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0521826179 - The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships

Edited by Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman

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## The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships

The *Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships* serves as a benchmark of the current state of scholarship in this dynamic field, synthesizing the extant theoretical and empirical literature, tracing its historical roots, and making recommendations for future directions. The volume addresses a broad range of established and emerging topics, including theoretical and methodological issues that influence the study of personal relationships; research and theory on relationship development; the nature and functions of personal relationships across the life span; individual differences and their influences on relationships; relationship processes such as cognition, emotion, and communication; relational qualities such as satisfaction and commitment; environmental influences on personal relationships; and maintenance and repair of relationships. The authors are experts from a variety of disciplines, including several subfields of psychology, communication, family studies, and sociology, who have made major contributions to the understanding of relationships.

Anita L. Vangelisti is a professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the Uni-

versity of Texas at Austin. Her work focuses on the associations between communication and emotion in the context of close, personal relationships. She has published numerous articles and chapters and has edited several books. Vangelisti has served on the editorial boards of over a dozen scholarly journals and has received recognition for her research from the National Communication Association and the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships.

Daniel Perlman is an academic psychologist with broad, applied interests that cut across social, developmental, and clinical psychology as focused on the study of close relationships. He is a professor of Family Studies and also teaches in the Department of Psychology at the University of British Columbia. He was president of the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships and the Canadian Psychological Association. He has authored more than 50 articles, edited or authored 15 books, and been the editor or associate editor for four journals.

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## Preface

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For volumes that review the present state of knowledge in dynamic, rapidly evolving fields, the label *handbook* seems only marginally appropriate. When one thinks of a handbook, one visualizes a person holding a plumbing manual in one hand and a wrench in the other and, after the leaky pipe has been fixed, putting the manual away for use another day, confident that the principles of plumbing will not change substantially from one year to the next or even very much from one decade to the next. Relationship science, in contrast, is a large and still loosely organized field that continues to expand rapidly in all directions, its momentum fueled partly by the internal combustion provided by the theorists and researchers who form the core of the field and partly by scholars in other fields who recognize the relevance of relationship theory and research to their own problems. Relationship science is, in short, a nova in the heavens of the social, behavioral, and biological sciences.

Not so long ago, the future of a field devoted to understanding interpersonal rela-

tionships was in doubt. As a consequence, and to be on the safe side, many of us adopted the convention of referring to the relationship field as “emerging,” a practice noted with exasperation in the late 1980s by Steve Duck, the editor of the first relationship handbook, the *Handbook of Personal Relationships* (1988). In his introductory remarks, Duck took a deep breath and dared to declare that the field *had* emerged, putting its birth about 10 years earlier, in the late 1970s. A second edition of that first handbook appeared 10 years later (Duck, 1997) and only 3 years after that a relationship “sourcebook” edited by Clyde and Susan Hendrick (2000) was published. In between and since, several edited topical “mini-handbooks” have been published, each devoted to a subject of special interest to relationship researchers, as Dan Perlman and Duck note in their historical review chapter in this book.

The continuing high volume of activity in the relationship field places a heavy burden on relationship scholars. There is too much to learn, and far too little time in

which to learn it, for most of us to feel that we have anything but a tenuous grasp of the breadth and depth of the field or more than a dim appreciation of its current trajectory. There are too many books, too many journal articles, and too many conferences, preconferences, and workshops for anyone to take in. Hence the need for volumes that periodically, comprehensively, and concisely describe current activities in the field – handbooks, in other words, or perhaps more accurately, status reports – to help us fend off the feelings of defeat that precede retreat into more settled areas of inquiry.

### A Book of Bets

In addition to surveying present activities in areas of interest to relationship scholars, many handbook contributors briefly describe the history of the area and some also attempt to predict its future. Historical remarks are useful to newcomers to the field who, entering the relationship movie midstream, often wonder how the relationship field got to where it is (and why it took so long to get here). Forecasts of profitable future activities are especially useful to new recruits, many of whom are in the process of deciding where they might most profitably invest their scholarly efforts. A “bookmaker’s book of bets” is, in fact, a secondary definition of the word handbook (*Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., p. 526). Indeed, and apart from the explicit predictions of future activity that some handbook contributors make, their descriptions of current activities in a specific problem area can be viewed as surveys of the bets individual researchers are currently making – where, in other words, one’s colleagues are gambling their professional and personal resources in the expectation that their investments will pay off by advancing relationship knowledge. It perhaps does not need saying that in performing the triage necessary for a concise report, some surveyors are better than others in identifying which current activities are likely to be rewarding and which can

be omitted from their report because they promise to be a waste of time or, of course, that some researchers invest their resources more wisely than others. Histories of disciplines, in fact, are simply accounts of scholars’ bets that paid off. Lost wagers are rarely mentioned.

