

Title: Joanna Schug, Relational Mobility and Cultural Confusion
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Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: Joanna Schug is my guest today. She's a social and cross-cultural psychologist at the College of William and Mary and she's also a friend of mine.

We're talking about cultural differences and how the concept of a relational mobility helps us understand why cultures defer from one another and why people can have difficulty adapting to a new culture.

For a long time we've described cultures in terms of individualism or collectivism but there are limitations to those terms. Joanna and I discuss how we can interpret cultural behavior better if we think about high and low relational mobility.

I think a lot of people have some sense of what the words individualism and collectivism mean. But tell me about some of the limitations we have if we try to understand the world through that lens.

Joanna Schug: It seems like when people talk about individualism and collectivism, different people have different ideas of what it means. So I mean you can go back in the literature for the past 50 years and see all different types of individualism and collectivism and we can look at like horizontal or vertical or Hofstede's measures and it just seems like people have an idea about what individualism and collectivism is. But in many cases, the data don't fit their predictions based on that idea.

So they've kind of had to try to figure out how to get around this concept or how to narrow it down to like different dimensions of individualism and collectivism. So one thing that I think relational mobility does a pretty decent job of explaining is this kind of idea about how much intimacy and closeness people have in their relationships.

I think in many cases, especially when North Americans think about collectivism, we like to think of a place where people sacrifice their self-interest for the sake of the group or the collective and then we also kind of throw in this idea that they do that because they want to do that. So maybe it's because we also have this tendency to make internal attributions for behavior. But we observe people who are behaving in collectivistic ways and we assume that they do that because they like to do that, right?

And in the case of collectivism, we think that they like other people or that they enjoy cooperating with other people, when at least the research comparing North America and East

Asia seems to suggest that that's not really the case, right? People in East Asia context in many cases don't like cooperating with the group.

Toshio Yamagishi's classic research showed that Americans are actually more likely to stay with their groups compared to Japanese when things start going wrong in the group because the Americans are trying to like stick with the group and the Japanese actually don't want to.

So if you give them an out, they will take it. But in most cases in Japanese society, they can't get out of their groups, right? So if you put them in an – in a situation where they can, they're more than happy to do so, even more so than Americans.

So I think relational mobility will – or at least is trying to address this kind of discrepancy. It can help explain why people might behave in other regarding ways even when they don't necessarily like their groups.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I guess this would be a good point to jump through a definition. So what's a good definition of relational mobility?

Joanna Schug: Yeah. I mean if you go back and look at our papers, we use several different definitions. But the idea is that your social environment provides you with opportunities to choose new relationships. So you have opportunities to meet new people, choose the group that you belong to.

But you also have the opportunity to cut off current relationships if you want to. So I think a lot of people assume that relational mobility means that people are just changing their relationships all the time, but that's not the case.

So if you are happy in your relationship, of course you're not going to move. But if you're somehow not benefiting from your relationship, your partner is not good to you, you're not happy in some way the idea is that you have other options out there, right? And you would be able to leave that current relationship or change the nature of that relationship, but move to a new, more beneficial relationship.

So this is an aspect of the society, right? So different societies will provide people with more or less opportunities to meet new people or they might try – they might – different societies might make it difficult to leave certain types of relationships. So marriage might be a good example of this.

In some context, it's more difficult to get a divorce than in other contexts. So the idea is that relational ability is something about the society in which people are a part of.

Chris Martin: A typical example of a city or a place that's really high in relational mobility is New York City because people are constantly meeting new people there and dropping old friendships and starting new ones.

Are there any places in America that might be examples of lower relational mobility?

Joanna Schug: Well, I mean I have data that are not published unfortunately. You know, so take this with a grain of salt. But we did a survey comparing different states in the United States and this was several years ago.

Actually I think the highest level of relational ability was Texas in that data set. You know, who knows if that would pan out. New York I don't believe – I mean I don't know if we looked at the city versus the state but I don't believe it was the highest.

The lowest was actually West Virginia. So we actually measured relational ability in that data set as the number of new acquaintances, someone who had met over the past week and the mean for West Virginia in that data set was zero.

