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PREVIEW

DIALECTICAL TENSIONS IN MARITAL
COUPLES' ACCOUNTS OF THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

by

Donna R. Pawlowski

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of
Communication Studies & Theatre Arts

Under the Supervision of Professor Diane M. Badzinski

Lincoln, Nebraska

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DISSERTATION TITLE

DIALECTICAL TENSIONS IN MARITAL COUPLES'

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BY

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
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DIALECTICAL TENSIONS IN MARITAL
COUPLES' ACCOUNTS OF THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

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University of Nebraska, 1995

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Dialectical tensions, defined as opposing forces that people experience in their relationships, are important for relational development. Predictability-novelty, for instance, is an example of a tension manifested by partners simultaneously desiring predictability and spontaneity in their relationships. Past dialectical studies are problematic as they neglect to include both couples' accounts of the relationship, and they fail to distinguish between the frequency and importance of the tensions.

The present study identifies contradictions in married couples accounts' of their relationships and assesses couples' perceptions of the importance of tensions. Three research questions are specifically addressed: 1) Do married couples identify the six tensions proposed by Baxter--autonomy-connection, predictability-novelty, openness-closedness, inclusion-seclusion, conventionality-uniqueness, and revelation-concealment?; 2) Do married couples identify different tensions at the different relational points?; and 3) Which of the six tensions do

couples perceive as most important at different relational points?

To address these questions, fifteen couples were interviewed about their relationships. Couples also completed an instrument identifying the importance of tensions at three relational points. Transcribed data were coded in terms of the six dialectical tensions.

One key finding was that the tension of autonomy-connection was the most frequently experienced contradiction; this result suggested that individuals often struggle with the need be with their partner and the need to be by themselves. Couples perceived openness-closedness as the most important tension; however, this tension was not frequently mentioned in the couples' accounts. This finding indicated that the competing forces to self-disclose and remain discrete may not be a topic of frequent discussion, but is perceived as being vitally important. Results also showed that inclusion-seclusion and revealment-concealment were more important for wives than husbands. Thus, wives were more concerned with establishing external networks than were husbands. Overall, the findings suggested that dialectical tensions were prevalent in relationships and may be an important component in understanding the maintenance and changes in marital relationships.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Various scholars have voiced their opinions regarding future directions for interpersonal communication. Some common issues prevail. First, researchers call for the need to identify features characteristic of developmental changes (Baxter, 1990; Duck & Pittman, 1994). Duck and Pittman (1994) argue that developmental changes cannot be assumed as prescribed stages, but as a dynamic and continually changing process. In addition, these changes should not be presumed by researchers, they should emerge from one's description of the relationship. In looking at relational development, Delia (1980) says we need more information on what causes changes in the relationship. How does one move from worker to friend, or from friend to romantic partner? Delia also argues researchers need to recognize that relationships develop slowly. Scholars call for the developmental models that take into consideration various aspects of relational development, without presupposing a stage progression.

Second, research needs to concern itself with the dyad of the relationship and not center on one individual in the relationship (Bochner, 1984; Delia, 1980; Duck, 1990). Duck (1990) sounds a cry for looking at the dyad rather than the individual. In doing so, researchers must carefully examine perceptions of the relationship as created within the relationship rather than focus on one partner's perceptions

of the relationship. Hence, both individuals' perceptions of the relationship need to be addressed.

Third, it is crucial that interpersonal scholars examine the talk of relational pairs. Duck and Pittman (1994) and Wood (1993) argue for the importance of better understanding the conduct of everyday talk of relational partners. Therefore, investigation of how relationship pairs discuss their relationships should be considered.

Finally, interpersonal researchers must examine the dialectical tensions that exist in relationships. Baxter (1990) and Duck and Pittman (1994) advance the need for scholars to look at dyadic dilemmas of resolving contradictions. In looking at dialectics, Altman (1993) stresses the importance of looking at the context and environment in relation to dialectic tensions. Thus, the identification of dialectical tensions existing in interpersonal relationships warrants further investigation.

In summary, scholars need to address several concerns of interpersonal communication research. Specifically, there is a demand for investigating developmental changes in interpersonal relationships. Second, it is critical to examine the dyad and not just one individual in the relationship. Third, it is important to consider the everyday talk of relational pairs. Finally, it is essential to identify dialectical tensions emerging from within relationships. Thus, the goal of this research project is

to examine the dialectical tensions relational pairs use to describe the developmental changes in their relationships.

Justification of the Problem

Altman, Vinsel, and Brown (1981) state that interpersonal theoretical positions of the past centered on a homeostatic prescription for a healthy, normal relationship. This healthy relationship was characterized by stability and consistency, which was thought of as the desired state for relationships. However, the ideal of stability did not account for instability and detachment also characteristic of healthy relationships. In order to account for and study relational development that includes stability and instability (among other opposing tensions), the dialectic perspective emerged.

The dialectical perspective allows for the understanding of a wide range of tensions within relationships. Researchers can examine both poles of various tensions within relationships, rather than only one side of the pole (Altman et al., 1981; Bopp & Weeks, 1983). For example, the dialectical perspective can consider both stability and instability or novelty and predictability within relationships.

