

Relationship Science

**Integrating Evolutionary, Neuroscience,
and Sociocultural Approaches**



Edited by

Omri Gillath, Glenn Adams, and Adrienne Kunkel

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AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
WASHINGTON, DC

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Published by
American Psychological Association
750 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002
www.apa.org

To order
APA Order Department
P.O. Box 92984
Washington, DC 20090-2984
Tel: (800) 374-2721;
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Fax: (202) 336-5502;
TDD/TTY: (202) 336-6123
Online: www.apa.org/pubs/books
E-mail: order@apa.org

In the U.K., Europe, Africa, and the Middle East,
copies may be ordered from
American Psychological Association
3 Henrietta Street
Covent Garden, London
WC2E 8LU England

Typeset in New Century Schoolbook by Circle Graphics, Inc., Columbia, MD

Printer: United Book Press, Baltimore, MD
Cover Designer: Minker Design, Sarasota, FL

The opinions and statements published are the responsibility of the authors, and such opinions and statements do not necessarily represent the policies of the American Psychological Association.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Relationship science : integrating evolutionary, neuroscience, and sociocultural approaches /
edited by Omri Gillath, Glenn Adams, and Adrienne D. Kunkel.

p. cm. — (Decade of behavior)

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-4338-1123-4 — ISBN 1-4338-1123-5 1. Interpersonal relations. I. Gillath, Omri.

II. Adams, Glenn. III. Kunkel, Adrienne D.

HM1106.R453 2012

158.2—dc23

2011049258

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A CIP record is available from the British Library.

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

DOI: 10.1037/13489-000

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Foreword

In early 1988, the American Psychological Association (APA) Science Directorate began its sponsorship of what would become an exceptionally successful activity in support of psychological science—the APA Scientific Conferences program. This program has showcased some of the most important topics in psychological science and has provided a forum for collaboration among many leading figures in the field.

The program has inspired a series of books that have presented cutting-edge work in all areas of psychology. At the turn of the millennium, the series was renamed the Decade of Behavior Series to help advance the goals of this important initiative. The Decade of Behavior is a major interdisciplinary campaign designed to promote the contributions of the behavioral and social sciences to our most important societal challenges in the decade leading up to 2010. Although a key goal has been to inform the public about these scientific contributions, other activities have been designed to encourage and further collaboration among scientists. Hence, the series that was the “APA Science Series” has continued as the “Decade of Behavior Series.” This represents one element in APA’s efforts to promote the Decade of Behavior initiative as one of its endorsing organizations. For additional information about the Decade of Behavior, please visit <http://www.decadeofbehavior.org>.

Over the course of the past years, the Science Conference and Decade of Behavior Series has allowed psychological scientists to share and explore cutting-edge findings in psychology. The APA Science Directorate looks forward to continuing this successful program and to sponsoring other conferences and books in the years ahead. This series has been so successful that we have chosen to extend it to include books that, although they do not arise from conferences, report with the same high quality of scholarship on the latest research.

We are pleased that this important contribution to the literature was supported in part by the Decade of Behavior program. Congratulations to the editors and contributors of this volume on their sterling effort.

Steven J. Breckler, PhD
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for Science*

Preface

This book has grown out of our own experience creating an interdisciplinary community of relationship researchers: the Close Relationships Interest Group at the University of Kansas. Since we formed the group in 2007, it has grown to include 10 to 20 active members who meet at least once a month. Each of us comes to the topic of relationship research with very different interests (e.g., communication, personality processes, sociocultural processes), intellectual bases (e.g., African studies, gender and sexuality studies, neuroscience), disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., communication, economics, gender and sexuality studies, health science, psychology, sociology), and domains of practical experience (e.g., army officer, domestic violence shelter volunteer, Peace Corps volunteer). Despite these differences, we are committed to the idea that a comprehensive relationship science must accommodate this diversity, and we believe that each of us has much to learn from the others. The monthly meetings provide members with opportunities to learn new research methods, get exposure to new theoretical models, and get feedback about their work. Students get a chance to add mentors to their committees or join classes they did not know existed before, and faculty get a chance to mentor and collaborate with new students. In short, we have benefited professionally and personally from this interdisciplinary approach to scholarship, and we recommend it to all researchers who wish to broaden their understanding of their subject.

The long-term success of such a group requires contributing members who have curiosity about topics at the edges of their work, a desire to get a bigger picture than disciplinary boundaries permit, a sense of humility or reflexivity about the limitations of what their theoretical perspective or body of work can achieve, and a sense that other disciplines or theoretical approaches have something to offer their own work. Perhaps the most important ingredient for the success of such a group is a true appreciation for—rather than mere tolerance of—different theoretical perspectives and ways of knowing. This is not always easy because different perspectives and ways of knowing sometimes exist in opposition to each other or suggest conflicting interpretations of the same set of evidence. One has to strike a balance between tenaciously held professional convictions and respect for perspectives that challenge those convictions. Our success in this task reflects the diversity of experience and perspective that each of us brings to our work.

