

dr. ben Haverford College's Benjamin Le, our Best Relationship Guru, on commitment, Facebook and why Dr. Phil makes him crazy. *By Sara Robins*

MLT: So you're a social psychologist. What exactly does that mean?

BL: Social psychologists study the impact social environment has on people's attitudes, behaviors, feelings, etc. We're interested in the causes and effects of social interactions.

MLT: You're a commitment expert. How did you get into studying that?

BL: I applied to graduate school in the pre-Internet age, and I didn't actually know who all the faculty were at the university I was applying to because the informational materials about the department were out of date. When I got to grad school, there was this new, young faculty member studying close relationships and another student who was a year ahead of me working in his lab. They were doing cool research on commitment and break-up in relationships, and I fell in with them. We've been collaborators for more than 15 years now.

MLT: How do you measure commitment in a relationship?

BL: There are three factors that go into commitment. The first is satisfaction. Are you happy in the relationship? Second, what are your alternatives? Are there other people you could be in a relationship with who would be even more satisfying? Finally, how much of an investment do you have in a relationship? What would you lose if you broke up—tangible things like your house, bank account, access to kids, and also intangibles like emotions, time, future plans.

MLT: What's the impact of social media sites like Facebook on commitment?

BL: We did a study last summer showing that people who perceived more alternative partners among their Facebook friends were less committed to their current relationships. That's the key way that social media impacts commitment. On the other hand, the thing about Facebook is that you're putting your relationship out there for everyone to see. You've updated your status on Facebook to say, "I'm in a relationship with so-and-so." You share photographs of the two of you together—a really good sign of investment—and your social networks begin to overlap as you become friends with your partner's friends.

MLT: Does that mean you have to un-friend your exes?

BL: In our research, we've found that people who are more committed to their partners are more willing to de-friend their exes if it bothers their current partner, compared to people who aren't as committed to their relationships.

MLT: During your sabbatical last year, you edited a book and launched a website.

BL: The book is called *The Science of Relationships: Answers to Your Questions about Dating, Marriage and Family*.

MLT: Is this something for a layperson?

BL: It definitely is. This is an alternative to the Dr. Phils out there.

MLT: Are you dissing Dr. Phil?

BL: Yes—and John Gray and all the other so-called experts in the mainstream media who've never actually studied close relationships, yet freely dole out advice. There's a whole community of researchers who have carefully studied relationships, but there's no avenue for their expertise to reach a general audience. That's my mission—to get solid information out there so that the public doesn't have to rely on these charlatans.

MLT: What's the book about?

BL: We answer 40 common questions people have about attraction, love, sex, commitment, families and parenting, using scientific evidence accumulated by relationship researchers over the last 40 years. The format is fun and accessible to readers who don't necessarily have scientific training. Now, we've continued that work on the website.

MLT: Speaking of that, I saw a story on your website about Don Draper. Whose idea was that?

BL: With the new season of *Mad Men*, we really wanted to do something that tied into the show. Samantha Joel, from the University of Toronto, came up with the idea for that story, researched it and wrote it. I think it's brilliant.

MLT: Is that serious social psychology?

BL: The idea that there are different attachment orientations to relationships is really well documented in developmental, personality and social psychology. There are hundreds of studies showing the importance of avoidance in the way people think about and behave in their relationships. Samantha used Don Draper as an illustration of the findings of those studies. He's a perfect prototype.

MLT: Do you give advice online?

BL: We tend to shy away from explicit advice. We educate you about what's going on in your relationship and you make your own decisions. Knowledge is power.

To learn more, visit benjaminle.com and scienceofrelationships.com.