It is to the prediction of profitable future activities that I address the remainder of these prefatory remarks because, like it or not, all scholars must be gamblers. To decide where to invest their time, energy, and other resources, they must make predictions about the kinds of theoretical, research, and service activities that are the surest bets to advance the field. This kind of gambling is a high-stakes activity, both for the individual and for the field, which perhaps is why so many scholarly conferences devote at least one session to “future directions” or some variant on that theme and so many journals periodically publish “forecast” articles and issues.

### The Wild Cards

Making accurate predictions about a field’s future, especially predictions about the specific research paths that will yield a significant payoff, is extraordinarily difficult. It is hazardous, in fact. My thesis here is that the wild cards that so often trump the most carefully considered forecasts are dealt by powerful, pervasive, and slow-moving macroforces. Because these forces intensify so gradually (think of a hand in a bucket of water in which the temperature is slowly and imperceptibly increased to the boiling point), they are hard to identify even as they are exerting their massive and inexorable influence on scholars’ activities. I illustrate the point by describing some of the macroforces that, I now see in retrospect, were beginning to gather strength when I became involved in relationship research more than half a century ago.

The seeds of at least three macroforces that would influence all of the social and behavioral sciences were beginning to germinate when, as an undergraduate English

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major vaguely intending to go on to law school, I impulsively enrolled in a new seminar offered by the psychology department titled Perception and Cognition. I signed up for the seminar expecting it (don't ask me why) to be a course in extrasensory perception and precognition. Although I spent much of the semester wondering when we were going to get to the interesting part, I wisely refrained from asking the professor, Paul Secord, for clarification and, persevering to the very end, I did well enough that Secord asked me if I would like a job as his research assistant. I had no idea what a research assistant did, but with another boring secretarial job looming on the summer horizon, I was pleased to give it a whirl.

Secord could offer me a job as a research assistant because during the semester in which I was impatiently tapping my foot waiting to learn the secrets of clairvoyance, mind reading, and spoon bending, he had received word that he was to receive a research grant from the National Institute of Health–Public Health Service. I learned years later that both the topic of Secord's seminar and his grant proposal had been influenced by his recent participation in the seminal symposium sponsored by the Office of Naval Research held at Harvard in March of 1957, resulting in the classic volume edited by Tagiuri and Petrullo, *Person Perception and Interpersonal Behavior* (1958). Secord's grant was among the first federal research grants ever made to the social and behavioral sciences. The gradual infusion of increasing amounts of federal research funds into the social and behavioral sciences that followed was to have enormous impact on what researchers in these disciplines did and how they did it.

Person perception and interpersonal attraction are intimate companions that together formed an important part of the nucleus of relationship science. My first task as a research assistant thus thrust me into relationship research. My job was to hand out slips of paper to a group of students, all strangers to one another, sitting around in a circle about to begin a discussion (of

pedagogical reform, no less). Each individual's slip listed certain other persons in the group who, supposedly as revealed by a personality test taken earlier, probably would like the individual. After their (embarrassingly desultory) discussion, I handed out questionnaires that asked each person whom he or she liked now that they had become acquainted with the other group members. I learned later that the experiment had been stimulated by the proposition, advanced independently by Renato Tagiuri and Theodore Newcomb, that a fundamental characteristic of the dyad is "congruency," a prominent instance of which was believed to be the tendency for people to like those who like them. Backman and Secord's (1959) results revealed that perception of another's liking caused liking the other in return at first but the effect evaporated upon further interaction (and the additional information it provided).

The seeds of the second macroforce, one that was to transform research activities in all of the sciences, were reflected in another of my initial tasks. Sitting by a window, I was to take two cards from a box of rectangular cards on which someone had punched a lot of holes, sandwich them together, and then hold the pair up to the light and count the number of holes through which the sun shone. This took a very long time. A very, very long time. With his usual perspicacity, Secord had recognized the possibilities that lie in the university's purchase of a card-punching machine. Unfortunately, no machine was available to make the comparisons he needed, nor was there available a machine that could compute the needed statistics on the "similarity-of-holes" data (what it actually represented, I never knew). I was to accomplish the latter by depressing the appropriate numbered keys on the top of a Friden calculating machine, which was about as large as a breadbox but considerably heavier, and then pulling the crank on its side almost 180 degrees to enter the numbers into the gizzards of the machine. Several days of frenzied crank-pulling to obtain what seemed an endless series of correlation coefficients later sent me to the orthopedic

surgeon with what was diagnosed as “tennis elbow.”

