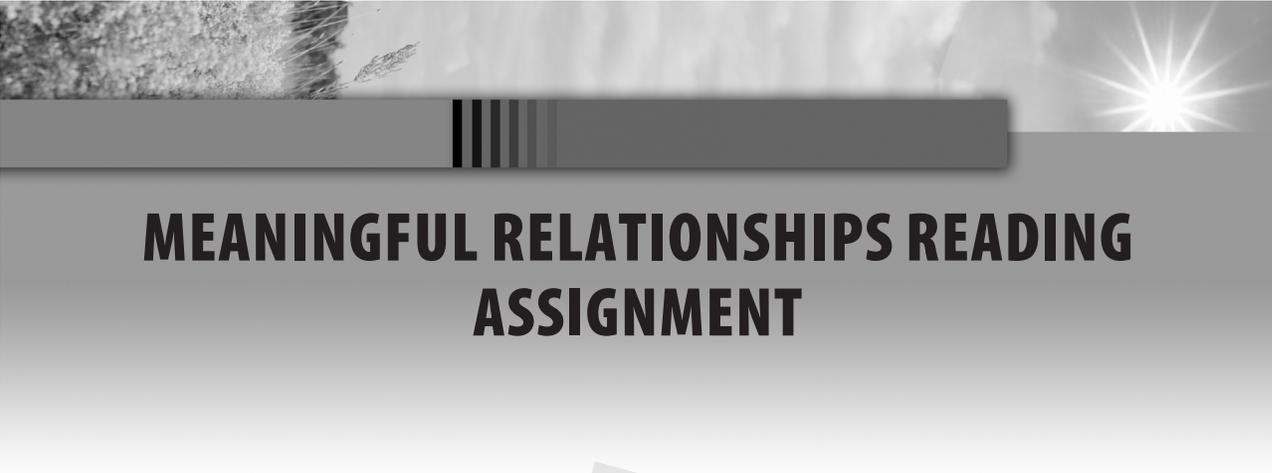




MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

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MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS READING ASSIGNMENT

Exploratory writing

These questions will help you begin to think about the ideas explored in the reading assignment. Answering them BEFORE YOU START this reading assignment will make the reading assignment more interesting and will help you remember the important ideas.

1. List the people with whom you have a meaningful relationship. First names are sufficient. Decide for yourself what does and does not constitute a meaningful relationship.
2. Are there more or fewer people on the list than you expected? Why?
3. Are there particular characteristics shared by all the relationships on your list?
4. Based on those shared characteristics, how would you define a “meaningful relationship”?
5. Given your own definition of a “meaningful relationship”, could you have a meaningful relationship with a person you interact with only while playing an online game? Explain your answer.

Reading Comprehension Questions

These questions will help you find and remember the important ideas in the reading assignment. Answer them DURING OR AFTER YOU COMPLETE the reading assignment.

1. Arguably, relationships are as important to your health as are diet and exercise. Why?
2. Describe four building blocks of meaningful relationships.
3. In what ways might online interactions be more effective in maintaining meaningful relationships than in-person interactions? Feel free to include your personal experiences and opinions in your answer.
4. In what ways might in-person interactions be more effective in maintaining meaningful relationships than online interactions? Feel free to include your personal experiences and opinions in your answer.
5. How do women’s same-sex friendships differ from men’s same-sex friendships?
6. How do similarity and propinquity work together?
7. Describe two possible ways that marriage and happiness might go together.
8. Are parents happier than people without children? Explain your answer.

Let's recap: Happy people have 1) enough safe water, air, land, and food; and 2) enough money. Happy people also have meaningful relationships. These relationships may be romantic, between family members, between friends or neighbors, or within a professional relationship (e.g., between a therapist and his or her client). Happiness is also related to the number of your daily social contacts, even if most of those interactions are superficial. People who interact with many neighbors, coworkers, retail clerks, even passers-by on a daily basis are healthier and happier than people who are socially isolated.

Close relationships also affect our physical health. People who have many close relationships live longer and remain healthier than people who have fewer close relationships (Myers, 2000). People who are diagnosed with a major illness are more likely to recover if they have many close relationships than if they do not (cf. Case, Moss, Case, McDermott, and Eberly, 1992). When people experience the end of a close relationship due to death, divorce, loss of a job, or relocation, they are more likely to become sick or die (Myers, 2000).

