

Dialectical Processes

The term *dialectical processes* refers to the contradictions that arise among a variety of opposing forces when people relate. Some researchers view these opposing forces as competing motivations within individuals. One example of opposing motivational forces is the desire to be open and honest with others versus the desire to be more guarded and less forthcoming in sharing information. Other dialectical scholars, especially those from the communication discipline, locate the opposing forces in the communication between relating parties. Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery articulated **Relational Dialectics** Theory (RDT) in 1996 to understand these communicative tensions between opposing systems of meaning. From a communication perspective, the issue at stake is how contradictory meanings are negotiated between relationship parties.

Several contradictions emerge consistently in the dialectically oriented research. One of the most common is labeled a variety of ways, including separation-integration, autonomy-connection, or independent-interdependent. When parties negotiate their close relationships, they construct a meaning of closeness that struggles with the tension of individual autonomy (the expectation that parties will respect one another's individuality and freedom of action) and interdependent connection (the expectation that the parties will privilege the interdependence of their connection above their individuality). The reason this contradiction is so prevalent in contemporary American relating is that the culture has contradictory ideologies that coexist. The cultural ideology of individualism supports a meaning of closeness that emphasizes the needs and desires of the individual parties. According to this cultural view, close relationships are expected to preserve each party's identity as an autonomous self, granting each person freedom of action and positioning the relationship at the service of individual wants and needs. By contrast, the opposing cultural ideology of community supports a meaning of closeness in which individuality is trumped by a commitment to the other party and to the relationship above the individual needs of the parties. According to this competing view, individual needs are secondary to the needs of the relationship and one's partner. This contradiction in what it means to be in a close relationship takes a variety of specific forms depending on the particular kind of relationship and where the relationship is in its developmental course. The contradiction of separation-integration could surface, for example, as a struggle over how much time to spend together versus how much time partners are granted to fulfill obligations outside of the relationship. It could also surface as a struggle over identity: to what extent parties are allowed to establish a self-identity independent of being half of a couple. The contradiction could surface, as well, in how much time the pair spends alone in couple time versus how much time they spend as a couple with others in their social network.

A second contradiction that also surfaces in much research goes by many labels expression-nonexpression, openness-closedness, and candor-discretion. At its core, this contradiction involves what it means to be communicatively open in the relationship. The frequency with which this contradiction surfaces among Americans is probably the result, once again, of competing cultural ideologies. On the one hand, Americans are immersed in an ideology of privacy, with the expectation that individuals have a right to privacy in their relationships and are entitled to avoid topics, keep secrets, and display discretion in what they tell their partner. On the other hand, Americans swim in a cultural ideology of expression in which individuals are accorded the right to say whatever they want, combined with a cultural ideology of intimacy in which total disclosure is an expectation of closeness. Parties negotiate what closeness means in their relationship by managing the struggle between candor and discretion. They also negotiate this struggle as a couple when they face the issue of how

much to share about their relationship with outside third parties: What is private between the two of them and what can and should be shared with others?

A third contradiction that frequently appears in the research also goes by a variety of labels, including past-present, predictability-novelty, certainty-uncertainty, or reproduction-production. On one hand, after their first encounter, relationship parties are never without a **relational** history. The next time they meet, they inherit this definition from the past, which affords predictability and certainty. On the other hand, however, parties can never reproduce their past completely; they are slightly different people, and the circumstances have altered at least somewhat. Even if the parties could reproduce the past meaning of their relationship, this would prevent novelty, creativity, and change. Thus, the meaning of the relationship is always to some extent up for grabs whenever parties communicate with one another. Sometimes, parties negotiate dramatic changes in the meaning of their relationship, often brought about by grappling with other dialectical contradictions that are circulating in the relationship. These dramatic changes often function as turning points that can alter **relational** meanings in profound ways. For example, among newly formed stepfamilies, especially among stepchildren, a dialectical struggle is often experienced between the meaning of the old family of origin and the new stepfamily, with efforts to define the new stepfamily often regarded as a threat to the memory of the old family of origin. A second example might be divorced parents, whose negative marital relationship is a meaning system that could work against a constructive coparenting relationship needed in order to raise their children.

