptions of other/relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstruction of History/Memory Emphasizing Positives</td>
<td>Negative reconstruction of memory/relationship history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride in Other’s Abilities</td>
<td>Little overt recognition of other’s preferences/concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed Feelings of Trust and Commitment</td>
<td>Inability to recall other’s disclosures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviors Which Acknowledge Other’s Preferences/Concerns</td>
<td>Ability to extensively list other’s faults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior/Verbal Expressions Which Acknowledge</td>
<td>Inequity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Disclosures</td>
<td>Nonmatching estimates of relationship effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>Expressed feelings of inequality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimates of Relationship Effort Match Partner’s</td>
<td>Inability to recognize other’s contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Identify Partner’s Contributions to Relationship,</td>
<td>Nonsynergistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of Other’s Support and Effort</td>
<td>Discontinuity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Synergy (Stronger Together Than Separate)</td>
<td>Sense of separateness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>Inability to agree on relationship ups/downs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of “We-Ness,” Togetherness Permeates Relationship</td>
<td>Pessimistic view of future of relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement in Charting Ups &amp; Downs of Relationship Over Time</td>
<td>Lack of perceived control over relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimistic View of Future of Relationship</td>
<td>Inability to perceive future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of Control Over Relationship</td>
<td>cae</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hope For the Future in General</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

exploring topics such as each partner’s understanding of the history of the relationship to the present, perception of whether the relationship is working well or not and why, ways the couple as a unit addresses major problems or issues (e.g., when/whether to have children), and major types of contributions of partners individually and collectively to making the relationship work. For each of these kinds of questions, participants’ attributions about a partner’s behavior and motivations would be probed.

Although no quick and easy set of methods can be advanced to study minding, it is possible that early research would provide a foundation for the development of a structured instrument to differentiate high- and low-minding couples. This latter work would parallel the development of instruments to measure such concepts as interdependence (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989) and trust (Holmes & Rempel, 1989) and treat them as factors differentiating couples.

A list of possible differentiating variables for high-versus low-minding couples that might be explored in cross-sectional designs is provided in Table 1.

As can be seen in Table 1, many types of behavior, thought, and emotion may be studied as part of the minding process. Central features of the variables listed in Table 1 for well-minded relationships are that they require motivation and effort on behalf of the relationship. In relationships that are not well minded, however, some of the variables listed reflect a partner’s active role in impeding the progress of his or her relationship. For other variables, a partner may be passive and through acts of omission fail to facilitate the relationship.

In principle, the variables listed in Table 1 could be studied one at a time or in combinations of variables, with the evidence obtained compared to derivations from the minding model. For example, one study might focus on couples’ telling their history together and imputing importance to different critical stages of their relationship. Another study might focus on nonverbal behavior displayed by a couple in listening and talking to one another as well as memory for what was said and attributions about other’s attitudinal position of topics discussed. In this way, a complex process may be studied via triangulation of data from several studies involving different parts of the theorized process.

Some caveats are in order. These postulations suggested by the variables listed in Table 1 are quite general. Exceptions can be found. As noted in the earlier discussion of attribution, evidence about the associations between attribution and relationship closeness is complex. A relationship may be well minded, and yet one or both partners may ascribe personal responsibility to a partner for an action that has a negative outcome. They may feel that the facts require such an attribution. At the same time, they may make clear that such an attribution in this case does not suggest any change in caring for the partner whose act is in question. Our position is that the determination of degree of minding...
in a relationship requires examination of a composite of acts, thoughts, and feelings exhibited in interaction by a couple over a considerable period of time.

In addition, quasi-experimental studies could be planned in which couples who are determined to be high versus low in minding would be presented with various types of situational variables (e.g., conflict scenarios) and asked to individually and/or collectively make decisions relevant to the situations. Couples who had been determined to engage in a high degree of minding would be expected to show a more cohesive and detailed approach to hypothetical or real problems relative to couples who had been determined to engage in a low degree of minding. Also, other variables such as empathic accuracy, which should be positively related to a high degree of minding, could be explored in this paradigm. This experimental approach might involve videotape recordings of the couples’ interactions, which should be amenable to testing for differences along such dimensions as sharing in problem solving (allowing each partner to voice positions, showing tactics for moving toward cooperative and constructive understandings).

