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Researcher Profile: An Interview with Melissa Curran

Melissa Curran
University of Arizona

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RESEARCHER PROFILE

An Interview with

Melissa Curran, Ph.D.

Melissa A. Curran is a Professor in Family Studies and Human Development at the University of Arizona. She received her Ph.D. in Human Development and Family Sciences from the University of Texas at Austin. In her scholarly work, she examines how finances are connected to individuals, couples, and families as well as how constructs such as relational sacrifices are associated with relationship quality for romantic dyads. She is the Editor of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships.

Q. Define what you do professionally.

A. I am a Professor at the University of Arizona (UA) where I have worked for 17 years.

Q. What activities encompass your professional responsibilities?

A. I'm interested in romantic/interpersonal/dyadic relationships most generally. Within romantic relationships, I often focus on the daily diary methodology. This research method allows researchers to track an individual's experiences in real-time and provides repeated measurement opportunities over time. This methodology is of interest to graduate students, colleagues, or both.

For example, when I first learned about the use of daily diary collection from my first advisee, Casey Totenhagen, and my colleague, Emily Butler. I connected with finance research from my former UA colleague, Joyce Serido, as well as former advisees like Ashley LeBaron-Black and



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Xiaomin Li, who were also interested in questions of finance. In addition to research, I teach classes about theory, including an undergraduate one that is an upper-level, intensive writing class. I also really enjoy mentoring doctoral students, several of whom I reference in this interview.

Q. How long have you been engaged in your professional activity?

A. 17 years at the University of Arizona (as faculty); 2 years as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Texas at Austin.

Q. What led you to your professional calling?

A. I always really liked information and classes in which I learned about romantic/interpersonal/dyadic relationships. I remember a very interesting project in a psychology class that I did as a senior in high school that I still think about today. From the project, I learned that people's views on gender, and the gender socialization they had experienced earlier in life, could be observed when shown the exact same images of a baby, but with the names of the baby changed: One named Larry, one named Lori, and one named Baby. When shown Larry, for example, and shown several adjectives (e.g., clever, delicate, gentle, strong), adjectives such as strong and clever were most often chosen. In comparison, when shown Lori, the most commonly chosen adjectives were delicate and gentle. When shown Baby, the adjectives chosen were less patterned around gender (e.g., clever, gentle). I have also had outstanding mentors all throughout my academic career, such as Dr. Paul Biner as an undergraduate student and Dr. Nancy Hazen as a doctoral advisor.

Q. Do you work alone or do you have a team?

A. Almost everything I do involves a team. I am a big proponent of science being social and noting how we can come together as a team to produce informative and innovative research.

Q. What theoretical framework guides your work?

A. So many of them – interdependence, family systems, attachment, feminism, queer theory, intersectionality, the vulnerability stress adaptation model. Starting with theory is the best way to frame your research study (e.g., justification for study constructs as well as ordering of study constructs in the model).

Q. Are you working on any projects right now that you are really excited about related to financial therapy?

A. Yes; these are projects using secondary data about finances for individuals and/or couples, including: (1) New data collected specific to a parent financial socialization scale for emerging adults (this data collection was led by Ashley LeBaron Black, as funded by the National Endowment for Financial Education) and (2) CREATE data (multi-wave data and also a national U.S. sample of newlywed couples; this data collection is by Brigham Young University, or BYU).

These research projects are collaborations with former advisees Xiaomin Li, Ashley LeBaron Black, and Casey Totenhagen as well as with newer collaborations with emerging scholars such as Matthew Saxey (at BYU). I also have newer collaborations with colleagues who are in Personal Family and Financial Planning – Thomas Korankye and Kenneth White – from whom I’m learning about new topics (e.g., debt and retirement; racial/ethnic differences in financial socialization).

Q. If you had unlimited resources, what would your dream financial therapy research project look like?

A. My colleagues – Ashley LeBaron Black, Xiaomin Li, and Casey Totenhagen – and I were fortunate to lead a special issue on Couples, Families, and Finance in the *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* in 2021 (see doi.org/10.1007/s10834-021-09771-7). In our last section of “What Have We Learned and What Questions Remain for Future Research,” all of these questions are ones that I would classify as dream financial therapy projects:

(1) A focus on samples outside the U.S. specific to finance, with consideration to both culture and policy

(2) Data from two or more members would allow researchers to understand the perspectives of multiple reports vs only one reporter about finances as would a specific focus on finances for gender and sexual minority individuals and couples

(3) An explicit examination of finances and race/ethnicity (vs. having race/ethnicity as a control variable) will add to the understanding of finances for racial/ethnic minority families

(4) Methods other than cross-sectional surveys/questionnaires are needed, including daily diary data collection of finances and more longitudinal designs that would allow questions of temporal ordering as well as both initial levels and over-time changes in finances in relation to other study variables.

Q. What needs to happen so that 10 years from now we can say that financial therapy is a respected field of study?

A. I already believe that financial therapy is respected and important. I appreciate when authors include implications from their studies that connect to financial therapy and/or education. I also think about how we can merge research and teaching in fields like Family Studies and Human Development with Personal Family and Financial Planning to get more students and scholars interested in the connections between finances and relationships.

Q. Could you give advice to practitioners who want to get involved in doing their own research or writing on financial therapy?

A. I would read the research that is available on websites like the *Journal of Financial Therapy*. I would also encourage students and emerging scholars to talk to their professors and/or those studying topics of interest to learn more; this could occur during faculty office hours and/or professional conferences. I would also encourage all scholars, and especially emerging scholars, to sign up on journal websites to be part of the peer review process as reviewers. I participated in a podcast led by Anthony James (Editor of Marriage and Family Review) in which we discussed the importance of reviews and what to know about being a reviewer, especially if you are a new scholar (see <https://soundcloud.com/anthony-james-jr-3749380/the-editors-in-with-dr-anthony-james-episode-1>).

Q. If others are interested in finding out more about you personally and professionally, where can they obtain this information?

A. Here is my website:

<https://profiles.arizona.edu/person/macurran>.

Here is my Google Scholar page:

<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=Qiu1ncUAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=ao>.