



ROBIN GOODWIN

Why I study...

Relationships and culture

PSYCHOLOGY offers us many interesting topics for study, but few capture the public imagination more than the study of close relationships. Our political leaders constantly refer to the importance of 'the family', the health implications of greater openness in sexual relations, the need for stronger community relations, and so on. Perhaps surprisingly then, few British psychologists have conducted systematic, scientific investigations on close relationships, with the majority of relationships research taking place in the US.

Unfortunately, as is the case in many other areas of psychology, the result is that we know a great deal about North American sophomores but precious little about cultural diversity in relationships, even within multicultural Western societies. I believe that this has a number of important implications, which prompted me to focus much of my research on relationships across cultures.

First, there are intriguing differences in the way that people think and feel about relationships across the globe, and many misconceptions about these differences. In some cultures, being married makes you far happier than in others (Goodwin, 1999). In many societies, a lack of close friendships has severe consequences for psychological well-being, in others it is less significant (van Tilburg *et al.*, 1998). And although humans just about everywhere fall in love and have similar intense, highly emotional feelings about the person they love, the role of these feelings in actually forming a relationship with the admired other may be heavily dependent on the extent to which important others regulate relationship formation in that society. As a result, in some societies, individual attraction may

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play only a small part in actual marital choice. Here we have just one example of a phenomenon familiar to cross-cultural psychologists: the relationship between what individuals feel (or indeed think) and the way they behave is likely to be moderated by culture. Relationship formation then serves as just one example of some fairly important principles about predicting behaviour in different settings.

Second, we are all often addressed in the media by 'respectable' pundits pontificating about the impacts of globalisation, its implications for the decline in social networks, interpersonal trust, intergenerational respect and the like. Unfortunately, these pundits usually base their proclamations on very little evidence. Studying relationships across various cultures can often give us important insights into the mechanisms and consequences of social change within cultures, one of the major themes of the social sciences but one rarely investigated by psychologists.

In China, for example, the role children have in the family has seen a saw-tooth pattern from a position of relatively little influence (pre-revolutionary China) to a situation where the authority of elders was severely challenged (during the Cultural Revolution), to modern-day China under the one-child policy, where sons in particular are often treated as 'pampered

Emperors'. I completed my doctorate in 1989, a time of great social change in Central and Eastern Europe, and for the past 14 years I have been fortunate to collaborate with colleagues across this region on projects investigating the implications of these changes for relationship intimacy and quality, trust, gender roles, intergenerational relations, social networks and sexual behaviour. We also worked in Hong Kong immediately leading up to the handover to China, investigating the implications of anxiety over the handover on the desire to have children.

Our results have shown that as 'large events' unfold within a society there are manifold implications for the everyday lives of individuals in these countries (Goodwin *et al.*, 2002). For example, we find that for some groups in some countries these social changes offer important opportunities for the development of psychologically important new networks, whilst for others (often the poorer and less skilled segments of society) these changes can lead to the collapse of developed interpersonal ties, often with devastating implications (e.g. the sharp increase in alcoholism amongst Russian men during the early 1990s, and the subsequent dramatic decrease in their life expectancy). Often these results are culture-specific and depend on long-established relational histories: in the

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Georgian Republic, for example, long hours at work were compensated for by the richness of workplace interactions, leading to high levels of psychological well-being amongst our Georgian respondents. In Russia a lack of such social integration meant that the same work hours helped contribute to high levels of depression. Frequently too, culture, group membership and personality combined to predict relationships outcomes; more formally, there were interactions between micro, meso and macro levels of variables. Everywhere, however, we found that close relationships acted as an important 'social glue', helping people deal with the uncertainties of their changing world, and that a culturally sensitive understanding of these interpersonal dynamics could be as crucial to successful societal transformations as the implementation of specific economic reforms.

This suggests that, finally, understanding relationships and culture can have considerable practical implications. In some societies, for example, domestic

abuse is very rare, and by studying such societies we can try to understand how to reduce abuse in our own culture. By understanding how culture may moderate an established relationship between variables (e.g. between personality and sexual risk taking) we can design better, more closely targeted interventions, more likely to work with particular cultural groups. Understanding cultural variations in relationship stability can help us design appropriate support services for particular communities, whilst comprehending some of the key issues in mixed ethnicity relations can be vital in promoting better integration within a multicultural Britain. All of these underline the value of relationship psychology as a very applied science.

Personal relationships are, of course, of interest to most people and a wonderful topic to research down the pub. Studying relationships across cultures is, however, more than just a great excuse for visiting pubs overseas: it has serious theoretical and practical benefits. Culture and ethnicity have too often been seen as at best co-

variates in psychology, 'messy' variables to be 'controlled out' in experimental designs. I believe it is time for culture and cultural change to take a much more central role within British psychology, prompting us to question many of our assumptions about the universality and stability of our 'established' findings.

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