Let's examine what makes a relationship meaningful. Remember when we were defining happiness, we did so in terms of subjective well-being? Subjective well-being is the idea that people get to decide for themselves whether they are happy. To some degree, the same can be said regarding meaningful relationships. If the people involved in the relationship perceive it as meaningful, it's meaningful.

That said, meaningful relationships also tend to share particular characteristics. These characteristics can be used to identify meaningful relationships or to increase meaning in a relationship. Being mindful of the characteristics of meaningful relationships can also help you maintain a meaningful connection with a given person over time.

An important prerequisite for meaningful relationships is **time**. Relationships become more meaningful when people spend time together. The time might be hours doing a mutual activity (e.g., running together) or briefer but frequent interactions (e.g., daily chats with your neighbor or the server at your regular lunch spot).

Being in the same place may or may not count as spending time together, however. Generally, two people doing independent activities in the same room are less likely to develop a meaningful relationship than two people sharing in an activity, even if they are physically distant. For example, long-distance friends who regularly chat on Facebook or via text message may have a more meaningful relationship than a married couple that live together but rarely speak.

It has been generally accepted that in-person interactions are more effective in fostering meaningful relationships than online interactions. Online video games, particularly Massive Multi-Player Online Games like *Call of Duty* or *World of Warcraft* present an interesting challenge to this point of view. Might interacting with

What does this have to do with psychology?

The topic of relationships may be the first topic in the book that has an intuitive connection with psychology. Although many people would have difficulty understanding how global climate change or personal finance relate to psychology, fewer people would have difficulty understanding why an Introduction to Psychology course would include information about relationships. This belief may be because the idea that counseling psychologists can help people who are experiencing difficulty in their relationships is commonplace in American society.

What might be surprising is that psychologists also study how relationships begin, what maintains relationships over time, and the effects of relationships on people's physical and mental health. For example, do "opposites attract" or do "birds of a feather flock together"? Are online interactions as effective in maintaining close relationships as face-to-face interactions? Are people who have many close relationships happier and healthier than people with fewer close relationships?

In short, relationships are an important part of our experience as humans. One could argue that our ability to form close relationships with many different people is one hallmark of being human. Consequently, the study of relationships is a very important part of psychology.

people in an online game be just as effective in forming and maintaining meaningful relationships as in-person interactions? Certainly online games allow people to interact and share exciting activities with friends and family members who are physically distant. They can also create interesting opportunities to interact and develop relationships with new people.

Although the actual effects of online interactions on social relationships has yet to be studied in detail, teens and college students think gaming is an important part of their social lives.¹ The majority of teens (76%) play video games with other people, either online or in-person, although the majority of teens (82%) also play games alone. Twenty percent of college students reported that gaming is an effective way to make new friends and improve existing relationships. More than half (60%) of college students agreed that gaming served to replace social interactions when their friends were unavailable, although slightly more students (65%) reported that gaming wasn't taking time away from spending in-person time with friends and family.

In contrast, in-person interactions have characteristics that may have unique benefits for meaningful relationships. For example, in-person interactions include richer sensory input than online interactions (<http://users.rider.edu/~suler/psyber/showdown.html>). Although video chats and online games allow people to see and hear each other (or read each other's words typed in text on the screen), you can't touch, smell, or taste the face in the video chat. It is important to note that touch and smell have particularly powerful connections with emotions (we'll see below that sharing emotions is another building block of meaningful relationships). In-person interactions allow these additional sensory experiences even if you don't make use of them.²

There may be a gender-related component to the role of online gaming and meaningful relationships. Specifically, although girls and women do play online games, the majority of frequent or daily gamers are boys and men. Men's same-sex friendships are also notably different than women's same-sex friendships. When men spend time with their friends, the interactions focus on a shared activity like watching or playing basketball. For men, the activity is the point. When women spend time with their friends, they might engage in a shared activity but the activity is just an excuse to share details about their lives and their feelings. Perhaps online gaming is particularly effective at maintaining men's close relationships because online games offer exciting and unique shared activities (e.g., raiding a competing guild or winning in a virtual fire fight).

As I hinted above, another important building block of meaningful relationships is emotional self-disclosure. **Emotional self-disclosure** is sharing personal information about your feelings, perceptions, and memories with another person. Emotional self-disclosure is a powerful way to increase intimacy in a relationship. It is so powerful, in fact, that Americans become uncomfortable when a person discloses too much information (i.e., TMI).