Along with what has been called the golden age of federal research funding and the advent of the computer age, the seeds of the third potent macroforce were reflected in my own gender, which turned out to be a harbinger of the great migration of women into the sciences. Redress of the lopsided sex ratio of researchers in the social and behavioral sciences almost surely influenced the development of relationship research, for researchers usually enjoy working on problems they personally care about; women, it has been documented, are more interested in personal relationships than men are. The entry of the other half of the human population into competition for graduate training and for jobs had another effect: It almost surely increased the quality of researchers in the disciplines that were to contribute to relationship science. Competition for admission to graduate schools became increasingly intense, and today most applicants' vitas are brimming with research publications, computer and statistical expertise; perfect grade point averages; outstanding GRE scores; extensive undergraduate coursework in psychology, sociology, and allied fields; and incredible (sometimes literally) letters of recommendation. Many of my age cohort (including yours truly) suspect they would not be let in the door today.

Reflecting on the changes that have occurred over the past 50 years in the study of interpersonal relationships, it thus seems to me that the major transforming agents have been only secondarily individual theorists and researchers. Rather, the prime movers in any field that influence who the theorists and researchers are (their personal characteristics and, indeed, their very number), what these theorists and researchers do, and how they do it – and, therefore, the number, nature, and quality of the advances made in a field – are powerful, pervasive, slow-moving macroforces. These are almost impossible to identify in prospect and difficult to identify even when they are quietly exerting their vast power. Indeed, their influ-

ence is rarely acknowledged even in retrospect. Their monumental impact illustrates that relationship science, like a relationship itself, is an open system sensitive to perturbations not only in the systems that relationship science encompasses (e.g., the scholars working in each of the problem areas that comprise relationship science) but also in the larger, societal systems in which relationship science is nested. It is the forces generated within these larger systems that so often crush the individual researcher's bets on the future.

### Variegated Effects of Macroforces

Each of the individual macroforces I have named as influencing the relationship field over the past half century (and I make no claim the list is exhaustive) represents a broad category of the types of changes that may forever alter the course of a research discipline – namely, changes in researchers' monetary, time, or other resources to do what they do; changes in technology that affect how they do it; and changes in the number and characteristics of the researchers themselves. Each macroforce has had variegated effects; most have facilitated the field's advance, but some have impeded it and are continuing to do so. For example, the effects of federal research funding for social and behavioral research have not been wholly beneficial. One of its most unfortunate effects is that as universities have become increasingly dependent on federal monies, many have come to see their researchers more as revenue-generating agents than as knowledge-generating scholars. Their employers' view not only influences researchers' choice of problem (increasingly determined by the vagaries of politics and the federal “social problem du jour” as opposed to research addressed to fundamental problems in the field) but also researchers' approach to the problem (e.g., a quick return to be itemized in the next “progress report” to ensure continued support).

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Changes in technology are, of course, particularly potent forces. The increasing power and sophistication of the computer not only has dramatically facilitated complex statistical analyses of data, it has also made possible the development of new methods to investigate both new and old hypotheses. For example, a decade or so after Backman and Secord's (1959) experiment, the failure to find evidence of liking reciprocity in a data set led a graduate student named David Kenny to develop what he called the social relations modeling (SRM) method (Kenny, 1994, p. 101); the liking reciprocity hypothesis was the first he investigated with the new method (Kenny & La Voie, 1982, 1984). The availability of the computer surely played a silent role, for one does not like to think about analyzing SRM data on a Friden calculator.

One especially does not like to think about performing the multiple regression analyses now endemic in relationship research on a Friden calculator, although it must be said that the old iron breadbox had its virtues. Because calculating a correlation coefficient was laborious, one did not undertake the task unless one had ascertained, first, that the data met the necessary assumptions and, second, that one really, truly needed those coefficients, which meant that one knew exactly what one was going to make of them. Moreover, by the time one had finished calculating all the necessary statistics on a data set, one had gained great familiarity with it, including its warts and anomalies, which often tempered interpretation of those statistics and sometimes even precluded their report. Today, extraordinary amounts of data are automatically fed into a statistical software program (often selected by what is now commonly called a technical advisor) that effortlessly but mindlessly churns out cornucopias of statistics, some of which have little or no real meaning but are interpreted as though they did.