A fourth contradiction that often surfaces in relationships is variously called self-other or similarity-difference. Researchers have long documented the meaning that partners give to the perception of similarity between them; it signifies a validation of oneself, communicative ease between partners, and freedom from conflict. However, if partners are too similar to one another, they do not help each other to grow; selves grow to the extent that they are different and can expose one another to different perspectives, experiences, and so forth. Difference is a source of stimulation, excitement, and growth. But it also can mean an increase in unpleasant conflict.

A fifth contradiction that frequents relationship parties is referred to as the ideal-real. This contradiction is evaluative, as parties attach good and bad meanings to their **relational** practices in comparison with what they perceive to be the ideal. Sometimes, the real—the meanings of what the parties perceive as their reality—match the ideal. Often, however, there are discrepancies and hence struggles of evaluation. In anticipating evaluations by outsiders in which a pair's **relational** practices are judged against an ideal, partners often engage in account-giving efforts. For example, imagine a young married woman who says to her family, "I know you guys want grandchildren, but we've decided to remain childless. It's our life, not yours." This account calls up the ideology of individualism to justify an anticipated negative evaluation from family members in the couple's decision to deviate from the normative cultural script for married couples to have children.

The variety of contradictions experienced by relationship partners is substantial, and dialectical researchers argue for the importance of appreciating the unique contradictions that face given relationship partners. To date, dialectical processes have been identified in a variety of relationship types in the United States, including dating relationships, divorced pairs, employee relationships, marital couples, marital couples in which one partner has been diagnosed with dementia, marital couples transitioning to parenthood, members of abusive relationships, mother-daughter relationships, older dating partners, parent-child relationships, platonic friendships, retirement-home relationships, romantic pairs, and stepfamily relationships. Contradictions vary by culture as well. Relationships in collectivist societies, for example, are not animated by the ideology of individualism the way mainstream Americans are when they relate; thus, the separation-integration contradiction doubtless is experienced entirely differently, if at all, by pairs in collectivist societies.

Relational partners jointly act in ways that negotiate the interplay of contradictory oppositions. Sometimes partners act in the moment to center one system of meaning, thereby marginalizing or silencing competing systems of meaning. The couple who acts to give priority to their relationship over each party's individual

competing demands for time from work, school, other family obligations, and so forth is centering connection in the meaning of their relationships while marginalizing autonomy. If they repeat this same prioritization over time, they have positioned connection as an authoritative meaning in their relationship. Alternatively, the pair could move back and forth between decisions to emphasize their relationship versus decisions to be responsive to individual demands for time and resources. One week, job demands might take priority while a relationship takes a secondary priority; next week, however, the couple might privilege the value attached to the relationship and take a 3-day getaway weekend. The relationship parties could also enact compromises, giving partial attention to all **relational** and nonrelational demands on them. In addition, the parties could reframe what it means to prioritize the relationship, moving beyond either-or thinking. For example, a pair might agree that putting in overtime at work is a way to prioritize the relationship because it goes into saving for the down payment on a house. In this way, work demands and relationship demands are reframed in a manner that is not viewed as competitive by the parties. Rituals have been identified as an especially important communicative practice in which relationship partners reframe opposing meanings so that they all are honored. For example, the remarriage ceremony of an older married couple celebrates both the uniqueness of their marriage as well as the fact that marriage is a conventionalized social institution.

According to RDT, relationship satisfaction is linked to how a pair navigates dialectical processes rather than the presence of contradictions per se. Dialectical processes are ongoing, and parties are continually interacting in ways that navigate the salient struggles of the moment. Thus, dialectical processes are normal for relating parties, although they require effort for parties to negotiate them. In fact, many of the conflicts experienced by relationship parties often involve disagreements over basic contradictions such as those discussed in this entry. It is through navigating dialectical processes that relationship parties create the possibility for change in their relationships.

Researchers who study dialectical processes use both quantitative methods (often surveys) and qualitative methods. Most of the work has employed qualitative methods in which the talk of relationship parties (both in interviews and naturally occurring between partners) is analyzed thematically for the presence of competing discourses, a method known as contrapuntal discourse analysis.

—Leslie A. Baxter

Further Readings

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Entry Citation:

Baxter, Leslie A. "Dialectical Processes." *Encyclopedia of Human Relationships*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009. 418-20. SAGE

Reference Online. Web. 28 Mar. 2012.



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