One reason Americans become uncomfortable when a person discloses too much information is that emotional self-disclosure carries pressure to reciprocate. If I tell you something personal about myself, you will feel some pressure to share a similarly personal detail about yourself. In some interactions, this reciprocal sharing fosters shared intimacy³ and increased relationship satisfaction. In other interactions, unwelcome emotional self-disclosure can motivate the recipient to distance herself from the other person to avoid any resultant increased intimacy.

Two other important characteristics of meaningful relationships are propinquity and similarity. **Propinquity** refers to being physically close to another person. People who live or work physically close to each other are more likely to develop meaningful relationships than those who do not probably because physical closeness creates many opportunities for people to interact. For example, college students are more likely to develop close friendships with roommates or dorm mates than with students who live across campus (Hays, 1985).

¹Survey results presented in this section are from two reports published by the Pew Internet and American Life Project: Jones (2003) "Let the Games Begin: Gaming Technology and College Students" and Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgill, Evans, and Vitak's (2008) report on gaming among teens ages 12–17 (i.e., Teens, Video Games, and Civics).

² Please don't try to taste the check out clerk at Walmart or visibly sniff the good-looking person who sits near you in class.

³Throughout this reading assignment, "intimacy" refers to emotional closeness, not romantic or sexual behaviors.

People are also more likely to develop meaningful relationships with people who share their attitudes, interests, and values. **Similarity** fosters meaningful relationships in at least three ways. First, you are more likely to spend time with someone who enjoys the same activities. In turn, spending time together fosters meaningful relationships.

Second, conversations with someone who shares your beliefs and values are more likely to result in moments of agreement and less likely to result in moments of disagreement than conversations with someone who does not share your beliefs and values. Agreeing with a person is usually a pleasant experience and disagreeing can be an unpleasant experience. If chatting with a person who shares your beliefs and values is pleasant, you are more likely to do it again. Those repeated, pleasant conversations can become the foundation of a meaningful relationship. One of the upcoming sections in the book discusses this idea, called operant conditioning, in more detail. Behaviors that lead to desirable consequences are more likely to be repeated than behaviors that lead to undesirable or neutral consequences.

Third, similarity and propinquity work together. People who share attitudes, interests, and values are more likely to be in the same physical space than those who do not share attitudes, interests, and values. For example, two people who enjoy outdoor activities are more likely to be outdoors in the same place at the same time than if one of them disliked outdoor activities. Put another way, people with similar interests are drawn to the same physical places and are, thus, more likely to interact with each other than people with dissimilar interests.

The link between similarity and propinquity also works in the opposite direction. People who spend time in the same physical space become more similar to each other over time, if for no other reason than they share that space. For example, you may or may not have had much in common with your roommate(s) or the people who live in the same dorm or apartment complex when you moved in. However, living in the same building or neighborhood becomes something that you have in common with those people over time. You are also more likely to discover ways in which you are similar to people if you interact with them frequently because you share the same physical space.

In summary, frequent social interactions and close relationships improve our mental and physical health. Just like happiness, meaningful relationships are defined subjectively. However, emotional self-disclosure, time spent together, similarity, and propinquity are building blocks of many meaningful relationships.

Although meaningful relationships can exist between friends, coworkers, neighbors, and professionals and their clients, many people associate meaningful relationships with marriage and children. Most Americans get married at some point in their lives. In addition, most American women give birth at some point in their lives. Specifically, 82 percent of women aged 40–44 had given birth to at least one child in 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau).

The relationship between marriage and happiness is well established. Data from tens of thousands of people worldwide indicate that married people are happier and more satisfied with life than people who have never married or who are divorced or separated (Myers, 2000). People in unhappy marriages are less happy than the divorced or unmarried, but people who are very happy in their marriage are some of the happiest people all around (Myers, 2000).

Recall that simply observing that two variables are related does not allow us to decide that one variable caused the other. The reason is that there are three possible causal relations: 1) Variable A causes Variable B; 2) Variable B causes Variable A; or 3) another variable causes both Variable A and Variable B. This issue is important when examining marriage and happiness. We know that marriage and happiness are related. Is that because marriage causes happiness, happiness causes marriage, or another variable causes both marriage and happiness?

All three possibilities may be true but only the first two have been systematically investigated. Happy people may be more likely to get married because they are generally more pleasant to be around and less self-focused than unhappy people (Myers, 2000). On the other hand, marriage offers intimacy, companionship, and new sources of identity and self-esteem that may increase happiness (Crosby, 1987).

