

Personal Relationships

An Introduction

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The smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction. From such nets of souls, societies, the social world, human life springs.

Tony Kushner

As far back as Aristotle, humans have been recognized as social animals. Most scholars, regardless of their theoretical background, agree that social connections are the basis of the human condition. From birth, and even before, our relationships with others are key to survival (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Infants who have close social bonds with their primary caretakers are more likely to thrive than those who do not. As children grow, their primary dyadic relationships proliferate into webs of social connections. These social connections, in turn, give rise to the creativity, structure, and ingenuity that allow us to improve society. Clearly, the advances that humans have made depend heavily on collective action.

What precisely do we mean when we refer to personal relationships? Two classic definitions that specify the domain of the present volume are as follows:

Two people are in a relationship with one another if they impact on each other, if they are interdependent in the sense that a change in one person causes a change in the other and vice versa. (Kelley et al, 1983, Chapter 1 by Berscheid & Peplau, p. 12)

Robert Hinde (1979, p. 15) wrote that “[a] relationship involves a series of interactions between two individuals known to each other” and devoted a chapter to expounding his views on the properties of relationships. He described such series of interactions as involving behavioral, cognitive, and affective (or emotional) aspects. Somewhat akin to Berscheid and Peplau’s view, Hinde (p. 14) noted that “[t]he interchanges have some degree of mutuality in the sense that the behavior of each takes into account the behavior of the other.” He underscored that relationships differ from single or limited interactions; relationships require an extended series of interactions over time that produce emergent properties beyond those of limited interactions. Also, he distinguished formal relationships from personal relationships: relationships in which most of the participants’ behavior is determined by their

position in society, where they do not rely on knowledge of each other, are role or formal relationships.

Personal relationships, in short, have a holistic quality. They are more than isolated, interactive moments. They are more than highly scripted role relations. Personal relationships comprise a range of types of relationships (see Koerner, Chapter 5, this volume) including, but not exclusively, our most intimate relationships.

There are several reasons why personal relationships are important and why they are studied. Time-utilization studies show that from age eighteen to sixty-five, we spend more than 70 percent of our waking hours in the presence of other people (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1982), and that figure ignores that 61 percent of Americans share their bed with a significant other (Rosenblatt, 2012). When people are asked about what makes their lives meaningful, what contributes to their happiness, and what they value, they frequently identify close relationships. People have a pervasive, nearly universal need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Research suggests that we are eager to form new bonds, but dislike breaking them. Similarly, we devote considerable cognitive processing to interpersonal interactions and relationships (Fletcher, Overall, Friesen, & Nicolls, Chapter 17, this volume).

Finally, relationships are key to our well-being. A plethora of evidence shows that close relationships are indeed vital to various indicators of well-being including happiness, mental health, physical health, and even longevity (Berkman, 1995; Myers, 1999). In examining results from more than 308,000 people, Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton (2010) found that those with adequate social relationships had a 50 percent greater chance of survival during a seven-year follow-up period than those with poor or insufficient relationships. As the slogan for a California public service program proclaims: “friends are good medicine.” Undoubtedly, there are exceptions to these generalizations, and it is difficult to know for sure that relationships are the cause of these outcomes. Nonetheless, the association of sociability with well-being cuts across time, cultures, measures of sociability,

indicators of well-being, and longevity – and the association is a statistically strong one (Feeney & Collins, Chapter 21, this volume; Holt-Lunstad, Chapter 33, this volume). In the health domain, cigarette smoking is one of the most widely studied and clearest hazards to health and longevity. Research demonstrates that sociability has as strong, probably even a stronger association with well-being, than does smoking. Stop smoking and have successful friendships: you'll live a long, happy life.

Of course, relationships are not always positive experiences. There is a “dark side” to close relationships (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2010; Olson & Fine, 2016; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Personal relationships can serve as a context for a variety of negative emotions including jealousy (Buunk, Dijkstra, & Massar, Chapter 26, this volume) and hurt (Leary & Acosta, Chapter 28, this volume). Further, people can experience emotional, psychological, or physical abuse at the hands of a loved one (Arriaga, Cobb, & Daly, Chapter 27, this volume). But even when problematic, relationships are significant to us.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Because relationships are so central to people's lives, they have garnered the attention of researchers and theorists from a number of different disciplines. Indeed, scholars have devoted a great deal of time and effort to understanding the antecedents, processes, and outcomes of close, interpersonal relationships.