A further direction for minding research is the investigation of relationships between minding and personality characteristics. As suggested by Wiese (1996), well-studied traits such as extraversion and agreeableness should be positively correlated with minding, whereas neuroticism should be inversely related to minding. That is, for relationships involving a high degree of minding, both partners should show evidence of extraversion and agreeableness in their personalities; for relationships involving a low degree of minding, one or both partners may show neuroticism.

Some assumptions that are implied by the minding concept that require early test are:

1. Couples in relationships involving a high degree of minding will be in greater agreement in identifying strengths, weaknesses, problem-solving strategies, and mutual contributions than couples in relationships involving a low degree of minding. Why? Because the former group engages one another to a greater extent in mutual self-disclosure and searching for relationship-relevant information than does the latter group. Further, the former group is presumed to act in greater concert with the information they obtain than is the latter group.

2. For the same reasons, those involved in relationships characterized by high versus low minding would be able to predict more accurately their partner’s responses for major relationship issues and approaches.

3. We assume that persons in high-versus low-minding relationships would reveal more detail and be more comprehensive in their statements of relationship strengths, weaknesses, problem solving, and mutual contributions and motivations. To better probe attribution, responses both by high- and low-minding groups of couples may be amenable to coding in terms of number and type of so-called “unsolicited attributions” relevant to their relationships (Harvey, Yarkin, Lightner, & Town, 1980).

4. Individuals who mind well their close relationships should be more knowledgeable about and aware of the impact of their partner’s past relationships and background factors in influencing the current relationship. They should show relatively great empathic accuracy in their knowledge and use of it in interactions with their partner.

Creating a Relationship That Involves a High Degree of Minding

Returning to Burleson’s (1995) argument that there are relationship skills that contribute to intimacy progression, we suggest that some people do not develop the requisite skills to engage very well in the minding process. It follows from our position that such people are not good candidates to achieve a high degree of closeness and satisfaction in their romantic relationships. When one member of a couple does acquire such skills and the other member does not, the relationship is vulnerable as long as this mismatch exists.

The minding position on the diminution of a close relationship is that the failure of both partners to be continuously engaged in minding is an important factor in the evolution of relationship breakdown. People disengage for many reasons, including a loss of passion and sexual interest, interest in alternative partners, and a progression of divergent values and/or proclivities for what people consider important in life. What the minding position contributes, however, to our understanding of the forces involved in the maintenance of closeness and satisfaction is a focus on the necessity of continuity and reciprocity in the process and the detailed nature of the process. Such a contribution may be viewed as mainly one of emphasis vis à vis available theoretical conceptions. In our view this focus is unique in the literature.

Some couples who have achieved a high degree of minding but who are encountering relationship difficulty may seek couples therapy. A common approach of couples therapy (e.g., Beck, 1988) is to invite the couple to begin a process of repair that involves mutual acts of knowing and disclosing, behavior that clearly relates to what is learned or known and that is jointly acknowledged about the relationship, and the stressing of the value of attributions about one another and the relationship that are fair and constructive to the relationship. In short, they will be invited to work toward a renewed level of high minding. The intricacy and synchronization of these acts is no small feat. But if the couple had previously achieved a high degree of minding and if they are mutually interested in repairing their relationship, their chances of renewal should be high.
Counterarguments

Is minding more “pie in the sky” than anything else? This concern may be broached because of the demands on time, thought, attention, and behavior required to “mind” a relationship. Although there may be lesser or greater exemplifications of minding revealed in different relationships and at different points in time in the same relationship, we believe that its existence and durability in a relationship represent a powerful vehicle for continued satisfaction and bonding. A well-minded relationship involves a mixture of equity, equality, empathy, negotiation, friendship, and deep commitment. It is not a mythical possibility. Many couples achieve it. Many do not.

Does this conception give adequate attention to the impact of emotion on close relationships? We believe that behavior reflecting sentiments of caring and empathy for a partner reflects emotional behavior. To wonder about, care for, or inquire about someone’s thoughts and feelings are acts often based on strong positive emotion. Further, affect has been found to be a part of the connective tissue of mutual storytelling in close relationships (Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993).

