

# Psychology's Theory of Relativity: When Research Is All in the Family

June 24, 2005

Most families on a long road trip pass the time by singing songs, playing 20 questions, or spotting license plates from distant states. But for the Fiskes, hours on the interstate provided the chance for something a little different: collaborative research. They're one of several psychology families who have found teaming up with relatives a natural blending of professional and family life.

But, to paraphrase Tolstoy, each of these academic families is academic in its own way. Collaborations range from occasional joint ventures to the equivalent of long-running mom-and-pop businesses.

APS Past President Susan T. Fiske, Princeton University, recalls the time when she was still an assistant professor and was in the car with her father, Donald, a well-established researcher. The conversation somehow turned to the stereotype that women talk more than men and the question of whether or not the stereotype is true. "We decided that we could collectively observe people in cars," Fiske recalled, and a research design soon emerged: As they moved through traffic, the Fiskes watched mixed-gender driver—passenger pairs, noting who was driving and who was talking. "As I recall, men drove more often," Fiske said with a laugh. Female passengers were likelier to be talking, male passengers to be sleeping. "We even wrote it up and submitted it to a journal, but they said it didn't have enough theory."

That particular paper never saw print or earned a mention in the *Festschrift* that Fiske later edited in her father's honor.\*<sup>1</sup> But the same attitude of intellectual partnership has produced successful collaborations between Fiske and her brother, Alan P. Fiske, an anthropologist at the University of California, Los Angeles. These include a widely cited paper on social gaffes and a chapter currently in process for a handbook of cultural psychology.

"My brother and I both went into the family business ... because my father seemed to be so motivated and so interested in what he was doing," Susan Fiske said. "He went to work on Saturdays, and we wanted to know what he was doing all the time." But despite following in their father's footsteps (more or less), the junior Fiskes maintain independent careers and research interests, collaborating only occasionally.

## The Family Business

In other families, the "family business" is a far more constant partnership. Take the longtime collaboration between Terrie Moffitt, University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Institute of Psychiatry in London, and her husband, APS Charter Member Avshalom Caspi, who holds faculty posts at the same institutions. (They both also do research at the University of Otago in New Zealand.) Their intellectual partnership, along with their romantic relationship, began almost as soon as the two assistant professors met at a conference in 1987. Caspi, teaching at Harvard, was a developmental and personality psychologist; Moffitt, teaching at Wisconsin, was a clinical-abnormal psychologist and neuropsychologist. "We started learning from each other right away," Moffitt said.

But not until 1990, the year they were married, did Caspi and Moffitt also commit to a common manuscript. “Several trusted senior colleagues warned us not to work together, so we avoided collaborating at first,” Moffitt said. “But then, because our research benefited from talking about it constantly, it became increasingly artificial to try to work alone. We decided in the end that it would be dishonest to portray joint work as individual work. So we came out as collaborators.” They have continued doing so ever since.

“Our role models are my grandparents,” Moffitt explained. “They worked side by side from dawn to dusk for over 30 years running a farm. Historically, many families worked together operating farms, or shops, or other family businesses, so our collaboration is in keeping with that tradition. ... It seems too natural to us. We wonder how other couples manage to work apart.”

Even so, Moffitt added, “each of us always keeps at least one independent research project or sole-authored paper underway at all times.” But still, “even on sole-authored manuscripts, we value the other partner’s feedback.”

Not only a long joint bibliography, but a large two-person partners’ desk symbolizes the work of Craig and Sharon Ramey, who both hold the title of director of Georgetown University’s Center on Health and Education. In addition to administrative work and 75 to 80 percent of their research, the Rameys’ collaboration includes teaching all their classes in tandem. According to Craig, first-time visitors to their large office, specially designed to accommodate them both, usually “stop and do a double take, and they say, ‘Not with a spouse!’ ”

The room, with its shared work surfaces and duplicate computers and phones, replicates a setup they first developed at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Newly arrived and awaiting completion of the space that would accommodate their research center, “we temporarily commandeered a conference room and moved in a couple of desks. After about a week, we looked at each other and said, ‘This is pretty cool,’ ” recalled Craig. “And so efficient,” added Sharon, an APS Fellow. Soon they “scrapped the plan for separate offices” in favor of a shared space.

