

## Thinking Sociologically about Personal Relationships.

By: Rebecca Adams

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### **Abstract:**

When my associate editors and I were discussing who would be our team's second distinguished scholar, psychologist Susan Boon suggested Graham Allan, pointing out that he thinks "in bigger circles" than most personal relationship scholars and therefore has something special to contribute to the field. As one of Allan's collaborators, I can certainly corroborate Boon's observation. Of course, though uncommon among researchers who identify themselves as "personal relationship scholars," Allan's practice of contextualizing personal relationships is not unique. Most sociologists, including me, agree that the structural and cultural contexts in which relationships are embedded influence their structure and the processes that take place within them. It is fairly common, for example, for sociologists to study how the opportunities or constraints facing people occupying various social structural positions shape the relationships they form and maintain (e.g., the effects of individual characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, social class, and age on relationship outcomes) and also how the relationships embedded in different immediate social and cultural environments vary (e.g., subcultures, neighborhoods, and organizations). Allan thinks in even larger circles than many sociologists, however, and certainly in larger circles than most of the few other sociologists who are involved in the International Association for Relationship Research. Rather than focusing on how individual characteristics and immediate environments affect personal relationships, he is concerned with the effects of much broader social and cultural characteristics and trends, such as privatization, inequality, and, as he discusses in his contribution to this issue, increasing flexibility in the normative expectations regarding family and friend relationships. His contribution to the field of relationship science is unique because he is simultaneously interested in the characteristics of the larger contexts surrounding personal relationships, those contexts most remote from the individuals involved, and in the details of how people "do" family and friendship. Most sociologists interested in the former are not interested in the latter and vice versa.

**Keywords:** sociology | psychology | personal relationships | sociology research | journal editing |

## Article:

When my associate editors and I were discussing who would be our team's second distinguished scholar, psychologist Susan Boon suggested Graham Allan, pointing out that he thinks "in bigger circles" than most personal relationship scholars and therefore has something special to contribute to the field. As one of Allan's collaborators, I can certainly corroborate Boon's observation. Of course, though uncommon among researchers who identify themselves as "personal relationship scholars," Allan's practice of contextualizing personal relationships is not unique. Most sociologists, including me, agree that the structural and cultural contexts in which relationships are embedded influence their structure and the processes that take place within them. It is fairly common, for example, for sociologists to study how the opportunities or constraints facing people occupying various social structural positions shape the relationships they form and maintain (e.g., the effects of individual characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, social class, and age on relationship outcomes) and also how the relationships embedded in different immediate social and cultural environments vary (e.g., subcultures, neighborhoods, and organizations). Allan thinks in even larger circles than many sociologists, however, and certainly in larger circles than most of the few other sociologists who are involved in the International Association for Relationship Research. Rather than focusing on how individual characteristics and immediate environments affect personal relationships, he is concerned with the effects of much broader social and cultural characteristics and trends, such as privatization, inequality, and, as he discusses in his contribution to this issue, increasing flexibility in the normative expectations regarding family and friend relationships. His contribution to the field of relationship science is unique because he is simultaneously interested in the characteristics of the larger contexts surrounding personal relationships, those contexts most remote from the individuals involved, and in the details of how people "do" family and friendship. Most sociologists interested in the former are not interested in the latter and vice versa.

In his article "Flexibility, Friendship, and Family," Allan argues that despite increased flexibility in the construction of personal life, patterns of social support among friends and relatives remain distinct. By increased flexibility, he means such trends as the stages of the life course becoming less predictable, the lessening of the durability of ties to localities, the rising divorce rate, the growth in number of births outside of marriage, the destandardization of the organization of families, changes to communication and transportation facilitating non-face-to-face interactions, and the increasing acceptance of cohabitation outside of marriage, cross-sex friendships, and friends with benefits. Although he focuses mainly on the distinctiveness of friend and family relationships as an outcome, the implications of his basic theoretical argument that characteristics of larger social contexts shape what happens in personal relationships are much further reaching. As he states in his article (p. 14):

This greater flexibility in the organization of family and nonfamily relationships has implications for all those involved in relationship research, no matter what their disciplinary home. In particular, as different personal relationships become more fluid and less tightly framed by

normative convention, so the relational pathways they take become more diverse. There is, in other words, less standardization in the dynamics of different relationships and the ways in which they develop over time. This opens up new avenues for research into personal relationships.

