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Understudied Relationships

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Most of the early studies in the emerging field of close relationships examined dating couples. What comes to mind are the pioneering studies of Berscheid and Walster. As our field began to develop, researchers began to study other types of relationships and researchers soon realized that they could establish a reputation by studying new types of relationships. For instance, Carol Masheter studied divorced couples, Gregory Guldner studied long-distance relationships, Glenn Adams studied enemies, Karen Allen studied relationships with pets, Rebecca Adams studied friendships between people who wore tied-dyed shirts, Miles Patterson examined gynecologist and patient relationships, and Tracy Gleason studied relationships with imaginary friends. Researchers also learned that you could study romantic relationships in strange places like standing on a bridge (Art Aron) or saying goodbye at an airport (Chris Fraley), obviously a pre-September 11th study.

The young investigator might despair that all possible relationships and situations have been taken. However, this is just not the case. There is a gold mine of possible relationships that could be

studied. As an assist to the young investigator seeking to create a new niche or to the senior (i.e., over-the-hill and picking up speed) researcher seeking a new topic, I present here is a list of some relationships and possible research questions.

Humans and extra-terrestrials:

In these relationships we could extend our understanding of physical attractiveness. Would extra-terrestrials find humans attractive who had a low waste-to-hip ratio and high facial symmetry? Of course, we might have some difficulty finding enough extra-terrestrials to have a sufficient sample size. We should be comforted by the fact that one survey has shown that 5 million Americans, including erstwhile presidential US candidate Dennis Kucinich, have seen extra-terrestrials. At a very small cost we could send questionnaires with stimulus materials to people with instructions "To be opened only when you meet an extraterrestrial." Alternatively, just post the study on the web and limit it only to extra-terrestrials.

Pregnant woman and fetus:

While it might be difficult to have a fetus fill out a questionnaire, I think we could easily investigate synchrony and motor mimicry. We could ask the woman to kick and see if the fetus kicks. We could also, of course with proper safeguards, ask the pregnant woman to stand on her head and see if the baby also turns upside down. The results of such research might well end up in

a United States Supreme Court decision but I do not want to wade into that issue.

Executioner and victim:

One difficulty in the study of forgiveness is finding dyads in which one member has clearly committed a transgression against another person. With executioner and victim we have a nearly ideal situation. There is the difficulty that most civilized countries have banned capital punishment. We can take comfort that the United States, The People's Republic of China, and Iran seem eager to provide us with data of this type. An alternative would be use archival data and examine the executions of Thomas More, Marie Antoinette, and Joan of Arc.

Within-person person perception:

We could find seek out people with dissociative identity disorder (what lay people commonly call people with "split personalities") and have them make ratings of their other personalities. As a fictional example, we could ask Jekyll to rate Hyde and Hyde to rate Jekyll. In such a way, we can examine complementarity in perceptions of dissociative individuals. This study would be the ultimate in "using the person as their own control."

Editor and author:

I would think this might be a productive area of study, especially if we are interested in studying negative perceptions. We could ask authors to rate editors on laziness, imperceptivity, pettiness, procrastination, haughtiness, anal attention to detail, and insensitivity.

We could ask editors to rate authors on persistence, sloppiness, failure to follow procedures, self-absorption, and impatience.

Customer and lap dancer:

I promise the reader that I am primarily relying on accounts here from movies, but it would seem to fertile ground to test theories hypotheses about exchange relationships. Likely a critical outcome in the analysis would be "bills stuffed per minute." I wish to note that the technical name for the research design is the "one with many" design.

Hospital patient and staff worker:

This is a wonderful opportunity where it is typically the case that the person who normally has more power and status is placed in a situation where they wear a robe that exposes most of their posterior, is bathed by total strangers, and other things that even I dare not mention.

Conjoined twins: The politically incorrect term for such twins is Siamese twins. They present a marvelous opportunity to study face-to-face interaction. What other relationship do you know of where one person observes the other person every waking hour of every day of existence? Also if one of the participants shows up, you know the other one is sure to come. Also there are no worries about dreaded relationship dissolution. The behavioral geneticist must feel depressed that it is so difficult to enroll any conjoined twins reared apart.

Suicide-bomber and spouse:

There is obviously a catch 22 here. If you study these couples after the event, you have missing data, and if you study them before the event you will be labeled as a terrorist. For the male bombers, I would be very curious about how his wife feels about her partner being with 72 virgins in the afterlife. No wonder there are no American suicide bombers. We would be too afraid that one of our 72 virgins would be Mother Teresa or John Paul II.

Talk-show host and sidekick:

With the plethora of talk shows on television, we can content analyze the interactions between these two. One possible area of study is the ingratiating comments made by the sidekick. The other might be a discourse analysis on how so much talk has so little content. Another idea is to look for Duchene smiles and laughs in these interactions.

I look forward to reading research on these relationship in *Personal Relations* and *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. Make sure you thank me in the acknowledgements. Upon further reflection, maybe it would be better if you did not thank me.