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INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS CULTURES

Intimate relationships exist in social domains, in which there are cultural rules regarding appropriate behaviors. But they also inhabit psychological domains of thoughts, feelings, and desires. How are intimate relationships experienced by people living in various types of romantic or sexual relationships and in various cultural regions around the world? In what ways are they similar, and in what ways are they different? This book presents a cross-cultural extension of the findings originating from the classic Boston Couples Study. Amassing a wealth of new data from almost 9,000 participants worldwide, Hill explores the factors that predict having a current partner, relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment. These predictions are compared across eight relationship types and nine cultural regions, then uniquely combined in a *Comprehensive Partner Model* and a *Comprehensive Commitment Model*. The findings test the generalizability of previous theories about intimate relationships, with implications for self-reflection, couples counseling, and well-being.

Charles T. Hill is Professor of Psychology at Whittier College, California, where he won the Nerhood Teaching Excellence Award. He has a PhD in Social Psychology from Harvard University and is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, the American Psychological Association, and the American Sociological Association.

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Although scholars from a variety of disciplines have written and conversed about the importance of personal relationships for decades, the emergence of personal relationships as a field of study is relatively recent. *Advances in Personal Relationships* represents the culmination of years of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work on personal relationships. Sponsored by the International Association for Relationship Research, the series offers readers cutting-edge research and theory in the field. Contributing authors are internationally known scholars from a variety of disciplines, including social psychology, clinical psychology, communication, history, sociology, gerontology, and family studies. Volumes include integrative reviews, conceptual pieces, summaries of research programs, and major theoretical works. *Advances in Personal Relationships* presents first-rate scholarship that is both provocative and theoretically grounded. The theoretical and empirical work described by authors will stimulate readers and advance the field by offering new ideas and retooling old ones. The series will be of interest to upper-division undergraduate students, graduate students, researchers, and practitioners.

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Intimate Relationships Across Cultures

A Comparative Study

Charles T. Hill
Whittier College, California



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“How do I love thee?
Let me count the ways.”
—Elizabeth Browning (1850)

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COLLABORATORS

The following collaborators made major contributions to the project in one or more of the following ways: by translating the questionnaire, by recruiting participants, by authoring Spotlights.

- Kâmile Bahar Aydın, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Turkey
- Maria Rivas Barros, Universidad del Magdalena, Colombia
- Diana Boer, University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany
- Claudia C. Brumbaugh, Queens College, City University of New York, United States
- José Enrique Canto y Rodriguez, Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, Mexico
- Rodrigo J. Carcedo and José L. Martínez, Universidad de Salamanca, Spain; Andrés A. Fernández-Fuertes and Noelia Fernández-Rouco, University of Cantabria, Spain; and Anni M. Garzón, University Foundation of the Andean Area, Colombia
- Elena Chebotareva, Moscow State University of Psychology and Education, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia
- Sylvia Xiaohua Chen, and Algae K. Y. Au, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China
- Artemis Z. Giotsa, University of Ioannina, Greece
- Victoria V. Ilchenko and Fatima G. Sanakoeva, North Ossetian State University, Vladikavkaz, Russia; Valery L. Sitnikov, Herzen State Pedagogical University, St. Petersburg, Russia; Natalia V. Parnyuk, University of the Ministry of the Interior, St. Petersburg, Russia; and Elena Sinelnikova, Emperor Alexander I St. Petersburg State Transport University
- Loredana Ivan, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest, Romania
- Ilona Kajokiene, Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania
- Rukhsana Kausar, University of Management and Technology; and Shehnaz Bano, University of the Punjab, Pakistan

List of Collaborators

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- Mie Kito, Meiji Gakuin University, Japan
- Karolina Kuryś-Szyncel and Barbara Jankowiak, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland
- Zsuzsa F. Lassú, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary
- Olufemi A. Lawal, Lagos State University, Nigeria
- Xiaomin Li, University of Arizona, United States
- Guillermo Macbeth and Eugenia Razumiejczyk, Universidad de Salvador and Argentinian Council of Science and Technology, Argentina
- Silvia Mari, Università di Milano-Bicocca, Italy
- Takafumi Sawaumi, Ryutsu Keizai University, Japan; and Tsutomu Inagaki (Fujii), Kagoshima University, Japan
- Jenny Lukito Setiawan, Universitas Ciputra Surabaya, Indonesia; and Immanuel Yosua, Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia
- Vered Shenaar-Golan and Ofra Walter, Tel Hai Academic College, Israel
- Suhas Shetgovekar, Indira Gandhi National Open University, India
- Mein-Woei Suen, Asia University/Chung Shan Medical University, Taiwan
- Cláudio V. Torres, University of Brasília, Brazil