The greatest outcome so far of the Close Relationships Interest Group at the University of Kansas was our ability to organize a conference on new interdisciplinary directions for relationship science. This conference was held at the University of Kansas in November 2009 and under the umbrella of the International Association for Relationship Research (IARR). It focused on neuroscience, sociocultural, and evolutionary approaches to relationship science. This book represents a culmination of that conference. The chapter authors elaborate on work presented at the conference and incorporate new ideas that

emerged. Our contributors are leading figures in the field of relationship research, as well as researchers who have worked on relationship topics but have not previously considered themselves “relationship researchers.” We encouraged our chapter authors to trace the theoretical background of their work, to document the major contributions they have made to the study of close relationships, to review the issues they have studied most recently, and to identify key issues for future research. Most important, we asked them to integrate their work with the broad theoretical perspectives—evolution, culture, and neuroscience—that are the themes of this book, as well as describe any ways in which their work integrates different disciplinary perspectives. Our introduction chapter presents our vision for interdisciplinary work and offers guidance to readers on how they might use the book. We hope to inspire readers to incorporate diverse theoretical and disciplinary perspectives into their own work in relationship science.

We would like to use this opportunity to thank the American Psychological Association, IARR, and several units at the University of Kansas—the Office of the Provost, the departments of Psychology and Communication Studies, the Kansas African Studies Center, and the Commons Interdisciplinary Research Initiative in Nature and Culture—for their continuous support. We would also like to thank our students, the speakers at the conference, and the many other people that helped us make the conference and the book happen. We especially note the support of University of Kansas Chancellor and fellow relationship researcher, Dr. Bernadette Gray-Little, who took time from her busy first semester on the job to contribute to the conference and our broader project. Finally, we would like to thank our families for their support, for allowing us space to work, and for being our secure base and safe haven.

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Relationship Science

Introduction: Theoretical Integration and Interdisciplinarity in Relationship Science

*Omri Gillath, Glenn Adams,
and Adrienne Kunkel*

Studies of happiness and well-being often reach the same conclusion: Close, personal relationships are one of the most (if not the most) important factors affecting life quality and satisfaction. No other factor is more meaningful or essential for mental and physical well-being than close relationships (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Therefore, the study of relationships—or *relationship science*—has the potential not only to advance knowledge regarding complex social behavior but also to provide an empirically informed framework to improve mental and physical health (Reis, 2007). To realize this potential, relationship science must build on the impressive progress that researchers have made over the last few decades, while integrating across different theoretical perspectives and disciplines.

The standard model that has dominated academic production for over a century has been to organize inquiry around disciplinary identity: application of discipline-based epistemologies and methods to integrate observations across a broad range of subject matter. A complementary model is to organize academic inquiry around deep knowledge of a topic domain integrated across a broad set of disciplinary perspectives. This latter model is implicit in such organizations as the International Association for Relationship Research (IARR). The purpose of this book is to apply this latter model to relationship science—that is, to integrate different theoretical and disciplinary approaches to the study of relationships. The collaboration between the editors of the book, all members of IARR, reflects an attempt to complement thorough disciplinary training with an interdisciplinary understanding of broader relationship research.

In this introduction chapter, we pause to consider important concepts that inform the book. In the first section, we consider the definition and scope of relationship science. In the second section, we consider the benefits of, and challenges to, interdisciplinarity. In the third section, we discuss the forms of theoretical integration that are featured most prominently in the book. In the fourth and final section, we explain how the book is organized.

Relationship Science

As one sets out to edit a book about relationship science, one faces a series of questions: What is relationship science? What topics fall under its umbrella? Who is a relationship researcher? We quickly realized that the answers to these questions are not obvious, especially when we began to contact people about contributing chapters to this volume. A not uncommon response to our invitations was something like, “Yes, I do research on relationships, but I’m not really a relationship researcher.” Accordingly, part of our task has been to define the field.

From our perspective, relationship science includes the theory, methods, observations, and conclusions of relationship-related research (Kenny, 1995). Consistent with an interdisciplinary outlook, we use the word *science* in a broad sense that is inclusive of disciplinary diversity in what constitutes scientific research and methodological rigor. Although all the contributions to the present book qualify as science, the interdisciplinary study of relationship research includes academic work that is not strictly “science” (e.g., literary theory, philosophy, history). Only by considering all of these sources can one obtain a truly full picture of relationship science.

With respect to the concept of *relationship*, a quick glance at the history of relationship research reveals frequent attempts to define and refine the object of study. For example, some researchers modify the word *relationship* with the adjective *close* to limit the object of study to connections between people who know and care about each other. The implicit distinction is with more general social relationships: patterns of repeated interactions between two partners who may know and care little about each other. Similarly, some researchers use *close* and *intimate* as more or less synonymous adjectives; other researchers reserve *intimate* for relationships that are (potentially) sexual.

We do not intend to revisit this issue of definition here. Instead, we merely note the extent to which the contributions to this book complicate the matter of definition and suggest rethinking of assumptions about relationship. For example, how does the prominent experience of enemies in intimate spaces (Adams, 2005; Geschiere, 1997; van Beek, 2007) inform understandings of “close” relationship that have connotations of positive regard? Similarly, to what extent are the twin connotations of disclosure and sexual interaction in the concept of “intimate” relationships more an indication of the position of researchers than something that inheres in the phenomenon? Alternatively, if one insists that the conjunction of disclosure and sexual interaction is a definitional feature of intimate relationship, does it mean that this relationship form is the product of particular settings rather than a universal human feature? Such questions about definition are not only a consequence of intersections with sociocultural perspectives. Similar questions arise from intersections with biological science perspectives, too. For example, how does consideration of repeated interactions between nonhuman animals (e.g., Chapter 5) inform prevailing definitions of relationship?

As this brief discussion makes clear, an interdisciplinary perspective requires that one take a broad, inclusive definition of *relationship research*. The chapters in this book consider not only mating or “romantic” relationship, but