Relational Dialectics Theory throughout Three Stages of Romantic Relational Development

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In a relational society driven by communication, dialectical tensions, or contradictions, frequently occur within various types of relationships (Baxter, 2010). Developed by Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montogmery (2008), Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) is an interpretive communicative theory used to examine and understand dialectical tensions and other relational contradictions within relationships. RDT developer Leslie Baxter states: “RDT is a theory of relational meaning making—that is, how the meanings surrounding individual and relationship identities are constructed through language use (Baxter, 2010, pg. 2).” As confirmed in Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication: “The central proposition of RDT is that all communication is rife with the tension-filled struggle of competing discourses—the discursive oppositions of sociality (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, pg. 352).” In relation to other interpretive theories, RDT specifically examines six dialectical tensions within relationships: “autonomy-connection, prediction- novelty, openness-closedness, inclusion-seclusion, conventionality-uniqueness, and revelation-concealment (Erbert, 2000, pg 3).”

As an interpretive theory, RDT recognizes the existence of multiple truths (Olson, 2012). This interpretive theoretical approach to knowledge and communication theory allows for the subsistence and acceptance of the vast truths that exist throughout the world. In relation to RDT, to actively and effectively communicate, one must recognize the various cultures, perspectives, and ultimately the variety of lenses that are used to view the reality, or world, surrounding each individual. The subjectivist position in the interpretive paradigm of the epistemological stance believes communication is vital to the reality that constructs the world and truths of each individual (Olson, 2012). Thus, within RDT, interpretation of others and knowledge itself are contingent on the situations, the cultural, and the experiential background of those involved.
Questions and analysis pertaining to RDT stem from case-study participants and are recorded and examined through the use of ethnography—a qualitative research method aimed to learn about and understand knowledge and meanings within a culture (Olson, 2012). Theorists use interpretive theories, like RDT, with real world contexts to analyze and strive to understand the dynamics and experiences within various relationships—for example, close, romantic, heterosexual couples. The success or failure of a close, romantic, heterosexual relationship depends on the ability of each partner to balance natural dialectic tensions created by conflicting desires, such as intimacy and autonomy. This paper will examine the dialectical tensions openness-closedness and autonomy-connection of the interpretive Relational Dialectics Theory throughout three primary phases of romantic relationship development.

Theoretical Application

In an effort to better understand contradictions within my own personal, close, and romantic relationship of two years with Matthew Whitt, I will examine the roles of two dialectic tensions within Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT)—openness/closedness and autonomy/connection—in the context of close romantic relationships.

The clarification of primary terms is critical in order to study, apply, and analyze communicative theories like RDT. In terms of tensions within relational dialectics, openness/closedness is an internal dialectic, or a tension occurring within the relationship, which deals with the desire to share information and feelings with one’s partner versus the want to keep said information private. Similar to the dialectic tension openness/closedness in RDT, the internal dialectical tension autonomy/connection encompasses one’s struggle to maintain a sense of “I”, or self, in a collective “we” romantic relationship. (Griffin, 2012) Angela Hoppe-Nagao and Stella Ting-Toomey (2002) identified the interconnectedness of both openness/closedness
and autonomy/connection in research surrounding the role of dialectic contradictions and communicative strategies used to manage various contradictions within newlywed couples. Thus, the research gathered by Hoppe-Nagao and Ting-Toomey (2002) suggests the internal dialectics of openness/closedness and autonomy/connection are typically experienced simultaneously by couples. Due to the noted connectedness of the two tensions, Em Griffin (2012), author and Communication PhD scholar, refers to this instantaneous experience of openness/closedness and autonomy/connection as a, “knot of contradictions (Griffin, 2012, pg. 153).”

When utilizing relational dialectics in the examining of a close, romantic, heterosexual relationship over the course of its existence, one must identify the pivotal phases of said relationship. In a study conducted by Donna Pawlowski (1999) regarding dialectical tensions and the metaphor phrases used to articulate said tensions throughout stages of romantic relational development, couples participating in the study identified multiple stages of relational development. The three main phases of relational development recognized by participating couples included: beginning/attraction, insecurity/decision-making, and contentment/stability.