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FOREWORD

Leo Tolstoy wrote “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” It is the first line of his novel *Anna Karenina*. Such openings in books and movies are often crafted to set the tone and signal what is ahead. In Chapter 1 of this book, *Intimate Relationships Across Cultures: A Comparative Study*, Charles T. (Chuck) Hill has an opening, elegant in its simplicity, that tells where his volume is headed:

This book reports the results of a comprehensive cross-cultural study of intimate relationships. The study was designed to do the following:

- Update the findings of the Boston Couples Study and other research
- Develop comprehensive models that combine the findings
- Compare the models across relationship types and cultures.

In broad strokes, the book accomplishes three things: (a) it builds on the foundation of a longitudinal study begun in the 1970s, (b) it provides a comprehensive model for predicting relationship commitment, and (c) it examines the extent to which predictors of commitment are similar or different in various types of relations and different world regions. Each of these goals merits comment.

THREE OBJECTIVES OF THE BOOK

Led by Zick Rubin along with Chuck Hill and Anne Peplau, the Boston Couples Study originally followed 231 dating couples for 25 years, which is extended to 38 years as part of the diverse sample in this book. In his 1969 doctoral dissertation, Rubin (1970) developed what became a groundbreaking social psychological measure of romantic love. In the Boston Couples Study, he and his coauthors set out to determine which couples stayed together and which terminated their relationships. Along the way, Rubin, Peplau, and Hill examined numerous aspects of the couples’ relationships bearing on Rubin’s central question. These included topics such as the couple factors in who

volunteered to be research participants, how relationships developed, self-disclosure, partners' gender roles, sex differences, sex and contraceptive use, commitment, various factors predicting whether or not couples stayed together (e.g., premarital factors including cohabitation, romantic beliefs), and the associations of relationships with other variables (e.g., life satisfaction). In all, the Boston Couples Study Publications, listed in this volume, include twenty-five items. The study became one of the preeminent, most-cited social psychological studies of relationships done in the 1970s.

Apropos of Chuck Hill's first goal, replications of previous studies have clear advantages such as allowing examination of historical change. They can also have drawbacks such as when questionnaire items have dated referents. In being a partial replication with new elements, in this work Chuck Hill capitalized on the best of both worlds. He was able to have baseline historical results but also new measures and the ability to study a much larger, more diverse sample of participants.

A second of Hill's key goals for the book was to develop two overarching predictive models: one of being (vs. not being) in a relationship, the other of partners' commitment to the relationship. Regarding commitment, Hill looked for what predicts commitment directly as well as what predicts relationship satisfaction, which in turn predicts commitment. In focusing on commitment, Hill is aligning himself with an interdependence theory (IT) position as articulated by VanderDrift and Agnew (in press): "From an IT perspective, ... commitment, conceptualized as consisting of a long-term orientation, a motivation to persist, and an affective connection to a partner (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001) fuels an individual's expectation that they will persist 'through thick and thin.'"

An exciting feature of Hill's study, reported in the present book, is how well he was able to predict commitment. The late Caryl Rusbult's Investment Model is widely recognized as the leading theoretical perspective on commitment (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). Rusbult believed that the amount partners invest in a relationship and how satisfied they are with it foster commitment, while the quality of the alternatives (e.g., other possible relationships) undermines commitment. Rusbult's model has enjoyed considerable predictive success, predicting nearly two-thirds of the variance in commitment (Le & Agnew, 2003). As readers will learn, Hill's empirically grounded, comprehensive model can do even better. Although advancing a theoretical model is different from advancing an empirical approach, Hill's unusually high level of predictive accuracy is certainly a kudo for his project.

Hill's third objective in doing the book was to test his model for predicting commitment in different types of relationships as well as different world regions. With male and female participants in heterosexual and same-sex relations as well as in married and non-married relationships, Hill had eight

types of relationships. He also had participants from nine cultural regions across the globe.

The variability captured in Hill's global effort is relevant to two thrusts in contemporary social science research: using diverse samples and exploring core principles. In 2010, Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan published their "weirdest people in the world" article. Henrich et al. noted that behavioral scientists routinely conduct their studies using participants from "Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies." They argued that these scientists then make broad claims about human behavior, but these claims are based on only a small, "unusual" proportion of the human species. Henrich et al. concluded, "WEIRD subjects may often be the worst population from which to make generalizations" (p. 79). They recommend, as Hill admirably does geographically, forging links to diverse samples.