#### A Diener Dynasty

If partnerships like the Rameys or Caspi and Moffitt bring to mind the mom-and-pop business model, the five psychological Dieners seem more like a conglomerate, with each member running a different subsidiary. Spouses Ed and Carol, both faculty members at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, pursue two separate specialties. Ed, an APS Fellow and founding editor of the APS journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, due out in 2006, concentrates on researching emotional well-being. Carol, a clinical psychologist and attorney, focuses on forensic issues.

Three of their five children have also chosen psychology careers. Marissa, an assistant professor at the University of Utah, does research in developmental psychology. Her twin, Mary Beth, a clinical psychologist, supervises student practica at the University of Kentucky. Their brother, Robert, an adjunct teacher at Portland State University, is described by their father Ed as an intrepid adventurer — “the Indiana Jones of psychology,” — who has collected data for Ed’s research in northern Greenland, in Amish communities in central Illinois, and in the slums of Calcutta, among other places. Ed added that Robert was even branded in a rite of manhood by the Maasai of East Africa.

Ed noted that his family members have all collaborated with him in his work, and not the other way around. Referred to as Dr. Happiness in a recent issue of *Time*, Ed heads a substantial research group to study emotional well-being.\*<sup>2</sup> The other Dieners “do their own stuff,” he said, but “have teamed up with me ... when something comes up that is kind of an overlap of interest. It’s kind of a fun thing.” Family collaboration is “on the side” for everyone. “We don’t work together all the time, and everybody’s got their own things going.”

Robert, however, has been Ed’s employee on the data-gathering trips. “You can’t send grad students readily to the places Robert’s been,” he said. “The slums of Calcutta are a pretty rough place.” With a master’s degree in psychology, Robert also “can analyze studies and write them up, but he’s an adventurer first and a psychologist second.”

### Family History

Unlike the Dieners’ wide-ranging conglomerate, the boutique collaboration of APS Fellow and Charter Member James Pate, an emeritus professor at Georgia State University, and his daughter, APS Charter Member Debra Sue Pate, Jackson State University, constitutes an exchange of subjects separate from either scientist’s main research.

“We both are interested in the history of psychological organizations,” said James, a past president of the Society for the History of Psychology, an organization in which Debra is also involved. “We have written about the conflicts between organizations, the compatibility of organizations. It is an unusual kind of emphasis. We are interested in organizational histories.”

This work began as an equal partnership, James said, “rather than one of us collaborating with the other — a very dynamic, very interactive kind of collaboration.”

“Obviously, given that I am senior both in age and in doing historical research, Debra and I would talk about that. She became interested in historical research and we realized that our talents would complement each other. She writes exceedingly well. My writing is not bad, but we found that by collaborating we could work out some things very nicely. We complement each other rather than duplicate each other.”

Their discussions about psychology go back to Debra’s childhood. Her undergraduate thesis “was an expansion of some research that I was doing,” James said. Their first formal history collaboration came in the early 1990s, after Debra had finished her PhD, and they have been collaborating on research and presentations ever since. In March 2005, the Pates became the first father-daughter pair to head the nation’s oldest regional psychology organization, the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology, when Debra assumes the presidency that James held in 1988.

### Relative Number

Family collaborations don’t always arise from overlaps in relatives’ existing research interests. Sometimes one person’s work draws another’s in a direction it might not have taken otherwise. Randy Gallistel and his wife, Rochel Gelman, both APS Fellows and former Board Members, are co-directors of Rutgers University’s Center for Cognitive Studies. But according to Gallistel, they are “not really in the same field.”

Gallistel is a neuroscientist and psychologist working with adults and animals, while Gelman is “in the cognitive end,” said Gallistel, working with young children. Only about 10 percent of their work represents their shared interest in the representation of number.

Early in their relationship, “I wasn’t doing anything remotely connected with number, but I had a longstanding interest in mathematics and the history of mathematics, number theory in particular,” Gallistel recalled. Gelman was “doing very influential experimental work” in how children develop concepts of number. “I found her results and general argument in the field very interesting, and we found fairly early on that my knowledge of number theory and the history of arithmetic was useful in thinking about some of the issues,” he said.