The purpose of the *Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships* (2nd edn.) is to present a synthesis of cutting-edge research and theory. This book integrates the varying perspectives and issues addressed by those who study how people relate to one another. In order to capture the breadth and depth of the literature in this area, the work of scholars from a variety of disciplines – including several subfields of psychology (e.g., social, developmental, personality, and clinical), communication, family studies, and sociology – is highlighted.

The first section of this book offers an introduction to the study of personal relationships. The history of the field – especially during the past dozen years – is examined, as are three major theories used to understand personal relationships and challenges for the field that they and contemporary research leave to be met. The role of various theories in generating research is noted throughout this volume. Research methods used to study close relationships and the decisions that scholars make are discussed. Current standards for analyzing cross-sectional and longitudinal dyadic data using unique applications of analytic procedures, and their contributions to the relevant literature, are presented. In addition, the introductory section illuminates the ways relationships have been divided into “types.” The concerns raised in this section provide a foundation for examining personal relationships because they set the baseline for the ways researchers observe, explain, and evaluate relationships.

In the second section, research and theory explicating the development of personal relationships, from when people meet until when relationships end, are covered. Chapters focus on issues such as relationship initiation, marriage, and divorce. Although the developmental course of relationships may be viewed as somewhat linear, much of the research covered in this section points to the very complex, multifaceted nature of relationship development including the possibility that relationships change from being highly intimate to post-intimate and more casual.

The third section focuses on relationships across the life span. The nature and functions of relationships vary depending, in part, on the age of relational partners. Children have different ways of relating and they develop relationships for different reasons than do adolescents, young adults, or older adults. People dealing with the tasks of middle age engage in different sorts of relationships than do the elderly. Chapters in this section describe some of the special concerns reflected in personal relationships in various life stages.

In the fourth section, individual differences that influence personal relationships are examined. People approach and enter relationships with some relatively stable characteristics. Whether those characteristics involve personality traits, attachment styles, biological sex, or sexual orientations, they affect the developmental course of people's relationships. The material covered in this section of this volume describes the effects of individual differences on personal relationships.

The fifth and sixth sections present relationship processes. In the fifth section, neuroscience, social cognition, communication, and emotion are discussed. These are fundamental processes that influence, and are influenced by, relationships as well as other arenas of life. The sixth section deals with processes that involve interpersonal interaction. These include disclosure, social support, conflict, and sexual behavior.

Over the past dozen years, researchers have focused attention on the problematic aspects of personal relationships. People involved in close relationships experience stress due to circumstances that occur outside their relationship as well as events that are instigated inside the relationship by the partners themselves. Relational partners sometimes feel jealous or lonely. They often lie to each other. They may engage in extradyadic liaisons and may even physically or psychologically abuse each other. Not being valued as a relationship partner can be extremely painful. Some relational threats are common and the successful navigation of these threats actually may add to partners' confidence in their union. Other threats not only damage the relationship – they may jeopardize the physical and psychological well-being of one or both partners. The seventh section of this *Handbook* covers several of the more widely studied threats to personal relationships.

The eighth section examines the major qualities that suggest how well relationships are doing. The study of relational satisfaction began in the 1920s and more

recently has been augmented by investigations of love, commitment, and intimacy. This section addresses the antecedents and dynamics associated with these phenomena as well as the challenges that researchers face as they attempt to conceptualize and operationalize the qualities of personal relationships. The section also includes a chapter focusing on how the quality and quantity of relationships are associated with physical health.

Of course, relationships do not happen in a vacuum. They are influenced by physical, social, and cultural contexts. The ninth section deals with some of the factors outside individuals and relationships that affect the bonds between partners. This section includes classic topics (e.g., social networks) as well as leading-edge topics (e.g., the role of digital technology in forming, maintaining, and dissolving relationships).

