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## Perceptions of Relational Mobility Among University Students

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### Abstract

*This study aims to examine individuals' perceptions of their relational mobility, that is, how they perceive their interactions and the development of their social relationships. Perceptions of relational mobility are considered central in social psychology, as they reflect an individual's ability to build an effective social network and move flexibly within it, allowing for positive interaction with their social environment. This ability is a fundamental requirement for achieving psychological and social balance, especially in societies undergoing rapid transformations in patterns of interaction and communication. Certain aspects of relational mobility such as low social support, reduced face-to-face communication, and feelings of rejection or loneliness indicate that social relationships are not a luxury but a necessity of human life. Through them, the fabric of daily life is formed, and feelings of belonging, safety, and support are built. People with healthy and balanced relationships tend to be happier, live longer, and are more resilient to life's challenges. Thus, understanding perceptions of relational mobility and their impact plays a vital role. Their importance has grown with the changes brought about by the digital age, where interactions have become faster, shallower, and more prone to change and disconnection. Individuals lacking positive perceptions of their relational mobility may experience social isolation or rejection, leading them to seek compensation through digital platforms (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Relational mobility is also a significant indicator of an individual's capacity for social adaptation, particularly during critical life stages such as adolescence or the transition to university or professional life. Those with positive perceptions of their ability to build and expand their social networks are more capable of handling stress and demonstrate greater competence in managing social tensions (Helsen et al., 2000).*

**Keywords:** Relational Mobility, Social Relationships.

### Introduction

Social relationships are fundamental pillars of human life. They go beyond surface-level interactions to include networks of support, communication, and mutual influence that shape the lives of individuals and communities alike. Humans are inherently social beings who cannot live in isolation; being part of a group is the basis for psychological, emotional, and even physical balance.

Understanding relational mobility perceptions and how they influence us helps us take steps toward improving our relationships through social interaction and the fulfillment of psychological needs especially the need for social satisfaction and pleasant emotions during interpersonal exchanges (Lipman et al., 1979).

Relational mobility is a pivotal concept in social psychology. It reflects an individual's ability to build and navigate a network of effective social relationships, enabling positive interaction with their social environment. This ability is essential for maintaining psychological and social balance, particularly in societies experiencing rapid changes in communication patterns.

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Theorists have provided multiple definitions for relational mobility, with more agreement than disagreement among them. For example:

- Yuki (2007) defined it as the freedom and opportunity to form friendships or new relationships in a given social context.
- Falk (2009) defined it as the extent to which individuals have opportunities to form new relationships and voluntarily end existing ones within a particular context.
- Thomson (2018) referred to it as the cultural capacity to choose and meet people based on personal preferences.

This research adopts **Alan Fiske's** theory of *Relational Models*, which posits that human social relationships are organized according to four basic models. These models represent different patterns people use to manage their everyday interactions with others. According to Fiske, these relational models help people understand social dynamics and coordinate behavior across various contexts. He proposed that all human interactions can be described by four "relational models" or primary forms of human relationships (Fiske, 1992):

#### **Fiske's Four Relational Models:**

1. Communal Sharing
2. Authority Ranking
3. Equality Matching
4. Market Pricing

Fiske suggests that a mismatch between relational models is a common cause of interpersonal conflict. These models may involve different behaviors in the same context. Conflict often arises (Fiske, 1992) when people apply different relational models to the same situation. For example:

- One person may follow a "communal sharing" model, expecting to give without receiving, while the other uses a "market pricing" model, expecting reciprocation.
- Or, two colleagues may view their relationship differently one as equal, the other as hierarchical leading to tension and disagreements.

Relational mobility can impact various psychological and behavioral outcomes, such as:

1. General trust
2. Subjective happiness and mental well-being
3. Self-esteem
4. The pursuit of individuality
5. Quality of personal relationships
6. Concerns about privacy on social media platforms
7. Cultural variations in personal behavior, e.g., North Americans tend to act more proactively across different relationship types compared to East Asians, who show more interconnectedness.
8. Helping friends and seeking support from them

9. Disclosing personal failure and vulnerability
10. Experiencing romantic emotional love
11. Trusting strangers (Yamagishi, 1994)

These findings are particularly interesting given that North American societies are traditionally viewed as "individualistic" or "independent," while East Asian societies are more often described as "collectivist" and "interdependent" (Thomson et al., 2018).

## Method

A random sample of 400 students (male and female) from both scientific and humanities colleges was selected. Variables and tools were determined through a review of relevant literature and previous studies. The researcher ensured the adopted scale was suitable for the study population and met scientific and objective standards expected of psychological measures. The study employed the **correlational method** (Lamar, 2000, p.1).

To achieve the study objectives, the researcher used the **Thomson et al. (2018)** Relational Mobility Scale, which includes 12 items. Responses range from (1) Strongly Agree to (7) Strongly Disagree. The scale covers three domains:

- Meeting new people
- Choosing personal relationships
- Association with undesirable groups

Some items are reverse-coded to reduce response bias. The scale has been used in over 39 countries, demonstrating its predictive strength and cross-cultural reliability.

After expert review and revisions, the researcher administered the scale to the sample and analyzed the collected data statistically. Reliability was measured using **Cronbach's Alpha**, yielding the following values:

- Meeting new people: 0.73
- Choosing personal relationships: 0.72
- Association with undesirable groups: 0.77

All statistical analyses were performed using **SPSS** software. The following statistical techniques were employed:

1. **Independent sample t-test:** To examine gender differences in relational mobility perceptions.
2. **Pearson correlation coefficient:** To assess the relationship between each item and the overall score of the Relational Mobility Scale.
3. **Alpha coefficient for internal consistency:** To assess reliability using Cronbach's alpha.
4. **Confirmatory factor analysis:** To validate the scale's factor structure.
5. **One-sample t-test:** To determine the significance of differences between the sample mean and the hypothetical mean.

