THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

With the field of study of personal relationships having grown dramatically in the past quarter century, the second edition of The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships serves as a benchmark of the current state of scholarship, synthesizing the extant theoretical and empirical literature, tracing its historical roots, and making recommendations for future directions. Written by internationally known experts from key disciplines, the Handbook addresses both fundamental questions and cutting-edge concerns.

This second edition has been thoroughly updated to reflect recent developments in analytical techniques, shifts in theoretical emphases, and an increased attention to social processes. New chapters include Neuroscience of Salutary Close Relationships; Self-Disclosure in Relationships; Acceptance, Rejection, and the Quest for Relational Value; Relationships and Physical Health; Personal Relationships and Technology in the Digital Age; and Promoting Healthy Relationships. This compendium of state-of-the-art research and theory on personal relationships will be of great value to researchers, graduate students, and practitioners.

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SECOND EDITION

THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Foreword

Reading through Ellen Berscheid’s preface to the previous edition of *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, I realized that I had become involved in studying personal relationships at a very different time in my life from Ellen, and probably from most relationship researchers. By the time I was carrying out relationship research, I had been married for about sixteen years and had four children. In addition, I have now lived through an even wider range of relationship experiences, including the sudden death of my husband of fifty years, a type of issue of little interest to relationship researchers, although perhaps it should be studied more. Divorce is widely studied, but there is not much work on how those made single by the death of a long-term partner deal with the dramatic changes in their lives.

One important factor that increased my interest in relationship research all those years ago was the development of the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships (ISSPR) as a research organization focused on personal relationships. I remember Michael Argyle from Oxford (who had been one of the external examiners of my doctoral work and was a friend of my advisor) coming to visit at the University of Queensland in 1982. He told me that he had been talking about my work to John Gottman (another of my external examiners) in Madison the previous week at the first International Conference on Personal Relationships. My response was, “Why wasn’t I told about that conference?” Of course, there was no email or Internet back then and the chances of a virtually unknown relationship researcher from a faraway country being invited were pretty slim, even though I had had several papers published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

I made sure that I was at the next conference in 1984 and at every ISSPR or International Association for Relationship Research (IARR) conference after that, right up until 2014. These societies and the conferences and associated journals were critical to my academic career. Many of the authors featured in this volume will have been inspired by those conferences as will many researchers like me who were starting their careers at that time. Those times of learning together played an important part in my academic development and were critical in keeping my focus on relationship research and making it my passion.

The editors of this volume are among those who have been very important to my career. Daniel Perlman was a real encourager in my early days along with others like Hal Kelly, and was influential in my becoming the *founding editor of Personal Relationships*, the first journal that really belonged to ISSPR. That was a hectic time for me, but also a very valuable and stimulating time because I learned such a lot. And what can I say about Anita Vangelisti? She is an excellent scholar and editor and a very dear friend. I have been privileged to come to know her and to work with her.

One aspect of relationship research I have come to appreciate is the multidisciplinary nature of the work clearly reflected in this *Handbook*: psychologists from various
subdisciplines (social, clinical, developmental), as well as scholars in communication, sociology, and methodology and international specialists in technology are all involved.

I remember someone from ISSPR (now IARR) saying to me many years ago that researchers who studied personal relationships were mainly interested in the beginnings and endings of relationships and were less concerned about the processes of relationships that lead either to growth and fulfillment or to dissolution. How things have changed! Or have they? Certainly there is now a great deal of research about the internal processes of relationships and what leads to their flourishing or failing. We have really begun to realize how complex human relationships are and how much they affect the well-being of those involved.

We just need to look at the wide range of topics covered in this Handbook to realize that interest in relationship research extends way beyond beginnings and endings. In fact, the interesting part of relationships for many of us is what happens between the beginning and the end, what we generally talk about as relationship processes. Of these, the most important process, at least from my perspective, is communication. Right from my first small studies that I carried out as part of my undergraduate degree (later published in Developmental Psychology), my focus has generally been on communication in family relationships across a broad spectrum from mother–infant relationships and attachment through to elderly spouses caring for their partners in old age.

At the time I began my research, studying communication in relationships was much more difficult than it is today, particularly when trying to study communication “in the field.” All the equipment we had to take along to the preschool in the late 1970s was very bulky compared with what is available today. Coding was also very tedious and time-consuming compared with what would happen today. These days all the equipment (or at least its equivalent) would be available not only in university departments but in most people’s homes. Data entry would no longer be carried out using those awful punch cards (complete with their hanging chads) but would be recorded and analyzed much more easily, perhaps even in situ.

I have focused a lot on communication in my research because I am convinced that relationships, and particularly marriages, thrive or fail depending on the quality of the communication between the couple, although we still don’t completely understand all the factors that affect the quality of communication. It is also true that parent–child relationships are heavily dependent on the communication between the parents, as well as between the parents and the child. If parents are continually bickering and struggling to agree about how to manage their children’s inevitable bad behavior, the quality of both the marital relationship and the parent–child relationship is likely to suffer. Communication is clearly also an important focus in this Handbook.

In this Handbook, the changes in analytical techniques because of the huge changes in technology are discussed as are the many changes in the effectiveness of a range of techniques used to collect data about relationships. Changes that come to mind include online participation in completing questionnaires or interviews with participants around the world and being able to set up computer programs to record participation in various game-like activities that can then be assessed using the computer.