A second thrust, this time in the relationship literature per se, is toward extracting a set of core principles from extant theories (Finkel, Simpson, & Eastwick, 2017). Finkel et al. do recognize the importance of cultural variation. Similar to Finkel et al. looking across theoretical perspectives, Hill's testing of findings across eight relational types and nine regional groups can help identify empirical regularities that might warrant being in the core set of phenomena that theorists should address.

When examining cultural variation, Hill primarily attends to how the association between variables is the same or different in various cultures. That is an important and frequently neglected part of how culture influences relationships. Other studies examining culture's impact on relationships often compare how cultures differ in average levels of key variables. In line with this more common approach, Hill also has a chapter on gender and cultural differences in the average levels of key variables. What do you think: are couple satisfaction and commitment pretty much the same across cultures, or do you think they vary between cultures? An intriguing part of Hill's analysis is this: do the two ways of comparing cultures produce similar conclusions, and what are the similarities and differences Hill finds?

STRENGTHS OF THE VOLUME

In an enlightening manner, the book provides a portrait of the universality and cultural specificity of personal relationships. For me, Hill's project and his report of it have two clusters of strength: (a) those of the study and (b) those of the book and its author. The laudable qualities of the study include the following:

- The study focuses on two of the most central aspects of close relationships: commitment and satisfaction.

- Whereas journal articles typically examine just a few factors, this project is comprehensive in exploring many factors related to its key outcome measures.
- It makes explicit comparisons across cultures instead of discussing each culture separately.
- It compares predictions across cultures instead of just average levels.
- It explores similarities as well as differences across cultures and relationship types.
- It considers effect sizes – the strength of predications, not just statistical significance.

Strengths of the author and the book include the following:

- Chuck Hill is an award-winning teacher who writes in a clear, direct style, which is apparent throughout and especially in his easily understood description of statistical and methodological issues.
- The book has a straightforward structure that builds across the chapters to an overall conclusion, the predictive model of commitment.
- The book balances a more Spartan statistical approach to reporting the study itself with a more detailed, more culturally sensitive set of SPOTLIGHTS.
- With its roots in the 1970s Boston Couples Study, for readers keeping track, the book uniquely illuminates a question that students, researchers, and members of the general public repeatedly ask: are our relationships changing?
- A short glossary of statistical terms assists readers who might want it.

THE BONUS FACTOR

Beyond Hill's investigation, the book features twenty SPOTLIGHTS as a bonus. These get into specific aspects of relationships in specific cultures. Various SPOTLIGHTS provide additional, country-specific data (e.g., Sexual Behaviors in Hungary), engage in theoretical analysis (e.g., Intimacy and Relational Mobility), summarize research conducted in specific cultural regions (Conflict Resolution in Spain and Colombia), depict historical change within a culture (Changes in Family Life in Greece; Traditional Norms and Social Changes in China), discuss atypical circumstances (e.g., Spouses with a Special Needs Child), and the like. Thus the SPOTLIGHTS expand the book's coverage, adding nuance and texture to the volume.

It is also interesting to consider these contributions from the perspective of the state of relationship science internationally. The number of international contributors testifies that relationship science is an area of research in many parts of the world. Personality and social psychology, a dominant

contributing discipline in the personal relationships area (Perlman, Duck, & Hengstebeck, 2018), has been and continues to be dominated by American scholars, but that domination appears to be lessening throughout the world. Adair and Huynh (2012) reported that in leading personality and social psychology journals the percentage of US first authors dropped from 82 percent in the early 1980s to 58 percent by 2008. The proportion of US authors was lower in psychology journals with lower citation impact scores, dropping from 76 percent to 41 percent over time. The proportion of US first authors was considerably less and dropped less in international psychology journals, going from 41 percent to a percentage in the low 30s.

Independent of judgments about the merits of different styles of research, Adair, Puhan, and Vohra (1993) have differentiated between indigenous and endogenous research, a distinction somewhat akin to emic (from the perspective of those within the culture) vs. etic (from the perspective of an observer outside the culture). Indigenous research emanates from within the culture where it is conducted, frequently dealing with applied questions of local significance rather than more universal, scientifically driven inquiries. References to the culture are common and citation of international scientific literature is less prominent. The worldview and the methodology on which research is based may also vary across countries and world regions.