He notes more specifically that this increased flexibility makes it important to understand how contextual characteristics influence the “negotiation and patterning of different relationships” (p. 14) and identifies understanding how personal relationships unfold in this more fluid environment as “one of the central tasks for future research in the field” (p. 14).

The rest of the articles in this issue are listed in the Table of Contents in the order in which they were submitted. Although none of these studies was specifically designed to examine the impact of the characteristics of the larger social environment on personal relationships (e.g., using historical or comparative methods) as Allan’s charge to personal relationships researchers implies is needed, the authors each speculate about how the social structural locations of the individuals they studied, the characteristics of their immediate social environments, or the characteristics of the larger contexts in which relationships are embedded might affect them. Inherent in these speculations are ideas for future research. This speculation is a necessary first response to Allan’s call to action. For example, the authors of two articles on the topic of commitment mention that the meaning of the concept may vary by culture and that some languages do not even include a word for it (Daniel J. Weigel, “A Dyadic Assessment of How Couples Indicate Their Commitment to Each Other” and Alexa D. Hampel and Anita L. Vangelisti, “Commitment Expectations in Romantic Relationships: Application of a Prototype Interaction-Pattern Model”). In speculating about the general applicability of his findings, Weigel, a family studies scholar whose participants were romantically involved couples between the ages of 18 and 59 years who lived in the United States, further observes that Russians, who do not have a word for “commitment,” offer alternative explanations for the duration of relationships. A comparative study would thus be quite revealing. Hampel and Vangelisti, communication scholars whose participants were students at a university in the United States, note in addition that their findings might have been different if they had studied older people or less educated ones. Replications would confirm or refute this possibility.

A third study by a team of social psychologists from the United States also touches on the topic of commitment. In their study of undergraduate students, Heidi R. Riggio and Dana A. Weiser (“Attitudes Toward Marriage: Embeddedness and Outcomes in Personal Relationships”) found that more embedded attitudes toward marriage (i.e., how many words listed in response to the word “marriage”) predict conflict, commitment, desirability of alternatives, and expectations of relationship success. The authors suggest replications of various kinds, commenting that studies of different ethnic groups would be particularly useful as ideas about marriage and intimate relationships might vary across them.

Two teams of researchers, Geneviève Bouchard, Mylène Lachance-Grzela, and Amanda Goguen (“Timing of the Transition to Motherhood and Union Quality: The Moderator Role of Union Length”) and Renate M. Houts, Kortnee C. Barnett-Walker, Blair Paley, and Martha J. Cox (“Patterns of Couple Interaction During the Transition to Parenthood”), both studied the transition to parenthood. Bouchard, Lachance-Grzela, and Goguen, who all three are psychologists, found that among the Canadian women they studied, postponing motherhood had positive effects on those in long-term relationships. They point out, however, that most of the women who participated in their study were “highly educated, economically stable, and eligible for liberal parental leaves, a social policy well-established in Canada” (p. 78) and that these characteristics may have affected their findings. Houts, Barnett-Walker, Paley, and Cox, an interdisciplinary team consisting of two family studies scholars, a statistician, and a developmental psychologist who collected longitudinal data (prenatal; 3, 12, and 24 months postbirth; and 5 years postbirth) on their primarily rural participants from the Southern United States, reported evidence that at least one of these characteristics, level of education, does affect reactions to parenthood. In their sample, the depressive symptoms of wives with more education decreased at a slower rate than those of wives with less education, and consistently, constructive husbands were more educated than consistently destructive ones. It would be interesting to know whether the Canadian findings would be replicated in a country without a well-established parental leave policy and whether those from the rural Southern United States study would be replicated in an urban context.