Can you talk or think a relationship to death? If so, is that the same as saying you can mind a relationship to death? Labored discussion, whining, and verbally obsessing about issues are examples of behavior that can be irritating if not divisive. A person may think about a relationship for hours on end without reaching any new insights or understanding. However, there likely can never be too much quality talk, problem solving, negotiation in and thought about a relationship. The minding process keeps as its focus the goal of learning about one’s partner and expressing respect of and commitment to the relationship, as opposed to the goal of expressing one’s own feelings and complaints. It is the reciprocation of this process that leads to the feelings of understanding and acceptance, which in turn makes unproductive discussion less likely to occur. Periods of “overthinking,” or labored discussion that lead to no new understanding would thus serve as symptoms that minding is not being well done.

Can you learn too much about someone while engaging in this process? Well-minded relationships involve agreement on what is a useful amount or type of talk to address issues. Well-minded relationships are disciplined regarding the rules of engagement. Quality talk and thought evolve in the process of caring for and learning about one another that a couple will have implemented if they are minding their relationship. It is likely that in any relationship, some negative events will occur, some negative information will be revealed, or some hurtful words will be said. This happens regardless of whether or not minding is occurring. The advantage of minding as a process is that it gives couples a tool to deal with unpleasant discoveries and a background of stability and intimacy to support them during times of conflict or insecurity.

It might be suggested that our conception of minding implies that each partner engages in the same kinds of acts that epitomize this process. We do not suggest that partners must adopt similar styles. One partner may emphasize direct verbal expression, whereas the other may display nonverbal acts of kindness that reveal understanding of other. As we have implied, in such instances the couple will acknowledge what has been shared and the value of sharing. Both partners may show little verbal expression regarding their thoughts and feelings. If they are minding the relationship, however, they somehow communicate knowledge of and caring about one another.

Nor are couples “stuck” with some structured, prescribed method of minding. Because minding is an effortful activity, couples can be flexible in how they implement the process. It can take many forms over time, depending on the changing needs of the people involved in the relationship. For example, at one point in a relationship, a couple may decide that regular family discussion of issues needs to occur, whereas at other points, the same couple may use more informal or spontaneous exchanges. This process will be most effective when dealing with content reflecting issues of moment to both partners, including relationship–family concerns (Larson & Richards, 1994).

It might be suggested that one partner’s minding may be enough for a relationship that is satisfactory to both. Although that is conceivable, our position is that the partner who does not feel that her or his partner likewise is minding the relationship will become dissatisfied in the long run. “To not mind” essentially may come to mean “to not care” that much about one’s partner and the health and welfare of the relationship. Once an attribution with such meaning (e.g., “He only thinks about himself and seldom cares to really find out what worries me.”) begins to come to fruition in the thinking of the minding partner, the relationship surely will be less satisfying to the minding partner. Moreover, meaning in a relationship is much more stable and powerful when both members experience it similarly.

Does everyone who finds satisfaction in a close relationship have to engage in minding the relationship? To the best of our knowledge, there are no good examples of research in the extensive literature on close relationships showing that processes quite different from, or opposite to, that of minding are positively related to relationship satisfaction. Knapp and Vangelisti (1991) allowed for a type of relationship that stabilizes at a low level of involvement with no further coming together or apparent coming apart. It is a sort of “empty-shell” marriage, after the term used to define
couples staying together without much intimacy and out of convenience or because of their concerns about the impact of separation on children or on their reputation. Our own view is that such relationships are not "close" in that there is no emotional meaning to the relationship beyond that of material need or convenience. There is no sense of emotional synergy.