## Results

### Objective (1): Measuring Perceptions of Relational Mobility among University Students

To achieve this objective, the researcher administered the Relational Mobility Perception Scale to a sample of 200 male and female students. Using a one-sample t-test, it was found that the differences were statistically significant in favor of the sample's mean scores on the subscales of "Meeting New People" and "Choosing Personal Relationships". However, the difference on the "Being Tied to Undesirable Groups" subscale was in favor of the hypothetical mean. The calculated t-values were greater than the tabulated t-value of 1.96 at a degree of freedom of 199 and a significance level of 0.05.

### One-Sample t-Test Comparing Sample Mean with Hypothetical Mean on Relational Mobility Subscales

Subscale	Mean	Std. Dev.	Hypothetical Mean	Calculated t-value	Tabulated t-value	df	Significance
Meeting New People	14.12	2.05	12	14.60	1.96	199	Significant (favoring mean)
Choosing Personal Relationships	14.73	2.54	12	15.23	1.96	199	Significant (favoring mean)
Being Tied to Undesirable Groups	8.44	3.06	9	2.59	1.96	199	Significant (favoring null)

These results indicate that the sample exhibited high levels of perception regarding meeting new people and selecting personal relationships, whereas their perception of being tied to undesirable groups was low.

### Objective (2): Identifying Gender Differences in Relational Mobility Perceptions

To examine this objective, an independent-samples t-test was used to identify gender-based differences in relational mobility perceptions. The results showed a statistically significant difference in the "Choosing Personal Relationships" subscale in favor of females, and in the "Being Tied to Undesirable Groups" subscale in favor of males. These differences were confirmed as the calculated t-values exceeded the tabulated value of 1.96 at the 0.05 significance level with a degree of freedom of 198. The similarity between males and females in the "Meeting New People" subscale suggests that both genders are socially open and possess comparable communication skills.

### Independent-Samples t-Test for Gender Differences in Relational Mobility Perceptions

Subscale	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t-value	Tab. t-value	Significance
Meeting New People	Male	100	14.33	1.91	1.45	1.96	Not Significant
	Female	100	13.91	2.17			

Choosing Personal Relationships	Male	100	14.21	2.64	2.96	1.96	Significant (females)
	Female	100	15.25	2.32			
Being Tied to Undesirable Groups	Male	100	8.91	2.89	2.19	1.96	Significant (males)
	Female	100	7.97	3.17			

## Conclusions

1. In light of the growing psychological pressures and ongoing societal conflicts, compounded by the complexity of modern life and the rise of virtual over real social connections, individuals must equip themselves psychologically by embracing noble values such as: developing a moral conscience, strengthening bonds of love, reinforcing willpower, upholding dignity, promoting honor, fostering empathy, feeling responsible, and seeking truth in the pursuit of justice.

2. Based on the study's objectives and findings, it can be concluded that university students possess a positive level of relational mobility perceptions. This is evident in their strong ability to meet new people and thoughtfully choose their personal relationships, along with their low tendency to associate with undesirable groups indicating social maturity and relational awareness that help in forming healthy, balanced relationships.

3. The results also revealed statistically significant gender differences in certain dimensions of relational mobility. Females showed greater ability in choosing personal relationships, while males demonstrated a higher tendency to associate with undesirable groups. This highlights the importance of considering gender differences when designing social and counseling programs.

## Discussion

The primary aim of the current study was to explore the nature of individuals' perceptions of relational mobility.

According to Relational Models Theory, individuals typically possess a good level of social skills that enable them to expand their social networks through their ability to initiate new relationships and selectively choose whom to engage with. The ability to meet new people reflects social openness, self-confidence, and effective communication. Choosing personal relationships indicates social maturity and awareness of the distinction between healthy and unhealthy connections. Meanwhile, the low tendency to associate with undesirable groups is likely due to students' social awareness and ability to avoid negative peer influence, suggesting a positive level of relational maturity.

Relational Models Theory also posits that societies with high relational mobility offer individuals more opportunities to form new connections and freely choose social partners. In contrast, low relational mobility societies tend to have more fixed social ties influenced by environmental and societal conditions.

Accordingly, the results show significant gender differences in relational mobility perceptions.

- **Females' superiority in "Choosing Personal Relationships"** may reflect a higher level of social and emotional awareness, as well as an ability to evaluate relationships based on

personal values and emotional maturity.

- **Males' higher score in "Being Tied to Undesirable Groups"** might be attributed to greater susceptibility to social pressure or a desire to assert identity and belonging, even within socially unaccepted groups. This suggests a need for more guidance and supervision for males in this domain.

These findings are consistent with the results of Yuki et al. (2007) and Benenson et al. (2011).

### **Conflict of Interest**

The researcher affirms that there is no conflict of interest with any party related to the execution of this study, and no commercial or financial agreements were made with any governmental or non-governmental institution that could be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

### **Financial Disclosure**

All research expenses were covered solely by the researcher. No financial support or funding was received from any organization or institution, either within Iraq or abroad.

### **Informed Consent**

Prior to conducting the study, consent was obtained from all participants. Additionally, the researcher obtained approvals from deans and department heads at the universities where the study was carried out.

### **Ethics Statement**

Due to the absence of a formal ethics committee within the Department of Psychology, the College of Arts, or even at the University of Baghdad, no written ethical approvals could be issued. Instead, the researcher relied on official letters issued by the Graduate Studies Division of the College of Arts, which facilitated coordination with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research as well as all colleges and departments involved in the study sample.

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