The effects of one macroforce often interact with the effects of another. For example, the researcher's need for federal research funding often interacts with the computerization of statistical analysis to produce a sit-

uation social psychologist William McGuire (1973) described some time ago:

*The affluent senior researcher often [carries] out his work through graduate assistants and research associates, who, in turn, often have the actual observations done by parapsychological technicians or hourly help, and the data they collect go to card-punchers who feed them into computers, whose output goes back to the research associate, who might call the more meaningful outcomes to the attention of the senior researcher, who is too busy meeting the payrolls to control the form of the printout or look diligently through it when it arrives. (p. 555)*

Or, it should be added, too busy to certify that the data shoveled into the computer's furnace meet each statistic's assumptions. The need to meet a statistic's assumptions was brought home to me early in a searing experience. After doing exactly what students are warned never to do – collecting data without first determining how they would be analyzed – Marshall Dermer and I belatedly discovered there were no time-series statistics available at that time to analyze our activation-level diary data (Dermer & Berscheid, 1972). Happily, Marshall found a team of biological rhythm statisticians working in the rabbit warren of rooms under the football stadium; taking pity on us, they agreed to make us some statistics (and thus act as our technical advisors). Unhappily, when we got around to looking these statisticians' gift horse in the mouth, we discovered that one of the mathematical assumptions underlying their statistics required our human subjects to be dead at least once a day. Even more unhappily, we made this discovery after we had interpreted our results to our satisfaction and were on the brink of publishing our report – yet another illustration that a researcher's facile and creative mind usually can see a rational pattern in any random display.

The fact that violation of a statistic's assumptions is hard to discern in the obtained statistic represents a special danger for relationship researchers who often find themselves in the uncomfortable position of

trying to make causal inferences from regression analyses performed on nonexperimental data. Many of the variables of interest in relationship research are causally bidirectional and highly correlated with each other (e.g., trust, love, commitment; see Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995). This highly glutinous mass often makes it difficult for relationship researchers to meet the assumptions that causal inference from such data requires (see Berscheid & Regan, 2005, pp. 79–81; McKim & Turner, 1997). Thus, my first prediction for relationship science is that making causal inferences from nonexperimental data will continue to be a problematic activity, barring the emergence of an statistical alchemist and the services of a statistical auditing firm to weed out spurious results in previously published reports.

### Some Other Predictions

My other predictions about the future of the relationship field and profitable avenues of research follow from consideration of the three broad categories of macroforces I have named. First, and with respect to resources, one can predict that threats to federal funding for the social and behavioral sciences will increase in frequency and severity as the nation's financial solvency deteriorates and its financial obligations increase. Indeed, funding from the National Institutes of Health for much basic social scientific research, including research vital to an understanding of relationships, is in jeopardy as this *Handbook* goes to press (see Carpenter, 2005; Fiske, 2005).

Second, and with respect to technological changes, my predictions are more positive. Advances in neuroscience as a result of the development of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and the increasing availability of the necessary magnets represent enormous opportunities for relationship researchers (see Berscheid, 2004). These are only now beginning to be mined (e.g., Fisher et al., 2003). Aron (in press) detailed several contributions that fMRI can make to relationship science and asserted that, in turn, relationship science may have

an even greater potential to contribute to neuroscience. His arguments may even be understated because it has become increasingly clear that the operations of the brain cannot be understood without significant advances in affective neuroscience; advances in affective neuroscience, in turn, require the development of a robust social neuroscience, which requires advances in relationship science because it is within our relationships with others that we humans most frequently and intensely experience emotion and process stimuli heavily saturated with affect.

The methods of neuroscience are only one way to understand the unconscious mind; the methods of cognitive social psychology are another. Unfortunately, the latter have yet to exert much influence on the relationship field. For example, social cognitive psychologist James Uleman (2005) observes that contemporary theory of mind “is remarkably absent from most research on person perception” (p. 11), which remains as important to the understanding of relationships as it was 50 years ago. Even well-established research findings on the nature of the human mind have yet to be recognized by many relationship scholars. Psychologist and computer scientist Roger Schank (“God . . .,” 2005) opined, for example:

*I do not believe that people are capable of rational thought when it comes to making decisions in their own lives. People believe they are behaving rationally and have thought things out, of course, but when major decisions are made – who to marry, where to live, . . . people's minds simply cannot cope with the complexity. When they try to rationally analyze potential options, their unconscious, emotional thoughts take over and make the choice for them. (p. F3)*

If Schank and the conclusions of many cognitive social psychologists are correct (see Hassin, Uleman, & Bargh, 2005, who described the *new unconscious*), we relationship scholars are trying to identify and understand the determinants of a person's “major decisions,” such as mate selection or whether to maintain or dissolve a relationship, primarily through self-report even though the answers to many of our questions are

not available to our respondents to report (although they always do report something).