“He actually used to go around giving talks based on my work,” Gelman said, “but I objected to them,” feeling that he extrapolated beyond the data. The solution was for both to attend a seminar at the University of California, Irvine during their first sabbatical after receiving tenure. The seminar explored “Rochel’s work and the issues that it raised,” Gallistel said. “That led to our first real collaboration, Gelman and Gallistel; that book is still in print.” \*<sup>3</sup>

“She was the senior author,” Gallistel said. “My work [until then] was on electrical self-stimulation of the brain in the rat, so it had nothing to do with [number]. This was very much her work, to which I contributed some things from time to time, at her invitation.” Added Gelman: “Every once in a while, during our long careers, we have come back together to work on numerical and quantitative reasoning.”

### Big Brother

The intellectual influences between the Elias brothers are even more direct and pronounced. Both work in the field of aging. Merrill, the elder by eight years, is a professor at the University of Maine and Boston University; APS Fellow Jeff is a research administrator at the National Institute of Aging. Both are also married to psychologists who specialize in aspects of aging — Merrill to Penelope Kelly “Penny” Elias, now of the University of Maine, and Jeff to Julia Treland, an intramural researcher at the National Institutes of Health.

Jeff said his interest in psychology was “definitely influenced” by his big brother. In fact, Merrill was the one who introduced Jeff to the field of aging. “I had interests in people and cognition and animals models. He pointed out [that] aging is this emerging field where you could do both.”

The Elias brothers’ work has overlapped, both intellectually and geographically, multiple times throughout their careers — at Allegheny College, West Virginia University, and Syracuse University. Both studied at Allegheny, where Merrill taught during Jeff’s undergraduate days. When Jeff was a graduate student and Merrill a young professor, “[Merrill] needed someone to run a grant, and I needed a place to gather dissertation data,” Jeff recalled. Jeff’s dissertation topic fit well with Merrill’s grant on information processing and aging, and the resulting data formed the basis of their first collaboration.

Jeff described their next collaboration as “Elias cubed” — a book co-authored by Merrill, Penny, and Jeff. Merrill’s collaborations with his wife, however, with whom he shares interests in epidemiology and health, have far outnumbered those with his brother.

### The Benefits of Working Together

Merrill Elias contends that collaborating with a relative, especially a spouse, nearly guarantees excellent work. “You end up being more careful about your work. Your work is probably the best you’re going to do, because you’re more critical of each other, because you’re married. It’s because of loving someone and wanting them to be the very best. ... I think it’s that quality that makes your research better. You don’t pull punches — you’re very honest about what you think. You’re less competitive because you’re doing something that’s good for both of you.”

That’s that attitude that animates the Rameys’ method of editing. When working on a manuscript, “we don’t put any marginalia indicating objections or corrections to the other’s work,” Craig said. “We make changes at will,” Sharon added. “If Craig can’t tell that a sentence is changed,” it wasn’t right to begin with. Rather than noting who proposed or added or cut out what, “It’s just a ‘make it better’ approach,” she continued. Added Craig: “It is up to us to resolve whatever differences we have over substance or style, and to always present a pretty united front.”

But how a family shares ideas depends on its own style; and collaborating with relatives “has the same ups and downs as a family business,” Merrill Elias said. “My brother and I, as children, always argued a lot. ... When we were publishing together, we had some pretty heated discussions.” He recalled an evening when the two were writing a paper and their wives, who were waiting to go to dinner, thought the brothers would never speak to each other again. “But we were quite compatible at dinner,” Merrill said. Of their vociferous disputation, Merrill noted, “As we grew older, we stopped.”

The feelings that arise in family collaborations are “more complex” than those that arise when working with an unrelated colleague, Susan Fiske observed; the relationship “reaches forward in time and also backward in time.

“You’re probably more concerned about harmony than you might be otherwise.” In any collaboration, “there’s some responsibility for responding to each others feelings,” she said. With a non-relative, “it’s not the main thing going on.” But with parents, children, brothers, and sisters, “there’s more assumption that you have to respond to feelings.”

Her brother Alan agreed: “The relationship transcends the particular collaboration. We know each other’s history and personality.” It’s one thing “if it’s just [unrelated] scientists [working together], and you end up never speaking to each other,” he said. “But it’s more important to get along with your sister than to write a good chapter. I know I’m getting along with my sister, and I think we’re writing a good chapter.”

- \*<sup>1</sup> See the September 2003 *Observer* for a collection of remembrances of Donald Fiske.
- \*<sup>2</sup> January 17, 2005, “The Science of Happiness.”
- \*<sup>3</sup> Gelman, R. and Gallistel, C. R. (1978). *The child’s understanding of number*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.