According to the findings of Pawloski (1999), the beginning/attraction relational development phase encompasses the initial interaction and excitement surrounding the new and potential relationships. The second phase, insecurity/decision-making occurs typically around a significant change in the relationship. Possible relational changes may consist of one partner initiating an adjustment in seriousness or level of commitment. Likewise, insecurity due to doubt of interest and/or affection may also prompt this development stage in the relationship. Lastly, the contentment/stability phase draws on the certainty and satisfaction of a monogamous, committed, growing, and healthy relationship. (Pawloski, 1999) Similarly, studies by Larry Erbert (2000), regarding the function of relational dialectic tensions within conflicts of recently
wed couples, suggests that throughout the phases of relational development, struggles between the internal dialectics openness/closedness and autonomy/connection are ever changing and at the center of a majority of close couple relationships.

**Relational Development Phase One: Beginning/Attraction**

My relationship with Matthew began with a chance meeting and instantaneous, undeniable chemistry. We engaged in similar extracurricular activities which brought us around each other about once week. Although our interactions were brief, we took advantage of our limited time together by making small talk and slowly disclosing simple facts about our likes and dislikes. Having both been previously involved in scarring relationships, Matthew and I proceeded to interact with one another with caution, or levels of closedness.

When deciding to attempt a dating relationship, Matthew and I continued to individually experience immense senses of autonomy. Our differing strong convictions threatened to hinder our integration as a legitimate couple due to uncertainty of how to balance both extremes. Elements of our past dating history left us each with great doubt, questions, and cautiousness toward one another—making us both extremely closed and autonomous.

Our persistently strong personal identities as individuals only perpetuated the dating processes, making the establishment of a collective relationship challenging. The practice of slow self disclosure and hesitation in trusting one another enough to establish ourselves as a “we”, instead of two “I’s”, led to weeks and weeks of casual dating. However, as we began to establish more and more similarities, our disclosure amount and frequency increased as our caution and uncertainty decreased. With the increase of confidence and sureness about the potential for our new relationship, Matthew and I grew comfortable enough to attempt shifting from two autonomous individuals to a collective unit. Our worlds became wrapped around each
other as our connectivity and openness reached an all time high.

Similar to the before mentioned study conducted by Pawloski (1999), Matthew and I experienced the early signs of attraction and development in our budding relationship. However, unlike the couples interviewed by Pawloski, Matthew and I went into the first phase of relational development with a great deal of uncertainty and insecurity. (Pawloski, 1999) The initial closedness and autonomy, experienced by Matthew and myself, derived from our past relationship experiences, acted as a framework for interactions in the following relational development phases.

**Relational Development Phase Two: Insecurity/Decision-Making**

Months into our relationship, Matthew and I became faced with what would become the defining moment of our relationship: our first substantial fight. Our relationship began to move from the all consuming get-to-know-you beginning/attraction stage of romantic relational development to one of familiarity. Matthew and I grew accustomed to one another and the start of a new relationship began to lose its initial excitement. We both began to feel unappreciated, vulnerable, and as if we were being taken for granted. However, because our relationship was still relatively new, neither Matthew nor I made an effort to discuss our anxieties due to the fear of seeming too concerned or invested so early into our relationship. This in turn led to the escalation of our first substantial argument which took place in Matthew’s vacant basement.

At the climax of the disagreement, the escalation in the volume of our voices led to the increase in our level of closedness in sharing our actual fight-provoking feelings and thoughts. Common themes of feeling unappreciated and not a priority streamed throughout our argument which primarily involved the blaming of one another. A twenty dispute argument surrounding our concerns was followed by an hour long civil conversation discussing our two true fears: a
lack of openness and connectivity in our relationship; both of which, according to Erbert (2000), are the two primary themes surrounding the conflicts of newer couples.