Chris Martin: Wow, yeah.

Joanna Schug: It was the only state with a zero. But that – you know, take that with a grain of salt because there were pretty few observations from West Virginia to begin with compared with some of the other states.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I mean in that case, I think maybe poverty is a compound too.

Joanna Schug: Yeah, it could be poverty. I mean it could be where people are living. If you're living in a rural community and you only come into contact with your neighbors, there's probably not a lot of opportunities to meet new people.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Joanna Schug: Certainly having more money lets you explore your environment more and go out and meet people and you also, as an individual, become more attractive to others, which is another component similar to relational mobility but it's more about the individual rather than the society. But if I am a wealth person, chances are the people around me are also wealthy and so collectively probably have more opportunities to form relationships than other people.

Chris Martin: Do you think it would be fair to say that in higher relational mobility, society is – you have to prove your worth? So in a way, you turn yourself into a commodity. Not consciously but in a sort of subtle way, you try to show ways in which you are a better friend or a better romantic partner.

Joanna Schug: Yeah, exactly and that's a big part of the theory is that in a high mobility society, it's like an open marketplace of relationship. So you need to demonstrate your worth to others to be chosen and also to choose others, right? So there are two sides of the coin.

I have to have opportunities to meet new people but also I need to get other people to want to be my friend or form relationships with me and also I want them to stick around.

So our research shows that people tend to be more invested and engaged in more relationship maintenance behavior, like proactive relationship maintenance behavior. So more self-disclosure, right? Higher levels of intimacy.

Ginko Yamada [0:08:06] [Phonetic], one of my kohai, so she's from the same graduate program in Hokkaido University. "Kohai" is the Japanese word for someone who is part of the same general class but younger, I guess, or – yeah. Yeah, it doesn't really translate well. But anyway, but she has a good, interesting line of research that looks at romantic passion and so in context where there's higher relational mobility, people tend to feel more passionate about their relationships because that passion actually serves as a commitment mechanism to keep one's self in the relationship and encourage other people to stay with you in the relationship.

Yeah. So, yeah, and then you think about, "OK, how am I going to make people want to be my friend or be my partner in a high relational mobility society?" Right? I'm going to have to market myself, maybe find a niche that only I can fulfill, that other people can't, because if I'm going to be competing with a lot of other people in a general domain, that's going to be more difficult than finding like a smaller domain to potentially market myself in, right?

So I might be like really into a certain type of like strange music. Like you say Oingo Boingo or something like that. So I can market that to other weird people who might like that kind of weird 80s music or something like that, right?

So that might help me market my strengths or my ability or my unique esoteric interests to make me more of a desirable interaction partner to other people in high mobility environments.

Chris Martin: Right. And what are some examples of countries that are low in relational mobility? I know Japan is one.

Joanna Schug: Yeah. So we have a large cross-cultural study that we did actually using advertisements on Facebook. So we actually put advertisements into people's news feeds that kind of looked like a little – one of those buzz feed quizzes if you remember those. You know they will tell you which Disney princess you would be. So we put a very similar type of quiz that's like, you know, tell us about your relationships. How does your relationship compare to other people? And it was designed very nicely and so quite a few people clicked on this. I think we got over 16,000 participants around the world.

So we only surveyed countries that had pretty high Facebook market penetration. So the lowest relational mobility societies were East Asia. So Japan, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa. We don't have any countries unfortunately from the Sub-Saharan Africa because there's not a lot of Facebook market penetration there unfortunately.

But we do have countries like Morocco and Tunisia and they do tend to have lower relational mobility.

Chris Martin: And that's a self-report way of measuring. What other ways are people looking into right now in terms of ways to measure it?

Joanna Schug: Yeah. So I'm always interested in looking at the number of new acquaintances that people are meeting. It doesn't really work well at an individual level because there's just so much variation there. But if you were to aggregate that on a societal level, I think that could be a measure.

Other people have looked at divorce rates. So divorce rates and probably better than divorce rates would be remarriage rates after divorce. So that could be a good proxy of relational mobility.