Two articles in this issue report on the findings of different teams of Canadian social psychologists who studied the effects of attachment style (Mihailo Perunovic and John G. Holmes, “Automatic Accommodation: The Role of Personality” and Bethany Butzer and Lorne Campbell, “Adult Attachment, Sexual Satisfaction, and Relationship Satisfaction: A Study of Married Couples”). Perunovic and Holmes studied a sample of young adults attending a Canadian university, and Butzer and Campbell studied married couples between the ages of 21 and 75 years who were recruited through newspaper advertisements. Perunovic and Holmes found that the difference between the levels of accommodation for some groups of participants “became even greater under time pressure” (p. 57). A study comparing accommodation rates in faster paced cultures to those in slower paced cultures would determine whether this finding can be replicated in both or is culturally related. Butzer and Campbell’s study supports hypotheses derived from attachment theory, which was developed mainly through studies of undergraduates and adolescents, and so their article represents a particularly important contribution. Nonetheless, they mention the need for further replications; for example, they expressed curiosity about whether their findings from a sample of urban dwellers would be replicated in a rural context.

Finally, on a lighter note, Lorne Campbell, Rod A. Martin, and Jennie R. Ward (“An Observational Study of Humor Use While Resolving Conflict in Dating Couples”) studied a sample of dating couples who attended a large university in the United States. They found that participants whose partners used more affiliative and less aggressive humor were more satisfied

with their relationship. These authors cite the need for further studies of various kinds, emphasizing the need for replications in cultural contexts that are more laconic in their use of humor than is the Southwestern United States and for comparing cultures in which ideas differ about what is humorous and when humor should be used. Note that Lorne Campbell will replace me as editor of *Personal Relationships* (for new submissions) on June 1, and so I cannot resist wondering whether his use of affiliative humor while interacting with contributors will enhance their satisfaction with the editor-author relationship? Note that I too will need to retain a sense of humor as I continue to serve as masthead editor through the end of 2009.

All joking aside, this may be the first issue of *Personal Relationships* where over half of the contributors are from outside the United States. True, all but our distinguished scholar are from North America, but half of the articles by North Americans are authored by Canadians. Counting Allan as temporarily Canadian because he was visiting the University of British Columbia during the time he was writing his article would mean that over half of the contributors to this issue were Canadian. As you may know, in order to help achieve our international and interdisciplinary mission, my editorial team strives to have reviewers from at least two countries and at least two disciplines read each manuscript. When my team first began its work, Canadian Susan Boon mentioned that she did not think that we should count Canada as a second country when the other reviewers are from the United States because they are so culturally similar. Unfortunately, the ratio of reviewers from outside the United States to reviewers from the United States is not high enough to afford us that luxury. Maybe in the future, we can have a two-continent rule instead of a two-country rule, but for now, any international diversification of our readership and pool of authors is a step in the right direction. The more internationally diverse the contributors to and reviewers for personal relationship scholarship become, the more likely it is that relationship scientists will collect data from a variety of cultural contexts, be inspired to think in big circles, and question the culturally biased assumptions that are currently so easy to accept.

As well as striving for international diversity, our field needs to encourage disciplinary diversity to enrich thinking about personal relationships. This issue of *Personal Relationships* does have a degree of disciplinary breadth. Although most of the articles in this issue are by psychologists of various types, our distinguished scholar is a sociologist and one contribution is by a family studies scholar, another by a team of communication studies scholars, and still another by an interdisciplinary team. The more disciplinary diversity our intellectual community achieves, the more sensitive authors and reviewers will be to the expectations of a multidisciplinary readership, the more likely articles will include information that makes it possible for scholars from underrepresented fields to build on and contribute to personal relationships scholarship, and the more authors will incorporate a variety of disciplinary perspectives into their work.

As this issue demonstrates, the enriching effects of international and disciplinary diversification on our field are already noticeable: all the authors, including nonsociologists and scholars from the United States, speculated at least a bit about how contextual characteristics might have

shaped the personal relationships they studied. Now all that remains for relationship scientists to do is to recruit researchers from a wider variety of countries, recruit more scholars from underrepresented disciplines, conduct more replications, collaborate internationally and across disciplines, and design and implement more cross-cultural studies. Fortunately, there are an increasing number of us to share in this work.

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

Rebecca G. Adams