

# RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

## It's a thin line between envy and pride

**Dr Rebecca Pinkus, of the School of Social Sciences and Psychology, will lead a team of researchers to investigate how relationships weather the comparisons partners make with each other and with other couples. The project, which is funded by the Australian Research Council, will identify factors that promote healthy relationships - a cornerstone of wellbeing.**

'Imagine that Angelina and Brad, a hard-working couple with six children, are dealing with their youngest child's temper tantrum,' says Dr Pinkus. 'Brad is able to soothe the child, but Angelina has been unsuccessful. They both realise Brad has a knack for calming unruly children that Angelina lacks. What kinds of feelings might this comparison evoke in Angelina and Brad?'

Possible outcomes are: Angelina feels resentful at Brad's toddler-taming success, or joyful. Brad feels proud of himself, or burdened by Angelina's inability to soothe the child. Both partners' reactions could bring them closer or create distance and distress.

Dr Pinkus's research will profile the broad spectrum of emotional responses that emerge when romantic partners compare themselves to one another and to other couples. Specifically, it will look at how emotions elicited by social comparisons can trigger behaviours that benefit or harm relationship wellbeing. The project will use real-life experiences, longitudinal surveys and laboratory experiments to hone in on the complex dynamics of relationships and understand how people balance self-oriented concerns with relationship-oriented concerns.

Strong romantic relationships are among the main components of personal wellbeing, which comprises physical health, mental health and subjective happiness. Research has established that individuals who have poor relationship wellbeing are



more likely to suffer poor physical and mental health, affecting the healthcare system and workplace productivity.

This research will provide important insights into the long-term impacts of partners' positive and negative interactions, and highlight the underlying processes that make some relationships thrive and others fail. It will enable relationship counsellors to identify ways to increase satisfaction and decrease conflict between partners – helping them to focus on vicarious pride rather than corrosive envy, for example – and potentially reduce marital unhappiness and divorce rates.

**Project Title:** Emotional responses to comparisons in romantic relationships: implications for relationship wellbeing

**Funding has been set at:** \$223,838

**Chief Investigators:** Rebecca Pinkus, Lisa Williams, Julie Fitness, Joseph Ciarrochi

**Contact Details:** [r.pinkus@uws.edu.au](mailto:r.pinkus@uws.edu.au)  
URL - <http://www.uws.edu.au/ssap>

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