Although the focus of much of the research deals with the initiation and establishment of relationships, relationships actually persist for a long time, sometimes with problems. The final section of this volume covers how people sustain their relationships over time, how psycho-educational programs can bolster relationships, and how therapists can intervene to repair problematic relationships.

To ensure consistency across this volume in terms of scope and coverage, authors were guided in the following ways. First, and foremost, they were asked to provide an integrative synthesis of existing theory and research, featuring classic and cutting-edge references where appropriate. Authors were encouraged to provide a historical or conceptual framework for organizing the literature and to make note of any important conceptual shifts. Second, they were instructed to comment on basic paradigms and research issues and to critically evaluate the area's methods. Third, authors were asked to provide judicious coverage of, and endeavor to resolve, any conflicts in the literature. Fourth, while this volume is primarily retrospective, authors were asked to signal directions for future research.

CHANGES TO THE PRIOR EDITION

Research and theory on personal relationships have changed since the first edition of *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships* was published, thus prompting changes in the second edition of the *Handbook*. One of the most obvious changes in relationship science involves the analytical techniques, including longitudinal analyses, used to study personal relationships (see Kashy, Ackerman, & Donnellan, Chapter 4, this volume). Many of the techniques used now are more sophisticated and allow researchers to probe questions that they previously were unable to study. For example, rather than examine relationship phenomena at a single point in time, scholars increasingly are conducting analyses that track the developmental course of relationships. Similarly, researchers have begun to shift their focus from studying individual partners in relationships to examining dyadic phenomena that occur between partners.

A second change that has influenced scholarship on personal relationships involves the theories that researchers use. While the core theories (e.g., interdependence theory, attachment theory, and evolutionary theories in psychology, and uncertainty reduction theory in communication) have remained the same, the emphasis placed on various theories has shifted. For instance, interdependence theory has become slightly less prevalent, whereas evolutionary theories have become more visible. Attachment theory has become an ascendant influential force, and has matured with researchers examining dimensions of attachment rather than typologies and attachment processes rather than differences among individuals with different attachment styles. Besides shifts in the core theories, newer, more-focused theories have increased in prominence (see Perlman, Duck, & Hengstebeck, Chapter 1, as well as Clark, Chapter 2, this volume). These changes, and others, have shaped the questions researchers are asking as well as the findings generated by their studies.

A third important change in the literature is a change in substance (see Perlman et al., Chapter 1, this volume). Besides a plethora of research on attachment, other topics that appear to have become more prominent in the period 2006 to 2017 have included studies involving the Internet (e.g., online dating, computer-mediated communication, social media use), studies involving health and health science issues and instruments (e.g., those using biomarkers, physiological and/or neuroscience measures, including ones concerned with mortality and health outcomes), and work concerned with self-regulation. We also perceive that research on personal relationships has witnessed a modest increase in emphasis on social motivations and goals such as appetitive versus aversive motivations (e.g., Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000), harmonious versus obsessive motivations (e.g., Bélanger, Lafrenière, Vallerand, & Kruglanski, 2013), and the place of goals in partners' interdependent relationships (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015). Ten years ago these motivations were being discussed, but empirical research demonstrating how they operate in the context of personal relationships was nascent. Now the empirical work that emerged from those discussions is impacting the field. Researchers have investigated predictors, outcomes, and processes associated with various motivations. The result is substantial literatures on topics such as compassionate love, forgiveness, rejection, and responsiveness in personal relationships.

It is worth noting that some of the substantive changes in relationship research have been driven by social changes. For example, there have been major shifts over the past two decades in attitudes toward same-sex couples. These attitudinal changes have engendered increased research on the relationships of same-sex couples and the influence of marriage in same-sex relationships (see Diamond & Blair, Chapter 15, this volume). Similarly, people are living longer today than they were several decades ago. In part as a consequence, many researchers have

turned their attention to concerns associated with physical health (see Holt-Lunstad, Chapter 33, this volume) and to the (extended) period of young adulthood (see Madsen & Collins, Chapter 10, this volume).

