

# Twenty years of research on relationship maintenance: More diversity is needed

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Relationship researchers often test their hypotheses on real people. But are their samples actually representative of diverse populations? A new study from the University of Illinois evaluates 20 years of research on

relationship maintenance and finds diversity lacking.

Relationship maintenance refers to the process of engaging in actions, activities, and thoughts that can sustain a [relationship](#). It has become a robust area of study, but there is little agreement about definitions and methodologies, says Brian Ogolsky, associate professor in human development and family studies, and the paper's lead author.

Ogolsky and co-author Laura Stafford, professor in the School of Media and Communication at Bowling Green State University, reviewed 198 academic studies published between 2002 and 2021. Their review includes articles that focus on [romantic relationships](#) and specifically mention relationship maintenance.

The paper, published in the journal *Personal Relationships*, is part of a special issue on advances in relationship science over the past two decades.

"For quite some time, people thought about maintenance as the stage in the middle of relationships where it's not breaking up, and it's not initiating. You start a relationship, you may stop it, and everything in between is a maintenance phase," Ogolsky says.

"In this paper, we wanted to challenge the often-used definitions in favor of something that is dynamic. We believe there is nothing static about the middle of a relationship; we view maintenance as active process."

There is a multitude of actions and processes romantic partners may engage in to maintain their relationship, depending on personalities, relationship dynamics, and [cultural context](#), so trying to pin down specific strategies would be fool's errand, Ogolsky says.

But some overall concepts are frequently cited in the literature. For

example, one seminal study identifies five factors crucial to relationship maintenance: positivity, assurances, social networks, shared tasks, and openness. Other researchers have built on these factors and expanded or specified them. Another oft-cited study distinguishes between strategic and routine activities. Routine activities may support the relationship without explicit intent, whereas people engage in strategic activities to benefit the relationship.

Relationship maintenance research covers a sprawling array of concepts, definitions, and methodologies, but Ogolsky and Stafford found little [diversity](#) regarding study participants' demographic characteristics. Most studies primarily include people who are white, heterosexual, and college age or slightly older.

"We found that across all studies of varying sizes, 77% of all participants were white. So, more than three-quarters of everything we've learned about relationship maintenance over the last two decades is essentially about white people," Ogolsky says.

Further, they found that more people identify as female than male, and the vast majority are in heterosexual relationships in these studies.

"All those features tell us a story about a very limited group of people who have been prioritized in research," he adds.

The results likely reflect the demographics of the researchers themselves, Ogolsky says, adding that the numbers are striking, and it is concerning that many studies do not address the lack of diversity and its possible ramifications.

"It's one thing to have a white sample; it's quite another to not say that you have a white sample and just talk about the process as if it applies to everyone, even though your sample is all white, or your sample is all

women, or your samples are all heterosexual," he explains.

"Most studies don't discuss [gender identity](#) at all; they assume everybody is cis-gendered, and many assume heterosexuality. That's a relic of the past and one that limits our research generalizability."

Study samples are also limited to a youthful age range, with a median age of 28. Around 50% of samples consist of [college students](#), which is convenient for researchers but not necessarily representative of other age groups. Ogolsky says researchers are getting better about using participants outside of college and obtaining funding for more diverse samples and longitudinal studies, but there is still a long way to go.

Moving forward, Ogolsky says researchers must consider to whom their research pertains, and to whom it does not.

"We also need to acknowledge who we are as people and how our [biases](#) sneak into our research. Finally, we need to make concerted efforts to recruit participants that are not 'easy' to access so we learn more about relationship diversity," he states.

"Methodologically, we have to think about how to expand what we do to more adequately capture relationship diversity. This also leads to a need to challenge what we think we know. Instead of saying, 'past research found this in this sample, so we should assume it is truth,' we need to think about how things may be different and how they may or may not apply to diverse populations."

**More information:** Brian G. Ogolsky et al, A systematic review of relationship maintenance: Reflecting back and looking to the future, *Personal Relationships* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/per.12429](https://doi.org/10.1111/per.12429)

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