I would love to find other ways to measure this. Maybe looking at following people over the course of a day and finding out like if they meet someone, how easy would it be to form a relationship with that person.

But yeah, it's a difficult construct to measure, especially because we're trying to assess the environment and not necessarily individual attributes of each individual, which is a little bit different than the way things are typically done in psychology.

Chris Martin: Can you give me some examples of cultural conflicts or misunderstandings that happen because of differences in relational mobility?

Joanna Schug: OK. I mean I can tell you a little bit about my experience in Japan. So I did my graduate work in Japan. So I was there several years and as an American, I'm kind of used to small talk and talking to people who I might come across in my daily life and forming some sort of relationship with them.

But I remember when I was – I would see this – a couple of people who worked in the lab across the hall. It's a different program. So I don't really have a lot of opportunities to talk with them. But there are seven years of my life where I would pass by this one person in particular and I see him almost every day, probably several times a day and I knew him.

Sometimes I would see him out like in the community in Sapporo and because we weren't part of the same group, we didn't really have license to talk to each other. So it just seems so odd to me that I would just pass by this person, know his face and see him around all the time and never like even know who he is where if this were the States, I would probably have introduced myself a long time ago.

Interestingly, on the day that I defended my dissertation – I guess maybe it was the day I actually received my diploma. We had a big party in the lab and they were having a party in their lab and I saw this guy and we were all drinking beer as one does in Japan in the lab.

I just – you know, I was just like, “You know, today is the day. It has been seven years. I'm going to walk across the hall and introduce myself,” and I just introduced myself and it turns out that he had wanted to talk to me too for the past seven years but he just didn't feel like it would be appropriate for him to introduce himself. So anyway, you know, so things like that.

Like whether it's OK to talk to someone who you haven't met before. I hear a lot of people outside of the United States complain about how superficial Americans are when it comes to forming relationships. So they will meet someone on the train and they will have a conversation, which for Americans is not a big deal. But for them, it's like wow, I just had a conversation with a stranger. This is amazing.

Then they will be like, "Oh, hey, you should come visit sometime when you're in my neck of the woods." They will think that that's like a really serious personal invitation, right?

Chris Martin: Right.

Joanna Schug: So then they will call this person and the person doesn't even remember them. So I hear about that happening a lot and then I kind of feel like I might be a little bit guilty of that. When I offered that invitation in the moment, I am serious. But unless they take it up very quickly, it kind of dissolves and I don't really think about it much after that. But yeah, so things like that.

Like whether – you know, just whether it's OK to form new relationships with strangers. Do you talk to strangers? Do you potentially think of them as someone who could be an exchange partner at some point in time?

Chris Martin: Yeah. One thing I've noticed is that some Americans also view their parents and family members as just some people in this larger marketplace and so they opt to keep in touch with them or not keep in touch with them, depending on how much value they perceive in those relationships whereas in India, you tend to feel obliged to keep in touch with your parents regardless.

Also in India, I mean you have a much stronger connection with them and that's a generalization. Of course many Americans are very close to their parents. Also speaking of conversations, striking up conversations. I realize in India, there's – even though there are more Starbucks now and more coffee shops in general, you just don't strike up conversations with someone at a coffee shop in India. It's just not considered OK.

Joanna Schug: Yeah. And even in the States, you mentioned New York is a high mobility environment. I feel like it actually might be kind of a U-shaped curve or an inverted U-shaped curve where when you have an extremely high population density, there might be an overload of relationships. So I feel like in big cities, people actually talk with each other a little bit less than they would in kind of medium-sized towns just because there are just so many people everywhere.

Like when you ride the subway in New York, you probably don't strike a conversation with the person next to you. But if you're on the bus in like a rural community, you might.

Chris Martin: Yeah, that makes sense. Yeah. In England, from traveling around within England, I know that – if you're riding a bus in London, you definitely don't strike up

conversations with people. But if you're in Wales for example, you can easily strike up a conversation with someone in the bus.

Joanna Schug: More research to do.

Chris Martin: Yeah. Well, Wales is beautiful. So if you get a chance to do research there, I would highly recommend it.