New understandings of the human mind have additional implications for us researchers; that is, we ourselves are not immune from the limitations of our conscious minds when thinking about the highly complex system in which people's relationship decisions and other behaviors are embedded. More than 30 years ago, McGuire called for new conceptual models "that involve parallel processing, nets of causally interrelated factors, feedback loops, bidirectional causation, etc." (p. 452) to deal with complex cognitive and social systems in which multiple causes interact with each other to produce an effect and in which effects act to change their original causal conditions. McGuire also warned, however, that "We shall all shy away from the mental strain of keeping in mind so many variables, so completely interrelated" (p. 452). He was right; we relationship scholars do shy away from the exercise. But he was wrong to blame "mental strain" for our avoidance; our conscious minds can strain until our noses bleed, but most of us still can't do it. Perhaps the epistemology of relationship research could use some attention.

Finally, with respect to macroforces that result in changes in the characteristics of research personnel, one can confidently predict that relationship researchers will become more racially and culturally diverse for a variety of reasons and that fewer will be men (if recently reported sex ratios of college undergraduates is any indication), all of which will influence the kinds of relationship problems that receive attention. One might also predict that as present researchers grow older, their interest in phenomena associated with young relationships (e.g., romantic love) will wane and the joys and problems of older relationships will gain more representation in relationship theory and research.

Only time will tell what the future holds for relationship research. We can all bet on that – and pray that the forces be with us.

ELLEN BERSCHIED  
University of Minnesota

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## Contributors

---

GRAHAM ALLAN  
 School of Social Relations  
 Keele University  
 Staffs ST5 5BG  
 G.Allan@keele.ac.uk

DONNA M. ALLEN  
 Department of Business  
 Northwest Nazarene University  
 623 Holly Street  
 Nampa, ID 83686-5897  
 dmallen@mnu.edu

IRWIN ALTMAN  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Utah  
 390 S. 1530 E.  
 Salt Lake City, UT 84112-0251  
 irwin.altman@m.cc.utah.edu

ARTHUR ARON  
 Department of Psychology  
 SUNY at Stony Brook  
 Stony Brook, NY 11794-2500  
 Arthur.Aron@sunysb.edu

DONALD BAUCOM  
 259 Davie Hall, CB #3270  
 Psychology Department  
 UNC-CH  
 Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3270  
 don\_baucom@unc.edu

STEVEN R. H. BEACH  
 Institute for Behavioral Research  
 157 Psychology  
 University of Georgia  
 Athens, GA 30602-3013  
 sbeach@egon.psy.uga.edu

ELLEN BERSCHIED  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Minnesota  
 75 East River Road  
 Minneapolis, MN 55455  
 Bersc001@umn.edu

ROSEMARY BLIESZNER  
 Department of Human Development  
 (0416)  
 Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State  
 University  
 Blacksburg, VA 24061  
 rmb@vt.edu

JEFFREY BOASE  
 Department of Sociology  
 University of Toronto  
 725 Spadina Ave.  
 Toronto, ON, M5S 2J4  
 Canada  
 jeff.boase@utoronto.ca

Cambridge University Press  
 0521826179 - The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships  
 Edited by Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

## xviii

## CONTRIBUTORS

TYFANY M. J. BOETTCHER  
 Human Development and Family Sciences  
 The University of Texas at Austin  
 1 University Station A2700  
 Austin, TX 78712-0141  
 tyfany21@aol.com

BARBARA B. BROWN  
 University of Utah  
 Department of Family and Consumer Studies  
 225 South 1400 East, Room 228 AEB  
 Salt Lake City, UT 84112-0080  
 barbara.brown@fcs.utah.edu

ABRAHAM P. BUUNK  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Groningen  
 Grote Kruisstraat 2/1  
 9712 TS Groningen  
 The Netherlands  
 a.p.buunk@ppsw.rug.nl

LORNE CAMPBELL  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Western Ontario  
 London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5C2  
 lcampb23@uwo.ca

DANIEL J. CANARY  
 Hugh Downs School of Human Communication  
 Arizona State University  
 Tempe, AZ 85287-1205  
 dan.canary@asu.edu

RODNEY CATE  
 Department of Family Studies and Human  
 Development  
 University of Arizona  
 Tucson, AZ 85721-0033  
 rcate@ag.arizona.edu

JOHN P. CAUGHLIN  
 Department of Speech Communication  
 University of Illinois  
 702 S. Wright Street, 127 Lincoln  
 Urbana, IL 61801  
 caughlin@uiuc.edu

MAHNAZ CHARANIA  
 Department of Psychology  
 Box 19528  
 University of Texas at Arlington  
 Arlington, TX 76019-0528  
 mahnazr10@hotmail.com

JENNIE Y. CHEN  
 Department of Psychology  
 Texas A&M University  
 4235 TAMU  
 College Station, TX 77843-4235  
 pookiesoup@tamu.edu

F. SCOTT CHRISTOPHER  
 Department of Family Resources  
 Arizona State University  
 Tempe, AZ 85287-2502  
 scott.christopher@asu.edu