It has been found that some couples spend a relatively great amount of time with one another alone not talking (Larson & Richards, 1994). Is it not possible that time spent together alone without such a process as minding occurring may lead to satisfaction and closeness? Possibly, but more likely these couples do not suspend their thinking about and feeling toward one another even in such quiet moments of togetherness. The smallest acts of perception are imbued with learning and contribute to knowing. Lewis (1961) implied this view in this quote about his inconsolable grief and missing his late wife Joy:

We have seen the faces of those we know best so variously, from so many angles, in so many lights, with so many expressions—waking, sleeping, laughing, thinking...The remembered voice—that can turn me at any moment to a whimpering child." (pp. 16–17)

It also is conceivable that independent of what people do in their minds, they may be biologically and temperamentally well matched such that their behaviors will lead to satisfying long-term relationships (a possibility perhaps implied in some work having a psychological evolutionary foundation; Simpson & Harris, 1994). To the extent that this possibility might be theorized to exist independent of a couple’s interactions, it is highly speculative and will require considerable further theoretical and empirical scrutiny to be a persuasive direction.

A critic might readily point to cultures in which many couples indicate that they are satisfied with their close relationships, and yet there is little apparent indication that couples in those cultures do much self-disclosure or communication about their feelings. However, self-disclosure and other aspects of the minding process may be implemented in more subtle ways in different cultures. Without more evidence of process in these relationships across different cultures, minding cannot be ruled out.

A culture’s relationship history also may affect the nature of what is viewed as satisfying in close relationships. Cultural norms and social structures of a particular time may have placed less emphasis on emotional closeness within a romantic dyad, with more intimacy needs being met through friendship or extended family networks. Later generations of couples may now look back and wonder how these earlier couples could possibly have been satisfied without more dialogue and manifestations of what they conceive as intimacy. The embrace of principles obtaining in peer marriages and companionate-friendship-oriented relationships by contemporary generations of couples has set the table for our creation of the term minding and analysis of its current cherished stature in close relationships. We would argue, also, that in any culture, there will be couples who have intuitively engaged in a minding process and achieved intimacy and meaningfulness in their relationships.

**Conclusion**

In this article we presented an analysis of what we defined and described as minding activity in the development of satisfying and potentially long-term close relationships. We defined minding as a process involving behavior and attribution designed to know one’s partner; actions based on that knowledge that have the goal of facilitating the relationship; and acceptance of and respect for what is learned in the process. It is essential that both parties be involved in minding activities and believe that both are involved and sincere in their efforts. We suggested that this process model is similar to models of reciprocal self-disclosure and intimacy but that the minding model involves important differences as well. Those differences include the continuous quest for knowledge about other and the relationship, the role of attribution in a person’s location of causality and responsibility for other’s and own behavior, and beliefs about another’s effort and sincerity in engaging in the knowing process. Overall, we believe that minding analysis provides a further integrative link between attribution theory and close relationships.

The late short story writer Laurie Colwin (1981) said about the transformative power of love, “Love transforms a difficult person into a charming eccentric; points of contention into charming divergences”(p. 25). We would suggest that as much as love, it is the process of minding that leads to a transformation in meaning in which a partner’s difficult ways become charmingly eccentric and points of contention into charming divergences in the eyes of the beholder.

It is also our contention that minding can create more than just increased feelings of closeness. Couples who mind the relationship well may often perceive themselves as stronger together than apart. More romantically inclined partners may describe themselves as “soulmates” or as “meant” to be together. For these couples, this belief or feeling is a serious and fairly consistent one over time, not simply inspired by the first passion of courtship. Although not losing their individuality as people with separate minds and identities, individuals in well-minded relationships may develop the Gestalt-like sense that their relationship has an importance and meaning beyond that of their two separate lives.
Harold Kelley (1979) concluded his analysis of the structures and processes of personal relationships with the following eloquent observation about the difficult quest each human faces in trying to connect intimately with another mind:

The unavoidable consequence of human social life is a realization of the essentially private and subjective nature of our experience of the world, coupled with a strong wish to break out of that privacy and establish contact with another mind. Personal relationships hold out to their members the possibility, though perhaps rarely realized in full, of establishing such contact.

(1979, p. 169)

We believe that the process we call minding offers us as humans the best means by which we can attempt to break out of our private, subjective experience and connect intimately with another human mind and life. Minding makes people feel special. Nothing else does it better. Minding makes our relationships meaningful. Minding helps us solve problems and plan. Minding bonds and over time creates and sustains a sense of connection between two minds and lives.

References


