Placing Personal Relationships Research in Context.

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Abstract:

The articles in this issue are published in the order in which they were submitted. In light of our editorial commitment to international and interdisciplinary scholarship (see Editor's Preface, *Personal Relationships*, Volume 14, Issue 1), the members of my team and I are pleased to note that these eight articles and one brief report are authored by 19 scholars representing four disciplines (communication studies, psychiatry, marriage and family therapy, and psychology) and four countries (Israel, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States). One of the articles is the result of interdisciplinary collaboration ("The Initiator Style Questionnaire: A Scale to Assess Initiator Tendency in Couples," by Wayne H. Denton, Psychiatry and Marriage and Family Therapy, and Brant R. Burleson, Communication Studies). This article reports on the findings from three samples, a community sample (married university employees, members of church groups, and residents of a retirement community), a clinical sample (married adults attending a general psychiatry clinic or a marriage and family therapy clinic), and a sample of adults who responded to advertisements inviting participation in a study of marital communication.

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Article:

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The rest of the articles in this issue were produced by individual psychologists, teams of psychologists (in one case, a psychologist and her undergraduate psychology students), and a team of communication studies scholars. This latter team, the team of communication scholars (Andrew M. Ledbetter, Em Griffin, and Glenn G. Sparks, "Forecasting 'Friends Forever:' A Longitudinal Investigation of Sustained Closeness between Best Friends"), contributed the first brief report that my team has accepted for publication. Their longitudinal study of friendship is based on a sample originally recruited in 1983 from a small, private, Protestant liberal arts college near a large city in the United States Midwest.

In addition to the international and disciplinary mix of the articles in this issue, another of their strengths is that all of the authors were careful to study samples appropriate for the topic they were addressing. For example, some of the authors collected data from samples of undergraduate psychology students to address research questions appropriate for studies of young adults (i.e., Katherine B. Carnelley and Angela C. Rowe, "Repeated Priming of Attachment Security Influences Later Views of Self and Relationships" and Catherine A. Sanderson, Emily J. Keiter, Michael G. Miles, and Darren J. A. Yopyk, "The Association between Intimacy Goals and Plans for Initiating Dating Relationships"). Although a study conducted in New Zealand relies on a university sample, rather than recruiting participants from a class, Myron D. Friesen and Garth J. O. Fletcher ("Exploring the Lay Representation of Forgiveness: Convergent and Discriminant Validity") found their participants at a temporary job placement service or outside the main entrance to the library.

Other researchers supplemented samples of undergraduate students with samples from other more diverse populations. For example, Amy K. Kiefer and Diana T. Sanchez ("Scripting Sexual Passivity: A Gender Role Perspective") report on the results of two studies, one on introductory psychology students and another on participants recruited over the Internet via message boards for 150 different Yahoo and MSN groups. Similarly, Lawrence A. Kurdek ("Avoidance Motivation and Relationship Commitment in Heterosexual, Gay Male, and Lesbian Partners") recruited heterosexual partners from an introductory psychology class and gay male and lesbian partners from the public records of civil unions in the state of Vermont in the United States and from nominations from partners completing the survey. Gurit Birnbaum ("Beyond the Borders of Reality: Attachment Orientations and Sexual Fantasies") supplemented a sample of volunteers from a university in Israel with volunteers from community centers.

One team of researchers went entirely outside of a university context to recruit their participants. Mahnaz R. Charania and William Ickes ("Predicting Marital Satisfaction: Social Absorption and Individuation versus Attachment Anxiety and Avoidance") sampled married couples who had signed up with an online research firm to participate in studies.

Given the topics of these articles and their authors' theoretical goals, it is not surprising that all of them report the results of research on convenience or volunteer samples rather than on probability samples of known populations. Like those included in this issue, most articles focusing on personal relationships report associations between variables, not differences between groups. When the goal is to study correlations among variables and not to estimate population parameters, finding similar patterns of correlations across studies of a variety of convenience and volunteer samples or replicating studies are alternative ways to make a contribution. Researchers in some areas have even reported similar correlations between variables in probability and volunteer samples. In addition to these disincentives to study probability samples, it should be noted that they are often prohibitively expensive and sometimes impossible to draw because the boundaries of a population are not known or no sampling frame is available. Ultimately, the researcher has to decide on the best sampling technique given the resources available, the goals of the study, and what is possible, which is what the contributors to this volume did.

Nonetheless, given our vision of *Personal Relationships* as an international and interdisciplinary journal, it is important for authors to continue to pay close attention to the nature of the samples they use in their research. As I discussed in the Editor's Preface to the previous issue of *Personal Relationships* (Volume 14, Issue 1), the ultimate goal is for personal relationship researchers to conduct comparative research rather than to publish articles authored by scholars living in an assorted collection of countries. Even when comparing the findings of studies done in separate countries by different researchers, having samples that represent the population under study is important. Imagine two studies of volunteer samples conducted in different countries that report different correlations among the same variables. Is the difference attributable to sampling bias or to cultural differences? Although bias can enter any sample, at least with probability samples, it is possible to estimate its extent. Similarly, imagine two studies of convenience samples of undergraduates conducted in different countries that report similar correlations among the same variables. Are the correlations similar because the cultures of the countries are the same or because the cultures of universities are similar everywhere?

As I also discussed in my previous Editor's Preface, to move in the direction of becoming a truly interdisciplinary journal, *Personal Relationships* authors must increasingly address the concerns of a heterogeneous group of scholars. Different disciplines tend to emphasize different theoretical mechanisms and have different research goals. These differences can be subtle, but they lead to different norms and priorities for research designs, including issues of sampling. Although the ultimate goal is for more personal relationship research to be the result of interdisciplinary collaboration in which the standards of more than one discipline are met, an interim goal is to attract more researchers from outside of psychology as contributors to *Personal*

Relationships. Until more personal relationship researchers report findings that are generalizable to known populations, most sociologists, for example, will not be likely to take the findings reported in this journal seriously or at least not be likely to find them interesting. I am suggesting that at least some personal relationship researchers broaden their research goals and conduct studies that can be generalized to known populations and confidently compared across cultural contexts so that scholars who are interested in estimating population parameters will be encouraged to build on their research.

Many seminal studies and theoretical perspectives have emerged from the work done with nonprobability samples and will continue to do so. It is important, however, for researchers who study convenience or volunteer samples to justify their use, make attempts to recruit sample members reflecting the diversity of the relevant populations as well as possible, demonstrate the appropriateness of samples for the research questions, and properly limit findings. All of the authors whose work is published in this issue have risen to this challenge. Furthermore, my editorial team and I asked them to go a step further and to describe their samples and the contexts from which they were drawn in as much detail as possible. This latter step is important. Although comparisons across volunteer samples drawn from different contexts cannot be made with confidence, thoroughly describing these samples and the contexts from which they are drawn will allow future researchers to develop tentative hypotheses about how the structural and cultural contexts in which the research subjects live their lives shape their personal relationships.

My team and I are encouraged by the commitment of the scholars who contributed to this volume to use convenience and volunteer samples only when justified, to find clever ways to diversify their samples both inside and outside of university contexts, to study student samples only when appropriate, to describe the contexts from which their samples were drawn thoroughly, and to limit findings properly. We encourage our readers to join our authors in thinking about how the contexts in which these studies were conducted might have affected the findings and to design studies to examine these potential contextual effects.

On behalf of the editorial team of *Personal Relationships*,

Rebecca G. Adams