JENNIFER A. CLARKE  
 Department of Behavioral Sciences and  
 Leadership  
 HQ USAF/DFBL  
 2354 Fairchild Drive, Suite 6J133  
 USAFA CO 80840-6228  
 clarkej@email.unc.edu

MARILYN COLEMAN  
 Department of Human Development and  
 Family Studies  
 411 Gentry  
 University of Missouri  
 Columbia, MO 65211  
 ColemanMa@missouri.edu

W. ANDREW COLLINS  
 Institute of Child Development  
 University of Minnesota  
 51 E. River Road  
 Minneapolis, MN 55455-0345  
 wcollins@umn.edu

MICHAEL K. COOLSEN  
 Department of Management and  
 Marketing  
 The John L. Grove College of Business  
 Shippensburg University  
 1871 Old Main Drive  
 Shippensburg, PA 17257-2299  
 mkcool@wharf.ship.edu

NATHAN R. COTTLE  
 Department of Family Studies and Early  
 Childhood Education  
 Matthews Hall 119A  
 University of North Texas  
 PO Box 310829  
 Denton, TX 76203-0829  
 NCottle@coe.unt.edu

CAROLYN E. CUTRONA  
 ISBR  
 2625 N. Loop Drive Suite 500  
 Ames, IA 50010  
 ccutrona@iastate.edu

MARIANNE DANTON  
 Associate Professor of Communication  
 La Salle University  
 Philadelphia, PA 19141  
 dainton@lasalle.edu

## CONTRIBUTORS

xix

VALERIAN J. DERLEGA  
 Department of Psychology  
 Old Dominion University  
 Norfolk, VA 23529-0267  
 vderlega@odu.edu

LISA M. DIAMOND  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Utah  
 380 South 1530 East, Room 502  
 Salt Lake City, UT 84112-0251  
 diamond@psych.utah.edu

PIETERNEL DIJKSTRA  
 Slochtermeenteweg 44  
 9621 CP Slochteren,  
 The Netherlands  
 dijkstrap@planet.nl

STEVE DUCK  
 Department of Communication Studies  
 151 BCSB  
 University of Iowa  
 Iowa City, IA 52242-1498  
 steve-duck@uiowa.edu

PEARL A. DYKSTRA  
 NIDI, P.B. 11650  
 2502 AR The Hague  
 The Netherlands  
 dystra@nidi.nl

NORMAN B. EPSTEIN  
 Department of Family Studies  
 University of Maryland  
 College Park, MD 20742  
 ne4@uemail.umd.edu

BEVERLEY FEHR  
 Psychology Department  
 University of Winnipeg  
 515 Portage Avenue  
 Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 2E9  
 bfehr@uwinnipeg.ca

FRANK D. FINCHAM  
 FSU Family Institute  
 Department of Child and Family Science  
 Florida State University  
 211 Sandels Building  
 Tallahassee, FL 32306-1491  
 fincham@fsu.edu

HELEN E. FISHER  
 Department of Anthropology  
 Rutgers University  
 Office: 4 East 70th Street  
 New York City, NY 10021  
 HelenFisher@HelenFisher.com

JULIE FITNESS  
 Psychology Department  
 Macquarie University  
 Sydney 2109, Australia  
 Jfitness@psy.mq.edu.au

GARTH G. O. FLETCHER  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Canterbury  
 Christchurch, New Zealand  
 g.fletcher@psyc.canterbury.ac.nz

MYRON D. FRIESEN  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Canterbury  
 Private Bag 4800  
 Christchurch 8020, New Zealand  
 mdfz6@student.canterbury.ac.nz

LAWRENCE GANONG  
 Sinclair School of Nursing and Department  
 of Human Development and Family  
 Studies  
 409 Gentry  
 University of Missouri  
 Columbia, MO 65211  
 Ganongl@missouri.edu

KELLI A. GARDNER  
 Psychology Department  
 Iowa State University  
 Ames, IA 50011-3180  
 kbendick@iastate.edu

JENNY DE JONG GIERVELD  
 The Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic  
 Institute  
 Lange Houtstraat 19  
 P.O. Box 11650  
 NL-2502 AR The Hague  
 The Netherlands  
 gierveld@nidi.nl

ROBIN GOODWIN  
 Department of Human Sciences  
 Brunel University  
 Uxbridge, Middlesex  
 London UB8 3PH  
 United Kingdom  
 Robin.Goodwin@brunel.ac.uk

CHRISTINE R. GRAY  
 Human Development and Family  
 Sciences  
 The University of Texas at Austin  
 1 University Station A2700  
 Austin, TX 78712-0141  
 crgray@mail.utexas.edu