In the SPOTLIGHTS, I detect some signs of an indigenous view. For example, Setiawan's discussion of dating in Indonesia rests heavily on Muslim views. Some of the SPOTLIGHTS are largely region-specific, primarily descriptive reports (e.g., Hill, Kausar, and Bano's analysis of parent vs. own-choice marriages in Pakistan). An indicator of a highly developed level of indigenous research is a high ratio of references to publications by local researchers relative to psychologists from highly developed countries (Adair et al., 1993). The discussion of power dynamics in Mexican couples does this, especially referencing Rivera Aragon and Diaz-Loving's formulations.

Yet many of the authors of SPOTLIGHTS drew on concepts and use methods (e.g., questionnaires, basic statistics such as correlations) similar to those used in North American-led research. A further indication of the more universal, endogenous trend is evidence that previously in Latin American countries where a psychoanalytic perspective was ubiquitous (Benito, 2012), this influence has been replaced more recently by neuroscience research and cognitive and behavioral theories. The SPOTLIGHT on conflict in Colombia (and Spain) shows no discernible influence of psychoanalytic thinking.

In sum, the distinction between indigenous and endogenous research has fuzzy edges. Nonetheless, characteristics of an endogenous approach are frequent in the SPOTLIGHTS, even ones that help explain cultural differences (e.g., Intimacy and Relational Mobility).

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR RELATIONSHIP
 RESEARCH SPONSORSHIP

This volume is sponsored by the International Association for Relationship Research (IARR), the leading international scientific society for the study of personal relationships. It is an exemplary addition to its *Advances in Personal Relationship Series*, joining some sixteen other published or soon-to-be-published books. The volumes in this series represent the culmination of years of scholarship on personal relationships. Contributing authors are internationally known scholars from a variety of disciplines, including social psychology, communication, family studies, human development, and sociology. Illustrating the ever-evolving yet cumulative nature of relationship science, this volume builds on the past from a fresh vantage point. It admirably achieves the standards and orientation of the series in presenting

first-rate scholarship that is both provocative and theoretically grounded. The theoretical and empirical work described by authors will stimulate readers and advance the field by offering up new ideas and retooling old ones. The series will be of interest to upper-division undergraduate students, graduate students, researchers, and practitioners. (IARR sponsorship page, this volume)

Other volumes in the series have addressed various aspects of personal relationships: their development, maintenance, and decline; specific types of relationships (e.g., romantic relations in emerging adulthood, marriage); external influences on relationships, including social networks; support; their role in health; abuse and other negative aspects of relationships; and ways of optimizing positive relationships. The book by Robin Goodwin (2008) entitled *Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition* is an especially noteworthy complement to the current volume. Goodwin primarily focuses on historical change. He does this, however, by reviewing research from across the globe. In doing so, he examines the impact of macro-level variables such as social class and especially cultural variations on dyadic partners' everyday relationships. His book, like the present volume, reminds us that cultural milieus in which relationships function are not fixed but rather fluctuate over time. The take-home message is that scholars should attend to the way both time and culture, as macro-level factors, impact relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

Tolstoy's opening sentence warrants a refrain: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Notarius and Markman (1993) have challenged the second part of the statement that every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. From an overall vantage point, Hill's study

Foreword by Daniel Perlman

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seems to me to support Tolstoy's first assertion: satisfied and committed couples all share many attributes in common. Foster those conditions and qualities in your own life; you will have rewarding primary bonds.

I have studied relationships throughout my fifty-plus year professional career. Chuck Hill's book has given me a world tour that has taught me new information and focused my thinking on what most importantly predicts key elements of relationship success. The book provides clear answers to crucial questions that diverse audiences want addressed. I am grateful. It is my privilege to extend to you an invitation to dig into what the book offers.

**Daniel Perlman, Former President (2012–2014)
International Association for Relationship Research**

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Zick Rubin created the first love scale and initiated the Boston Couples Study in collaboration with his graduate students Anne Peplau and myself. It was enjoyable to work together with such great colleagues.

The original two-year data collection of the Boston Couples Study (1972–74) was supported by National Science Foundation grant GS27422 to Zick Rubin. Collection of the fifteen-year follow-up data was supported by grants to Charles T. Hill from the Haynes Foundation and from Whittier College, and by a University Research Grant from UCLA to Anne Peplau. The twenty-five-year and thirty-eight-year follow-ups were supported by faculty research grants to Charles T. Hill from Whittier College.

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