To reflect the aforementioned changes in analytical techniques, theoretical emphases, and substance, the authors who contributed to the proposed volume were asked to attend to methodological, theoretical, and substantive issues when they wrote their chapters. In addition, several chapters were added to the table of contents including: Neuroscience of Salutary Close Relationships (Chapter 16); Self-Disclosure in Relationships (including secrecy) (Chapter 20); Acceptance, Rejection, and the Quest for Relational Value (Chapter 28); Relationships and Physical Health (Chapter 33); Social Networks and Personal Relationships (Chapter 34); Personal Relationships and Technology in the Digital Age (Chapter 35); and Promoting Healthy Relationships (Chapter 37).

AUTHORS

The individuals who contributed to the *Handbook* were selected as authors because they are recognized for the outstanding theoretical and empirical contributions they have made to the study of personal relationships. The contributors, in short, are distinguished, internationally known scholars. Many ($N = 20$) are among the fifty-three most eminent scholars in the field as identified by a survey of relationship scientists (see Perlman et al., Chapter 1, this volume). They herald from a variety of disciplines and approach personal relationships from a number of different perspectives. They focus on topics ranging from the beginning to the ending of relationships, from micro to macro forces, and from the problematic to the sublime. Readers will find that the authors are adroit at expressing themselves in a scholarly, yet readable fashion.

As the field has continued to grow, so has our author set. Sixty-eight authors contributed to the first edition; this edition has more than 100. In this expansion we have achieved continuity and change. Fifty of the sixty-eight authors from the first edition are contributors to this edition. More than half of the current chapters have new first authors, many with the original first authors continuing. Sixteen chapters have a new author set including the seven aforementioned chapters new to this edition.

We are sad to report that F. Scott Christopher, co-author of the sexuality chapter, died from cancer in February 2018. For roughly 30 years beginning in 1986 Scott was a faculty member at Arizona State University. Author of the book, *To dance the dance: A symbolic interactional exploration of premarital sexuality*, sexuality within close relationships was a major focus of Scott's scholarship. He contributed to the close relationships community in many ways including serving as an

associate editor of the *Journal of Sex Research*, and in multiple roles in family and relationship organizations. His intellect and personal warmth touched and added to the lives of many students and colleagues. It is with fondness and admiration that we share this brief remembrance of Scott's life.

AUDIENCE

Because the contributors offer sophisticated, new perspectives on extant literature as well as important theoretical and methodological recommendations for future research, the *Handbook* is an important volume for individual researchers and theorists to use and have close at hand on their shelves. Graduate students in social psychology, communication, family studies, sociology, and clinical psychology also will need to know the material published in this book. They may use the whole volume or selected chapters as a text in one of their courses or as an advanced introduction to the study of close relationships. Additionally, practitioners will be served by this volume. They will find that the theory and research presented provides a foundation for understanding relationships seminal to their therapeutic work with individuals confronting relationship issues, couples, and families.

Readers who are familiar with the literature on personal relationships will note that the current volume is one of three published since 2010 that summarizes research on personal relationships. In part this is because of the speed with which the field has advanced. One of the other books, entitled *The Oxford Handbook of Close Relationships*, was edited by Jeffry Simpson and Lorne Campbell and was published in 2013. The other is *The APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology: Interpersonal Relations: Volume 3*. This book was edited by Jeffry Simpson and John Dovidio and was distributed in the summer of 2014 with a 2015 publication date.

Although both of these earlier volumes offer a relatively comprehensive treatment of personal relationships, the current volume is unique in three important ways. First, it draws authors from multiple disciplines. Second, and relatedly, because this volume has a multidisciplinary author set, it gives a broader coverage of relationships. Third, the content of the present volume is unique in the emphasis it gives to threats to relationships and the promotion and repair of relationships.

We believe social science knowledge is best when it can be given away. If this volume is to succeed, it must engage you and leave you, the reader, wiser. Whether it is for your personal life, for a course, for your professional practice, or for doing the next generation of research, the chapters should leave you better informed about, and with better tools for understanding, close relationships. We hope that you will develop an intimate relation with the contributors' ideas and join with us in helping to disseminate, apply, and/or empirically advance their wisdom.

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