KATHRYN GREENE  
 Department of Communication  
 Rutgers University  
 New Brunswick, NJ 08091-1071  
 kgreene@scils.rutgers.edu

DAVID W. HARRIS  
 Department of Psychology  
 Michigan State University  
 East Lansing, MI 48824  
 harri523@msu.edu

WILLARD W. HARTUP  
 Institute of Child Development  
 University of Minnesota  
 51 E. River Road  
 Minneapolis, MN 55455  
 hartup@umn.edu

JOHN H. HARVEY  
 Ell Seashore Hall  
 University of Iowa  
 Iowa City, IA 52242  
 john-harvey@uiowa.edu

KATHI L. HEFFNER  
 Department of Psychology  
 Ohio University  
 209 Porter Hall  
 Athens, OH 45701  
 heffner@ohio.edu

TED L. HUSTON  
 Department of Human Ecology  
 Gearing 117  
 University of Texas at Austin  
 Austin, TX 78712  
 huston@mail.utexas.edu

WILLIAM J. ICKES  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Texas at Arlington  
 Arlington, TX 76019-0528  
 ickes@uta.edu

EMILY A. IMPETT  
 Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality  
 San Francisco State University  
 2017 Mission Street #300  
 San Francisco, CA 94110  
 eimpett@sfsu.edu

MICHAEL P. JOHNSON  
 Associate Professor of Sociology, Women's  
 Studies, and African and African American  
 Studies, Department of Sociology  
 The Pennsylvania State University  
 University Park, PA 16802-6207  
 mpj@psu.edu

DEBORAH J. JONES  
 CB #3270, Davie Hall  
 Psychology Dept. UNC-CH  
 Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3270  
 djones@email.unc.edu

DEBORAH A. KASHY  
 Department of Psychology  
 Michigan State University  
 East Lansing, MI 48824  
 kashyd@pilot.msu.edu

JANICE KIECOLT-GLASER  
 Department of Psychiatry  
 Ohio State University College of Medicine  
 1670 Upham Drive  
 Columbus, OH 43210-1228  
 kiecolt-glaser.1@osu.edu

JEFFREY L. KIRCHNER  
 308 Davie Hall  
 Psychology Department  
 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
 Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3270  
 jkirch@email.unc.edu

BRIGID M. KLEINMAN  
 University of Miami  
 Department of Psychology  
 P.O. Box 248185  
 Coral Gables, FL 33124-0751  
 b.kleinman@umiami.edu

GALENA H. KLINE  
 University of Denver  
 Department of Psychology  
 Frontier Hall, 2155 S. Race St.  
 Denver, CO 80208  
 gakline@du.edu

MARK L. KNAPP  
 Department of Communication Studies  
 University of Texas at Austin  
 1 University Station A1105  
 Austin, TX 78712-0115  
 mlknapp@mail.utexas.edu

ASCAN KOERNER  
 Department of Communication Studies  
 244 Ford Hall  
 University of Minnesota  
 Minneapolis, MN 55455  
 koern011@umn.edu

JEAN-PHILIPPE LAURENCEAU  
 University of Delaware  
 Department of Psychology  
 108 Wolf Hall  
 Newark, DE 19716-2577  
 jlaurenceau@psych.udel.edu