There are several reasons why a dialectical perspective was chosen as the theoretical grounding for the dissertation. First, dialectics is a dyadic approach to the study of relationships. Second, the dialectical perspective

focuses on the tensions within relationships. Third, this perspective allows for examining developmental processes in interpersonal relationships:

Dialectical Approach

The dialectical approach is not considered a theory, but more of a meta-theory or a perspective for studying interpersonal relationships (Baxter, 1988; Cupach, 1992; Duck & Pittman, 1994). This particular approach examines contradictory tensions in relationships that lead to relationship change (Cupach, 1992). Werner and Baxter (1994) argue that dialectics is a family of distinct perspectives sharing a commitment to the concepts of contradiction, change, and totality. They also claim these concepts are not negative, but refer to the ongoing dynamic interaction between opposition. These opposing tendencies are then seen as the driving force or catalyst of ongoing change in relationships (Werner & Baxter, 1994). Individuals constantly attempt to balance the push and pulls of maintaining and adapting to relationships in order to understand the relationships created between them.

Dyadic Approach

One reason the dialectic approach was chosen as the framework for my dissertation is that the dialectic perspective is a dyadic rather than an individual approach to the study of relationships (Baxter, 1992, Griffin, 1994; Werner, Altman, Brown, & Ginat, 1993). Altman (1993) argues

the dialectic perspective is based on other dyadic theories such as systems and rules, increasing the validity of the dialectic approach.

A major tenet of dialectics is the importance of the characteristics of the relationship as a whole instead of focusing on individual characteristics (Montgomery, 1993). The tensions of opposing dialectics reside within the relationship and the context of the relationship, not the individual. For example, research in dialectics is concerned with exploring the stability of the relationship instead of analyzing one person's perceptions of the relationship. Dialectic scholars see meaning created between the association within the relational pair. Looking at the talk of both partners should provide a richer understanding of the perceptions working in the relationship.

Focus on Tensions

The dialectical perspective focuses on the tensions within the relationship. One of the major assumptions underlying the dialectical perspective is the notion of contradiction. Contradiction refers to the tensions between two opposing forces (Cupach, 1992). These forces are interdependent and mutually negate each other (Baxter, 1990). An example of this may be that even though I want to have open communication, I also desire privacy.

Baxter (1990), Rawlins (1983a & 1989), Montgomery (1993), and Werner and Baxter (1994) advance an additional tenet of the dialectical perspective--that opposing forces are the basis of all relationships. Tensions between people always exist. This does not mean that tensions are good or bad, just that they exist. The study of these opposing forces is what Bochner (1984) refers to as seeing both sides of a relationship. By realizing there are inevitable forces, and that such tensions are not unhealthy, people will better understand the process of interpersonal relationships.

Developmental Process

The dialectical perspective allows for examining developmental processes. Process is a major component of the dialectical perspective. Process refers to the notion that opposing forces are dynamic and that they focus on developmental change (Baxter, 1990; Cornforth, 1968; Cupach, 1992).

The dialectic approach is capable of helping scholars investigate relationship development. Mao (1953, 1965) proposes that contradictions are characteristic of developmental processes. Individuals in relationships need to be aware of the tensions and understand ways of dealing with the tensions throughout the course of their relationships. The negotiation of these tensions between

relational partners is central to the understanding and interpretation of relational development (Cupach, 1992).

Several communication scholars look at relational development using the dialectical perspective. Wiseman (1986) looks at friendships. Baxter (1990) explores dialectics and relational development in romantic relationships. And, Masheter and Harris (1986) look at divorced couples and their encounters with tensions and dissolution of the relationship. Indeed, it appears that the dialectical perspective is applicable for examining relational development as it is capable of illuminating developmental processes of relationships.

Study of Temporal Aspects

Within the process of relationships, the dialectical perspective argues tensions are always changing throughout a relationship's history (Baxter, 1990; Rawlins, 1983b & 1989; Werner and Baxter, 1994). Scholars do not assume relationships as linear, but a cyclical, fluctuating developmental process (Baxter, 1990; Cupach, 1992). Within this process, relationships are seen along a historical time line. As the relationship moves in time, the implications and intentions of the dialectic forces also change. Tensions are in flux and adapt to the relationship, thus the tensions mirror the relationship process.

Some scholars (Montgomery, 1993; Werner et al., 1993) claim that dialectical studies examining the process of

relational development need to address temporal aspects. For instance, researchers should examine how tensions are sequenced over time and how the pace of events influence the dialectical flow of the relationship. Altman (1993) and Montgomery (1993) believe that temporal issues will support dialectical assumptions dealing with history and change. This project examines individuals' descriptions of their relationships from beginning to present in an attempt to tap temporal issues.

Summary

As indicated, the dialectical perspective is the framework for this research project. Several reasons are advanced for using the dialectical approach. First, this perspective looks at the dyad of the relationship. Second, dialectics focus on tensions within the relationship. Third, the dialectical perspective allows researchers to examine the developmental process. Finally, this approach is applicable for studying temporal aspects of a relationship's history.

The dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 1 identifies the problem and justification for using the dialectical perspective. Chapter 2 introduces the literature on dialectic research including why the dialectic perspective was chosen as the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 focuses on methods and procedures. Identification of subjects, procedures and data analysis are explained.

Chapter 4 provides results of the analyses. Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the findings and identifies areas for further research.

PREVIEW