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Personality and Personal Relationship Processes:  
An Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A version of this paper will appear in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 24(4), August 2007, © Sage Publications. The author is indebted to Editor Paul Mongeau for his constructive comments on earlier versions of this paper. Please address all correspondence to: Stanley O. Gaines, Jr., School of Social Sciences, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex, United Kingdom (phone +44 189 526 5485; fax +44 189 526 9724; e-mail Stanley.Gaines@brunel.ac.uk).

*...[P]ersonality is the relatively enduring pattern of recurrent interpersonal situations which characterize a human life.*

-Harry Stack Sullivan,

*The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (1953/1997, p. 110-111, emphasis in original)

Within the subject area of individual differences, the term “personality” refers to a variety of internal influences (outside the domain of cognitive ability) that may be reflected in individuals’ behaviour (Ewen, 2003). Traits, motives, moods, emotions, attitudes, and values are key personality constructs. Given the intraindividual focus of many theories and studies of personality, readers might wonder why an entire edition of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* has been devoted to personality and personal relationship processes. However, as the quote from Sullivan (1953/1997) attests, personality simultaneously is a cause and a consequence of the social and personal relationships that individuals enter, maintain, and exit over time.

Sullivan’s (1953/1997) interpersonal theory of personality reflects Sullivan’s belief that the study of interpersonal relations ought to be a multidisciplinary enterprise. Accordingly, Sullivan viewed the topic of personality and personal relationship processes as proper subject matter for anthropologists as well as psychologists, sociologists as well as psychiatrists. For those sociologists and anthropologists who conduct research on personality and social structure (Ryff, 1987), the idea that interest in personality and personal relationship processes is not confined to any particular discipline (e.g., psychology) is hardly novel. However, in the current era of fragmentation within and across disciplines (e.g., sociologically oriented social psychologists are struggling to remain relevant within mainstream, psychologically oriented social psychology; Stolle, Fine, & Cook, 2001), Sullivan’s (1953/1997)

interdisciplinary orientation toward personality and personal relationship processes is refreshing to many relationship scholars in psychology, sociology, communication studies, and family studies (see Wiggins, 1991).

As a practising psychiatrist, Sullivan (1954/1970) was especially interested in understanding how psychotherapists' relationships with clients could improve the social and psychological functioning of clients. Nevertheless, Sullivan contended that the same personality processes characterize relationships outside as well as within psychiatric settings. Consider Sullivan's (1954/1970) theorem of reciprocal emotion, which was a hallmark of Sullivan's interpersonal theory of personality:

...Integration in an interpersonal situation is a process in which (1) complementary needs are resolved (or aggravated); (2) reciprocal patterns of activity are developed (or disintegrated); and (3) foresight of satisfaction (or rebuff) of similar needs is facilitated. (p. 122)

In *The Psychiatric Interview*, Sullivan (1954/1970) applied the theorem of reciprocal emotion to therapist-client relationships; whereas in *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, Sullivan (1953/1997) applied the theorem of reciprocal emotion to parent-offspring relationships. Ironically, with the possible exception of self-esteem, Sullivan's interpersonal theory of personality offered little direct insight into those personality constructs that might be most relevant to personal relationship processes (see Millon, 1996). However, Sullivan's interpersonal theory of personality stimulated the development of circumplex models of personality traits (i.e., dominance and nurturance) that inherently were interpersonal (e.g., Leary, 1957; Wiggins, 1979).

Sullivan's (1953/1997) interpersonal theory of personality provides a useful frame of reference for understanding personality and personal relationship processes as examined in the seven peer-reviewed empirical articles within this special edition of *JSPR*. With the exception of the paper by Patrick Markey and Charlotte Markey (described below), these articles do not draw explicitly upon Sullivan's interpersonal theory of personality. Nonetheless, Sullivan's (1953/1997) interpersonal theory of personality served as inspiration for this special edition and may offer an intellectual common ground for understanding results of the empirical articles in this edition (see Concluding Thoughts article at the end of this special edition).