- KIM LEON  
 Human Development & Family Studies  
 College of Human Environmental Sciences  
 University of Missouri-Columbia  
 407 Gentry Hall  
 Columbia, MO 65211-7040  
 leonk@missouri.edu
- TIMOTHY J. LOVING  
 University of Texas at Austin  
 Department of Human Ecology  
 1 University Station A 2700  
 Austin, TX 78712-0141  
 tjloving@mail.utexas.edu
- STEPHANIE D. MADSEN  
 Psychology Department  
 McDaniel College  
 Westminster, MD 21157-4390  
 smadsen@mcdaniel.edu
- HOWARD J. MARKMAN  
 University of Denver  
 Department of Psychology  
 Frontier Hall, 2155 S. Race St.  
 Denver, CO 80208  
 hmarkman@du.edu
- ALICIA MATHEWS  
 Old Dominion University  
 Department of Psychology  
 Norfolk, VA 23529-0267  
 amath003@odu.edu
- MARIO MIKULINCER  
 Department of Psychology  
 Bar-Ilan University  
 Ramat Gan 52900  
 Israel  
 mikulm@mail.biu.ac.il
- PATRICIA NOLLER  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Queensland  
 Brisbane, QLD 4072  
 Australia  
 pn@psy.uq.edu.au
- NICKOLA C. OVERALL  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Auckland  
 Private Bag 92019  
 Auckland, New Zealand  
 n.overall@auckland.ac.nz
- LETITIA ANNE PEPLAU  
 Department of Psychology  
 Box 951563  
 University of California, Los Angeles  
 Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563  
 lapeplau@ucla.edu
- DANIEL PERLMAN  
 School of Social Work and Family Studies  
 University of British Columbia  
 Vancouver, BC  
 Canada V6T 1Z2  
 d.perlman@ubc.ca
- SALLY PLANALP  
 Department of Communication  
 The University of Utah  
 255 S. Central Campus Drive, Room 2400  
 Salt Lake City, UT 84112  
 Sally.Planalp@utah.edu
- URMILA PILLAY  
 54 Ratcliffe Close  
 Uxbridge UB8 2DD  
 U.K.  
 urmilapillay@msn.com
- NICOLE PLEASANT  
 University of Denver  
 Department of Psychology  
 Frontier Hall  
 Denver, CO 80208  
 npleasant@du.edu
- CARYL E. RUSBULT  
 Department of Social Psychology  
 Vrije Universiteit  
 Van der Boechorststraat 1  
 Amsterdam 1081 BT  
 The Netherlands  
 ce.rusbult@psy.vu.nl
- BARBARA R. SARASON  
 Department of Psychology  
 Box 351525  
 University of Washington  
 Seattle, WA 98195  
 bsarason@u.washington.edu
- IRWIN G. SARASON  
 Department of Psychology  
 Box 351525  
 University of Washington  
 Seattle, WA 98195  
 isarason@u.washington.edu
- PHILLIP R. SHAVER  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of California  
 One Shields Avenue  
 Davis, CA 95616-8686  
 prshaver@ucdavis.edu
- ALAN L. SILLARS  
 Department of Communication Studies  
 University of Montana  
 Missoula, MT 59812  
 sillars@selway.umt.edu

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 0521826179 - The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships  
 Edited by Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

## xxii

## CONTRIBUTORS

JEFFRY A. SIMPSON  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Minnesota  
 Minneapolis, MN 55455-0344  
 simp108@umn.edu

SUSAN SPRECHER  
 Department of Sociology-Anthropology  
 Illinois State University  
 Normal, IL 61790-4660  
 sprecher@ilstu.edu

SUSAN STANTON  
 238 Davie Hall  
 Psychology Dept. UNC-CH  
 Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3270  
 sstanton@email.unc.edu

GREG STRONG  
 Department of Psychology  
 SUNY at Stony Brook  
 Stony Brook, NY 11794-2500  
 gregjstrong@hotmail.com

CATHERINE SURRA  
 University of Texas at Austin  
 Department of Human Ecology  
 Gearing 115  
 Austin, TX 78712  
 surra@mail.utexas.edu

LAURA SULLIVAN  
 263 Davie Hall  
 Psychology Dept. UNC-CH  
 Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3270  
 sullival@email.unc.edu

ANITA L. VANGELISTI  
 Department of Communication Studies  
 College of Communication  
 1 University Station A1105  
 Austin, TX 78712  
 a.vangelisti@mail.utexas.edu

C. ARTHUR VANLEAR  
 Department of Communication  
 Sciences  
 University of Connecticut  
 Box U-85  
 Storrs, CT 06269-1085  
 vanlear@uconn.edu

THEO VAN TILBURG  
 Faculty of Social Sciences  
 Vrije Universiteit  
 De Boelelaan 1105  
 Amsterdam NL-1081HV  
 The Netherlands  
 TG.van.Tilburg@fsw.vu.nl

BARRY WELLMAN  
 Centre for Urban & Community Studies  
 University of Toronto  
 455 Spadina Avenue  
 Toronto, ON, Canada M5S 2G8  
 wellman@chass.utoronto.ca

AMY WENZEL  
 Psychopathology Research Unit  
 Department of Psychiatry  
 University of Pennsylvania  
 3535 Market St., Room 2032  
 Philadelphia, PA 19104  
 awenzel@mail.med.upenn.edu

CAROL M. WERNER  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Utah  
 380 South 1530 East, Room 502  
 Salt Lake City, UT 84112-0251  
 carol.werner@psych.utah.edu

ADAM R. WEST  
 The University of Texas at Austin  
 Division of Human Development and Family  
 Sciences  
 SEA 2.412/A2700  
 One University Station  
 Austin, TX 78712  
 adamwest@mail.utexas.edu

SARAH W. WHITTON  
 Judge Baker Children's Center  
 53 Parker Hill Avenue  
 Boston, MA 02120  
 swhitton@jbcc.harvard.edu

HEIKE A. WINTERHELD  
 Department of Psychology  
 N307 Elliott Hall  
 University of Minnesota  
 Minneapolis, MN 55455  
 winte216@umn.edu