Joanna Schug: All right.

Chris Martin: So people have mostly looked at differences in relational mobility through differences across nations or to some degree across regions, wheat-growing areas versus rice-growing areas.

But within a country, do you think we could also look at life stages through the lens of relational mobility? Because as some people get older and start a family, it's just harder to make new friends and maybe you're less interested in marketing yourself because you have a family now.

Joanna Schug: Yeah. I mean I definitely think this is the case. I don't have a lot of data – at least I don't have any published data to support this. But what I would imagine is of course the lowest level of mobility is probably going to be those people of – you know, when they have young children and they can't really get out as much as they would like to and they're probably only interacting with the same group of people, probably who are connected also through their children.

You know, whereas if you're a college students, I'm sure you have lots of opportunities. If you just joined a new company, you have a lot of opportunities and also I think that people who are retired have a fair amount of relational mobility and this is somewhat based on just eyeballing data that I have and it does seem that people around age 60 seem to have – or at least report pretty high levels of relational mobility.

Again, take this with a grain of salt because I haven't published anything on this. But this is something I – you know, that made me think at least about why it is that retirees might have higher levels of relational mobility and it just might be because they have more leisure time, right? That they have more time to get out there.

They're probably choosing what they want to do and maybe they choose to go and – I don't know, go on a cruise or go out and go fishing and they might be meeting people as they do so.

I like to think of middle school as a good example of what a low mobility society is like. You know, middle school I think is the epitome of low relational mobility.

You have a set group of people. Everyone knows each other. You're very concerned because everyone knows each other about your reputation, right?

So if you do something wrong or you – you're wearing something that your friends don't like or you're listening to music that your friends don't like, they're going to gossip about you. So you have to be on your best behavior not to make those relationships go bad, right?

Like if they see your parents and you're mortified by how embarrassing your parents are and so forth. So it's kind of like you have to be on your tiptoes all the time about making sure that you are not rocking the boat too much to damage your friendships because if you damage those friendships, you are out of luck, right?

You're not going to move to a new classroom and find a new group or clique of friends. So when I talk about how relationships work in Japan, I think it's very similar to how relationships work in middle school in the United States.

I mean not in necessarily a bad way but people are very conscious about what other people think about them, right? So if you put yourself in that mindset, you might be better to adapt into a low relational mobility environment.

Chris Martin: Right. And there also seems to be a connection between industrialization and relational mobility. So do you think as the whole world gets more industrialized, relational mobility just across the board will be higher?

Joanna Schug: Yeah. So one thing that industrialized nations have is they have generally centralized mechanisms at enforcing cooperation. So we have like police systems and so forth that – you know, say I interact with someone and they steal something from me for instance.

Like I talked to a stranger, stranger danger. They did something bad. In industrialized, developed societies, generally we have some mechanism of punishing them, right? And that mechanism of potentially punishing someone for doing something bad to you makes it so that it's easier to actually get out there and start talking to people, right?

Because you have that kind of sense of security that you get from this institutionalized system of cooperation enforcement.

In low mobility societies or maybe developing societies or less industrialized societies, you may not have that, right? You might not have that like external enforcement system. So the enforcement systems probably become more network-based, right?

So I only interact with people who I know and I know that if they do something wrong or they transgress against me, I can get back to them. I can punish them through my interpersonal networks.

So as societies become more industrialized, I would imagine that there's a lot more freedom and ability to interact with people who you don't currently have a relationship through your kind of extended network. But then again like if things get extremely industrialized like we were just talking about, New York City, it might be that there are too many options, right? And then it might be that society then ends up being fragmented and this is completely theoretical. I have no idea whether this will be the case.

But it's something I like to think about as I'm trying to sleep at night. Like what happens when you have a completely high mobile society where everyone has options to leave their relationships? And I think what will end up happening is people will sort themselves into fragmented groups, right? Because eventually, if you think of like for instance Thomas Schelling's model of residential segregation, right? Even if you have a very, very small preference for interacting or living near people who are mostly like you, maybe not all like you – even I suppose like 51 percent of your neighborhood you want to be people like yourself, then eventually with enough mobility, you're going to get complete segregation, right?