Given the consensus that has emerged among personality theorists and researchers since the mid-1980s regarding five-factor models of personality traits (Ewen, 2003), it is fitting that the first two empirical articles in this edition examine effects of the Big Five personality traits (i.e., openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism; Costa & McCrae, 1985) upon personal relationship processes. Dick Barelds and Pieter B. Barelds-Dijkstra report that partners' dissimilarity in the Big Five personality traits of extraversion, emotional stability (the inverse of neuroticism), and autonomy (i.e., openness to experience) positively predicted the swiftness with which romantic partners fell in love and entered into their current relationships. C. Veronica Smith, John Nezlek, Gregory Webster, and E. Layne Paddock report that a group of sexuality-specific personality traits known as the Sexy Seven (i.e., sexual attractiveness, relationship exclusivity, gender-role orientation, sexual restraint, erotophobic disposition, emotional investment, and sexual orientation) together were more strongly related than are the more generic Big Five personality traits to individuals' reactions to sexual experiences; results were strongest for emotional

investment, which was a significant positive predictor of individuals' sexual enjoyment, intimacy, desire, respect, and love.

Although generic, Big Five models are especially popular among trait theorists, circular or circumplex models of specifically interpersonal traits (i.e., dominance and nurturance; Wiggins, 1979) also are popular among trait theorists (Millon, 1996). Accordingly, the third empirical article in this edition examines the impact of interpersonal traits upon personal relationship processes. Patrick Markey and Charlotte Markey report that partners' similarity in warmth (i.e., nurturance) was a significant positive predictor of partners' reported relationship quality; whereas partners' similarity in dominance was a significant negative predictor of partners' reported relationship quality.

Bowlby's (1969/1997) attachment theory is not cited extensively in personality textbooks. However, as Feeney and Noller (1996) observed, attachment theory is as much a theory of personality development as it is a theory of social development. Consistent with the perspective that attachment theory qualifies as a personality theory, the fourth empirical article in this edition examines individuals' attachment styles (i.e., attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) as personality influences on personal relationship processes. Heidi Kane, Lisa Jaremka, AnaMarie Guichard, Maire Ford, Nancy Collins, and Brooke Feeney report that men's attachment avoidance was a significant negative predictor of their female partners' relationship satisfaction; whereas women's attachment anxiety was a significant negative predictor of their male partners' relationship satisfaction.

For the most part, the first four empirical articles in this edition draw upon relatively well-established theories and models that have been applied to studies of personality and/or personal relationship processes. In contrast, the fifth and sixth

empirical articles owe their inspiration to emerging theories and models regarding personality and personal relationship processes. In an application of the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), M. Brent Donnellan, Kimberly Assad, Richard Robins, and Rand Conger report that the personality trait of negative emotionality exerts a negative effect upon individuals' and partners' relationship satisfaction; whereas communal positive emotionality exerts a positive effect upon individuals' and partners' relationship satisfaction. In an application of the social ecology model (Huston, 2000), Judith Fischer, Jacki Fitzpatrick, and H. Harrington Cleveland report that the temperaments of novelty seeking and harm avoidance (both of which are negative influences) mediate the impact of family dysfunction (which itself is a negative influence) on individuals' relationship quality.

The seventh and final empirical article in this edition is similar to the first four empirical articles in drawing upon the relatively mainstream self-theories of James (1890/1981), Cooley (1902), and Mead (1934). However, the seventh empirical article departs from the first six empirical articles in examining the effects of individuals' personality traits on individuals' efforts at sculpting their partners' selves (and, in turn, on individuals' responsiveness to partners' efforts at sculpting them). Madoka Kumashiro, Caryl Rusbult, Catrin Finkenauer, and Shevaun Stocker report that individuals' locomotion orientation is a positive predictor of partner affirmation, movement toward ideal self, and couple well-being; whereas individuals' assessment orientation is a negative predictor of partner affirmation, movement toward ideal self, and couple well-being.

I am grateful to *JSPR* Editor Paul Mongeau for sharing my vision and for allowing me to serve as guest editor for this special edition. Taken together, the empirical articles in this edition represent innovative, theoretically informed research

on personality and personal relationship processes. I hope that this special edition will encourage relationship scholars to consider personality constructs, not as nuisance or error variables, but as substantive influences in future research on relationship processes.

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