Pre-argument, similar to experiences recorded in a study by Miles Loveless, William Powers, and William Jordan (2008) centered on the first large fight experienced by newer couples, Matthew and I noted no changes in our communication comprehension, or the overall understanding of one another’s communicative messages, prior to the conflict (Loveless, et al., 2008). However, pre-fight, a significant shift in extremes regarding the dialectical tension autonomy/connection transpired. In a relating study conducted by Erin Sahlstein and Tim Dun (2008) examining the role of autonomy-connection in fighting and ultimately the termination of various monogamous relationships, Sahlstein and Dun suggest that couples will often reach a pivotal point in their respective relationships that force partners to decide if truly shifting from an “I” to a “We” perspective is feasible. Matthew and I had reached this pivotal make-it-or-break-it moment of our relationship with the onset of the argument. In contrast to the earlier autonomous phases of our relationship, Matthew and I now desired a more collective dating experience. Unsure how to address and articulate this newfound desire for connectivity led to an increase in vulnerability and doubt—thus prompting the argument. The conscious realization and mutual validation of the increase in desire for exclusivity left Matthew and I wanting a stronger, open, and more connected relationship. This led to the commutative construction of our shared wants and individual needs for our relationship.

However, while Matthew and I both agreed that we longed for a more committed and stable relationship, having just experienced our first large argument left us feeling a great deal of communication apprehension. Similar to the research complied by Loveless et al., directly following our fight Matthew and I were weary and cautious as to the content and delivery of our
verbal messages and increasingly aware of our non-verbal communication (Loveless, et al., 2008). This communication apprehension did not last long, however, as Matt and I began to grow in confidence and certainty in our relationship as the shift to mutual openness and connectivity occurred.

**Relational Development Phase Three: Contentment/Stability**

Having committed ourselves to each other and the growth and happiness of our relationship, Matthew and I began to move into the relational development phase of contentment and stability. A noted sureness and security in each other became evident as Matthew and I comfortably integrated both our autonomous “I” ideals and collective “we” within our relationship. We consciously worked to obtain the golden mean or perfect balance of the openness/closedness and autonomy/connection extremes. A relationship which previously left us feeling cautious and unsure currently leaves us with a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

In an effort to avoid further conflict and deal with dialectical tensions, Matthew and I now implement one of several conversation strategies discussed by Em Griffin (2012)—spiral inversion. According to Griffin: “Spiraling inversion [is defined as] switching back and forth between two contrasting voices, responding first to one pull, then the other (Griffin, 2012, pg. 162).” To this day, depending on the situation, Matthew and I continue to note a frequent “pull and tug” sensation, as mentioned by Griffin, surrounding the polar opposites of openness and closedness, as well autonomy and connectedness (Griffin, 2012). For example, depending on the time, place, and situation, Matthew and I gravitate toward certain dialectic tension extremes to promote peace, happiness, and balance within our relationship. The new found level of commitment to each other and our relationship creates both a feeling of satisfaction and stability within our relationship.
When reviewing the three phases of relationship development above (Beginning/Attraction, Insecurity/Decision-Making, and Contentment/Stability (Pawlowski, 1999)), there is a distinct and continuous pull between opposing dialectical tensions. Having both experienced unfulfilling relationships previously, Matthew and I entered our relationship with increased levels of autonomy and closedness. With time, these simultaneously occurring extremes morphed into a mutual need for connectivity and openness (Hoppe-Nagao & Ting-Toomey, 2002). Matthew and I strive daily to balance the dialectic tension extremes of openness/closedness and autonomy/connection. Examining the three primary relationship development stages through the lens of the Relational Dialectics Theory enables the understanding of the various roles and aspects of dialectical tensions throughout the progression of a close, romantic, heterosexual relationship.

Theory Evaluation

As an interpretive theory, Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) is graded on five criteria: “understanding of people, clarification of values, aesthetic appeal, community of agreement, reform of society, and qualitative research (Griffin, 2012, pg. 35).” In particular, RDT enhances understanding of people and the clarification of values within the context of close, romantic, heterosexual relationships.