In contrast, the relationship between children and happiness is complex. Many studies indicate that having children reduces life satisfaction, decreases positive feelings, increases negative feelings, and increases one's

risk for depression (e.g., Evenson and Simon, 2005; Twenge, Campbell, and Foster, 2003). Other studies find that marital satisfaction plummets with the arrival of the first child and drops slightly more with each additional child. In one study, around half of couples that are new parents report as much marital distress as couples who are in marital therapy (Picker, 2005). Marital satisfaction doesn't return to prechild levels until the last child leaves the house. On the other hand, other studies find no difference in happiness between parents and nonparents. Still other studies find increases in meaning, gratification, and reward among parents compared to nonparents (e.g., White and Dolan, 2009).

The results of these studies may be mixed partly because they use different research methods and different definitions of happiness. For example, if we want to understand how children affect happiness, is marital satisfaction a reasonable variable to measure? Should we use a cross-sectional design where we compare parents to nonparents at the same point in time or a longitudinal design where we compare a given set of couples before and after they become parents?

A very recent study by Nelson and her colleagues used three different methods and operational definitions of happiness to overcome the inevitable limitations of any individual study (Nelson, Kushlev, English, Dunn, and Lyubomirsky, 2013). First, a large national survey used a cross-sectional design to compare whether parents report higher levels of overall happiness, life satisfaction, and meaning than nonparents. This study found that parents reported being happier than nonparents in terms of these big, global definitions of happiness (Nelson et al., 2013, p. 6).⁴

This national survey did a great job of comparing overall happiness between parents and nonparents. Recall, though, that another reasonable definition of happiness is experiencing lots of positive emotions throughout the day. To compare moment-to-moment happiness between parents and nonparents, the authors did a second study that asked parents and nonparents to report on their moment-to-moment positive experiences as well as overall well-being and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Compared to nonparents, parents reported more positive moment-to-moment emotional experiences as well as higher levels of overall well-being and perceptions of meaning. So, two different studies using different methods and different definitions of happiness found the same pattern: Parents are happier than nonparents.

Still, an important earlier study asked parents to rate how much they enjoyed taking care of their children compared to their other daily activities, like shopping, watching TV, or cooking (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, and Stone 2004). That 2004 study found that parents enjoyed many daily activities more than taking care of their children. So, Nelson and her colleagues decided to do a third study specifically designed to test whether the results of the 2004 study replicated.

In this third study, parents reported what they were doing and how much they enjoyed it during eight segments of the previous day. Nelson and her colleagues then compared how much parents enjoyed taking care of their children to how much they enjoyed doing other things. However, Nelson used a slightly different technique for analyzing the data than the study done in 2004.

The different math mattered. Nelson found that parents reported experiencing more positive emotion and perceptions of meaning when they were taking care of their children than when they were not (Nelson et al., 2013). Summarizing the results of all three studies, Nelson and her colleagues concluded, "contrary to repeated scholarly and media pronouncements, people may find solace that child care may actually be linked to feelings of happiness and meaning in life" (Nelson et al., 2013, p. 9).

If two well-done studies using somewhat different methods and definitions of happiness drew opposite conclusions about children and happiness, which one do you believe? Recall the importance of replication. In general, scientists are more inclined to believe studies that replicate results across methods. In other words, studies that use different methods and obtain the same results are more believable than studies that use just

⁴ However, the relation between parenthood and happiness was primarily true for married fathers between the ages of 26 and 62. Single parents and younger parents were less happy than peers without children. There was no difference in happiness between mothers and childless women.

one method. Thus, Nelson's 2013 paper that used three different methods and found consistent results across all three methods is more believable than Kahneman's 2004 paper that used just one method. And, you may have thought that research methods didn't matter!

In summary, marriage and children are important sources of meaningful relationships. Mountains of data indicate that married people are happier than unmarried people. In addition, new data indicate that parents generally experience more frequent positive emotions and a greater sense of meaning and purpose than nonparents.

As the recipe for happiness goes, meaningful relationships may be the easiest piece to achieve. Your meaningful relationships are not limited by global politics, as is the fate of our safe air, water, food, and land. Relationships are not a function of your financial good fortune or savvy, as is money. There are countless people near you (or whom you can arrange to be near you) who are similar to you. You can build meaningful relationships with many of those people with an investment of time and attention. What are you waiting for?

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