One issue that has bothered me since I’ve been involved in relationship research is trying to understand the full meaning of “personal” when used with relationships. For example, family relationships often do not seem to be considered “personal.” Although marital relationships are considered personal, parent–child and sibling relationships are not. I had the experience at one time of suggesting that I would present a paper on research on sibling relationships at a small conference on personal relationships held in Australia every couple of years. I had been doing this research with several of my students over a number of years. The organizer wasn’t keen on my suggestion, although the audience was really quite interested, because these relationships are relevant to so many of us, and are generally the longest relationships we have. For example, I have been a sibling for seventy-eight years, but was a wife for only
fifty, although that relationship was definitely closer than my relationship with any of my siblings.

This Handbook clearly focuses on the processes involved between the initiation and the dissolution of relationships, not just in the section on relationship maintenance and repair, but it also deals with many other factors and processes involved in keeping relationships healthy. One thing I have noticed with my own family is that problems in one part of the family also affect other parts of the family, including other generations. I write this as mother to four and grandmother to eight at various stages of relationship initiation, development, and dissolution.

My husband and I were very involved in marriage enrichment right up to the time he died, and I stayed involved for several years to help train new couples as leaders. In the model we used, the couples enrolled in the retreat were given the opportunity to suggest topics to be covered in each session. As you might expect, there were two topics that were suggested by every group: communication and handling conflict. Very often, these topics were also the first to be mentioned. These topics are mentioned in most chapters in this Handbook, and are the likely focus of chapters on relationships across the life span at whatever stage, the development of relationships, individual differences, basic processes, emotion, couple conflict, jealousy, aggression and violence, loneliness, social networks, and support, and I could go on.

Where communication is effective (to go back to some of my early studies, message sent equals message received) and positive, almost any situation can be dealt with. Each member of the couple or family knows what the issue is and the possible means of resolving the conflict. Of course, not everyone will necessarily be happy with the final decision, but if they believe that they have been heard, they are more likely to cooperate.

I have no doubt that the quality of our relationships is important, and as Stephanie Cacioppo and Julianne Holt-Lunstad point out in their chapters, the quality of our relationships seems to provide important benefits to our general health, including affecting such basic processes as those involving our cardiovascular systems, as well as our overall life satisfaction. Of course, as we all know, maintaining healthy relationships can be a challenge, and may be even more challenging currently with both partners often involved in high-level employment and juggling the demands of that employment, caring for small (or even older) children, managing basic household tasks, and the complexity of life in the twenty-first century, such as caring for elderly parents, and being involved in community organizations.

One of the decisions that my husband and I made was that I would be at home with our children until they were all at school (eleven years in my case), which is why I started my academic career so late. To be perfectly honest, though, I had no idea early on that I would even have an academic career, but our situation changed so dramatically that, with my husband's support, I was able to have an international and, I believe, influential career.

I noted the inclusion in this Handbook of material from different disciplines that have not been so involved in the past. Neuroscience was one discipline that stood out to me, probably because there was a group of neuroscientists at my own university several years ago, but I don't think they had anything to do with relationships between people. I think that those of us who studied relationships were generally considered "on the very soft side of science." I actually had someone make such a comment to me some years ago and she was an anthropologist!

One of the things my university (or at least the School of Psychology) discovered was that courses on family and on personal relationships attracted plenty of students. Judy Feeney and I had 350 students in a senior course on personal relationships. My course "The Family" was canceled at one stage as "not central to the curriculum," despite protests from the students. Interestingly, it was restored several years later when the head of the school was concerned about low enrollments, and then I continued to teach both courses until my retirement. Some of the mature-age students would ask me why they hadn't been taught these courses before they started making their own relational mistakes.
When I peruse the list of authors in this volume, I notice many names that I know very well, as well as others whose work I know well but who are not known to me personally. I am also pleased to see names that I do not know at all. It seems clear that relationship researchers are still mentoring new graduates and graduate students by inviting them to collaborate on book chapters. Many of my own graduate students worked with me on articles and book chapters related to their work, and I hope that they gained good experience in the process.

Many aspects of relationships have changed even over the past ten years since the publication of the first edition of The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships. One important example of these changes concerns the different ways relationships can be initiated in today’s society, and the way that those looking for new relationships are not confined to those in their own social circle but can avail themselves of various types of social media and services like Tinder to meet new people. These encounters can, of course, be problematic as the potential partners one meets may not be psychologically stable. We have had several instances in Australia where a person met a “potential partner” through a dating agency such as Tinder, and ended up abused or dead.

On the positive side, because of technological advances, it has also been possible to keep in close contact with loved ones when traveling, especially overseas. For example, when I spent my last sabbatical in Texas, I was able to keep in touch with my husband using email, and he looked forward to having a message when he woke up each morning, although we still talked on the phone several times each week as well. This was very different from my first sabbatical in Madison when we only had the phone. In 2010 when I went to the ISSPR conference in Israel, we had Skype and could see each other as well as share our news. Modern technology can be used to enhance relationships or, as we found in a recent study on Facebook use, it can create problems for those relationships.

Relationships, like people, flourish when they are prioritized and cared for and flounder when they don’t get the attention they need. This Handbook presents a vast amount of research by a range of distinguished international scholars written in a scholarly and yet readable fashion. It has the potential to help both those who teach about relationships and those who work to repair relationships that have hit stumbling blocks along the way. I congratulate Anita Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman on both the breadth and depth of the work they have brought together in this important volume.

Patricia Noller
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