Through the analysis of my personal relationship using RDT, I have gained a new found understanding of the ways in which my boyfriend Matthew and I relate to one another. Through the processes of recording the three primary phases of our developing relationship, I identified key elements—such as feelings of uncertainty and the need for commitment—in the tug-and-pull phenomenon with the internal dialectic tensions openness/closedness and autonomy/connection. This allowed me to hypothesize within the realm of relational dialectics, how and why particular
events throughout relationship development transpired. In addition, RDT clarified the core values of our relationship. The emphasis Matthew and I place on trust and commitment motivates us to openly communicate any concerns which arise before the occurrence of conflict escalation. Through recognition of the values of others, or one’s moral compass, individuals are able work towards understanding and justifying of dialectic tensions exhibited by relational partners (Griffin, 2012). The qualitative research utilized throughout the application created a sense of self-assurance due to the overwhelming amount of relatable experiences with dialectic tensions openness/closedness and autonomy/connection throughout the phases of relational development (Erbert, 2000; Hoppe-Nagao & Ting-Toomey, 2002; Loveless, 2008; Pawlowski, 1999; Sahlstein & Dun, 2008).

However, throughout the applied context, RDT failed to recognize possible contributing factors which may have caused the tendencies to gravitate toward particular relational dialectical extremes. For example, in the before mentioned study conducted by Donna Pawlowski, partners entering into the first stage of relationship development—beginning/attraction—noted feelings of attraction and openness to the possibility of a new positive relationship (Pawlowski, 1999). In contrast, in the beginning of my relationship with Matthew, I experienced feelings of doubt in the sincerity of Matthew’s feelings toward me due to his relatively closed and autonomous persona. Not until after considering the factors which led Matthew to act in such as way—his previously bad relationship—was I able to give reason for his closed and standoffish behavior at the start of our relationship.

Relational Dialectics Theory creator Leslie Baxter (2010) identifies other critiques of RDT in the book *Voicing Relationships: A Dialogic Perspective*. A primary misconception within academia, according to Baxter, is the reference to RDT as a “model” as opposed to a
“theory”. The label of a “model” questions the validity and integrity of relational dialectics as a theory and ultimately attempts to decrease the value of RDT. Baxter continues on to address other common complaints by various scholars regarding the acceptance of RDT as a true communicative theory. (Baxter, 2010) At times, interpretive theories encounter struggles to maintain a dominate voice among scholars due to the inability to predict behaviors; as, in comparison, a more scientifically driven postpositivist theory accomplishes. As an interpretive theory, RDT, specifically, lacks the ability to both foresee the characteristics of future interactions and to be quantitatively measured due to the ever changing dynamics of communication. For these reasons, some scholars believe the validity of RDT as an actual theory becomes tarnished. (Baxter, 2010) In refutation of to the allegations, Baxter argues, “RDT is not a postpositivist theory…[which is] designed to predict…[RDT] helps us explain the communicative social world (Baxter, 2010, pg. 6).” The subjective nature of RDT allows for successful application and characterization justification to an immense number of communicative contexts.

By definition, communicative theories are, “sets of systematic, informed hunches about the way things work (Griffin, 2012, pg. 4).” Interpretive communicative theories, such as Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT), specifically allow for the examination and rationalization of experiences within various relational contexts. In the case of investigating the function of RDT dialectic tensions openness/closedness and autonomy/connection throughout three phases of heterosexual romantic relationship development, research suggests that couples tend to fluctuate between opposing extremes depending on the relationship development phase (Erbert, 2000; Hoppe-Nagao & Ting-Toomey, 2002; Loveless, 2008; Pawlowski, 1999; Sahlstein & Dun, 2008).
As stated earlier, the subjective nature of RDT creates a level of universal applicability to various relationships—romantic or not. However, one must question what role does differing social backgrounds play the application of RDT? Is RDT useful and applicable when examining an individual from a collectivist society partnered with an individual from an individualist society? For example, in this partnership, meanings and connotations of each dialectical tension may greatly differ, thus causing vast levels of confusion and difficulty in communication comprehension. Additional factors theorists may consider conducting further studies and questions on, within RDT, are the contributing past experiences and relationships of individuals, as well as the influence of individual personality—both of which directly affect the role and perception of relational dialectic tensions by individuals in current and future interactions.

Relational Dialectics Theory offers theorists and communicators the opportunity to examine and justify natural dialectic tensions within various relationships. Personal cognitive recognition of the differing roles and patterns of dialectical tensions challenges one to become increasingly aware of the structure and value system within one’s society. (Griffin, 2012) Identifying common personal assumptions and interpretations of differing dialectical tensions allows for one to question common relational misconceptions and strive to become an ethical communicator.
References


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