I think the same thing would happen with relational mobility. People will probably sort themselves into very fragmented categories which might inadvertently lower the mobility. So I will need to pair up with some sort of computer simulation person to do that at some point.

Chris Martin: Right. I can imagine if you're trying to measure that. You have to measure other things that are happening at the same time in society like various kinds of polarization that might drive groups apart from each other for entirely other reasons.

Joanna Schug: Exactly, yeah. I mean it might be the same reason. The polarization could be whatever attribute is being selected for by people. So they – it could be – if it's in politics, you want to move to people who have similar political views and if I'm in a low mobility environment, like where I live now, I mean it's in the United States, so it has pretty high mobility compared to Japan.

But I live in a kind of a – not a super urban area but not a super rural area either. But there are people around me who have all sorts of different political attitudes and maybe I might not want to interact with some people. But I have to do that anyway.

But if I had more mobility, right? In this case, residential mobility, then maybe I would move to somewhere where there are more people who have similar mindsets as my own.

Chris Martin: So this was part of a larger school of psychology that's called socio-ecological psychology. Can you talk a little bit about what that larger project is?

Joanna Schug: The socio-ecological approach is used by quite a few people now in cultural, cross-cultural and social psychology to try to link aspects of the social environment in particular to the ways that people think and behave. So relational mobility would be a socio-ecological concept. Residential mobility, you can think of people who are doing work like on the different types of agriculture. So like the Culture of Honor research looking at whether people are living in an area that used to be inhabited by herders as opposed to other types of people. Rice versus wheat farming.

So these are all examples of socio-ecological approaches and this is not a new concept. There are people who have done very similar types of research. John Berry for instance has what he calls the “eco-cultural approach,” which is very similar and I would say probably 80 percent overlap between socio-ecological and eco-cultural approaches. So different people use different terms.

But it's really trying to understand human behavior and cognition, not as something that comes just from inside the individual, but as something that's adapted to different sorts of social or physical environments.

So it's almost getting outside of psychology, right? Psychologists really like thinking about what's going on inside the minds of people and they – and not so good about thinking about what's going on outside of individuals.

So it's almost kind of bridging into sociology, fields like human behavioral ecology. You know, things that psychologists traditionally, at least in the United States, haven't focused much on.

Chris Martin: Right. Well, before we wrap up, tell me a bit about some future research that you have planned for the next couple of years on relational mobility or anything else cross-cultural.

Joanna Schug: Well, that's top secret. But yeah, I have a lot of things planned. We will see how much gets completed. I feel like a kid in a candy store where I want to eat everything, but I know that I'm only going to be able to eat so much. But I was recently fortunate to receive funding to work on larger projects on relational mobility.

What I really want to do is get away from using the scale to measure relational mobility and try to find other ways, particularly using momentary or daily assessment to look at how people are interacting with other people, how they interact with new people and so forth and hopefully this will give us a better idea of what relational mobility is.

I think – you know, again, this is a pretty young concept. We've based it on Toshio Yamagishi's classic work on what he calls “The Emancipation Theory of Trust”. So we've kind of taken a small portion of his grand theory and I've been trying to kind of put – shine a spotlight on that, which is the openness of a society and how many opportunities people have to meet and change the relationships that they want to.

We measured that again as you've mentioned with the Self-Report Scale, but it would be really great if we can get away from doing that and try to find some sort of objective or less objective measure of relational mobility.

Chris Martin: Great. Well, thanks for joining us on the show

Joanna Schug: All right. Thanks for having me.

[Music]

Chris Martin: The next episode of *Half Hour of Heterodoxy* features Lara Schwartz. She is the director of the project on civil discourse at American University. I will also be releasing an episode with Steven Pinker's talk at the 2019 Heterodox Academy Conference. As always, if you enjoyed the show, please leave us a five-star review on iTunes. It helps other people find out about the show and you can reach me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org or on Twitter, @Chrimartin76. Thanks for listening.

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