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Relational Dialectics: *Friends* or More?

**Introduction**

In every intimate relationship, there are bound to be some tensions couples will need to overcome in order to carry out successful partnerships and connections. Researchers and theorists study the tensions between couples in order to identify communication strategies that can be used to manage or diminish these dialectical tensions. By analyzing a fictional representation of a relationship, individuals may appreciate it and apply it as a model for their own real-life relationship. How is the theory of Relational Dialectics, as presented by Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery, related to the relationship of Ross and Rachel from the television comedy *Friends*, and how can analyzing their tensions benefit others? This communication event is useful to study because it enables researchers, theorists, and common people to better understand the importance of working with their partner in order to establish a healthy, positive relationship. A prominent scene between two main characters, Ross and Rachel, generates questions about the theory of Relational Dialectics created by Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery. Relationships are many times the center of people's lives. Analyzing scenes between Ross and Rachel will add more information to the research already found for Relational Dialectics. The tensions that occur between couples will never be completely fixed, but by looking at other couples as models, especially ones on television or in fictional works, there can be a start at finding a solution.

**Literature Review**

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) in their book, *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics*, developed a new approach to studying interpersonal communication that emphasizes the idea of a social self instead of sovereign self. They identified key areas of relationships that bring about tensions including development, closeness, certainty, openness, communication competence, and the boundary between self, relationship, and society. Baxter and Montgomery's research, along with Sahlstein's (2004), show integration and separation cannot be understood without one another. Sahlstein states in her research, "People want to be a part of relationships, but they also desire being their own person" and "being your own person is accomplished by being defined in relation to others" (p. 693). Viewers can use Rachel's example of running away and Ross's example of putting pressure on Rachel as what not to do. Once Rachel finally began to realize her commitment to Ross she began to wish for independence.

No couple wishes to have tensions as defined by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), but watching another couple cope with these tensions can reduce the fear and anxiety of dealing with their own. In Meyer's (2003) research, "'It's me. I'm it': Defining Adolescent Sexual Identity Through Relational Dialectics in *Dawson's Creek*", she argues that fictional representations are models for personal relationships. She sheds light on positive aspects of this television representation that can be applied to other television shows such as *Friends*.

Hoppe-Nagao and Ting-Toomey researched dialectical relations within marriage, as did Carine Cools (2005), but Cools' studies focus on intercultural couples. Not only are these people married, but they also suffer from tensions of integration and separation. The issues presented in Ting-Toomey and Hoppe-Nagao's (2002) research are applicable to Ross and Rachel and their situation of deciding whether to be together or independent. Cools (2005) presents issues that arise from a difference in language, communication, and traditions. Although Ross is Jewish and

Rachel is gentile, the issue of traditions and religion are not in the clip being analyzed here. In the clip there are no intercultural references, nor are there “different set of rules; different values, habits, and viewpoints” (p. 7) between Ross and Rachel. The scene focuses more on the tension brought on by integration and separation which Cools’ responds to in her research. Within her paper she calls these factors “autonomy and connection” and states that they “are not always perceived in the same way by the relational partners” and “contradiction occurs when the couple perceives the autonomy-connection to be in competition with each other” (p. 12).

Baxter and Montgomery reference Daena Goldsmith who did an in-depth qualitative study on romantic relationships. She chose ten couples and asked participants to create graphs of their relationships. Goldsmith (1990) found that “the respondents recognized that any relationship poses some costs to autonomy but that choosing not to be involved in a relationship limits one’s ability to meet needs to connection” (p. 542). Sigman, a researcher referenced in Sahlstein’s studies, argues that all relationships are maintained in a number of ways. Relationships are not only constructed in the face-to-face interactions between partners (Sigman, 1991, p. 106). One author that Meyer cites in her paper, Michael Real (1996), observes that narratives allow audiences to connect lived experience with experiences portrayed in mediated narratives. By watching other couples go through issues that happen everyday, people can learn to manage without overreacting or making rash decisions without communicating.

Other research Baxter and Montgomery used to further their own findings includes the works of Rawlins (1983) and Wiseman (1986). Both these researchers discuss friendship relationships. Rawlins (1983) states, “Friendship relationship is unique among personal relationships because of its voluntary quality” and there are “freedoms” relevant to the friendship (Rawlins, 1983). The relationship between Ross and Rachel is no longer platonic, so their

freedom is limited. The other researcher referenced argued the “feature of voluntary association that characterizes friendship lies ‘at the crux’ of the dialectical dilemma between freedom of behavior and committed intimacy” (Wiseman, 1983). Ross and Rachel must balance their friendship, freedom, and intimacy in order to have a happy, healthy relationship.

### **Methodology**

The research presented on the clips from *Friends* revolves around Ross and Rachel’s dialectical tensions and provides criticism and analysis. The clips chosen to be analyzed are from the third season, episode 14 entitled “The One With Phoebe’s Ex-Partner.” The clips of Ross and Rachel throughout the episode and analyzing what was said and the actions committed reveal that their tensions can be categorized as the dialectic Baxter and Montgomery call “Internal.” Ross and Rachel’s relationship can be explained through the relational dialectic of “integration and separation.” The first scene, near the beginning of the episode, is of Ross entering Rachel’s work questioning why she has been spending so much time there. The second is of them lying in bed discussing Rachel’s relationship with her job and the man she works with. Again, Ross questions why Rachel enjoys spending so much time away from him. She is to attend a fashion lecture and because Ross wants to spend more time with her, he agrees to attend it as well. Once at the lecture (as seen later in the episode) Ross pesters Rachel many times and she must tell him to be quiet. As soon as they return to the apartment Ross complains about how long the lecture was while Rachel says she enjoys fashion and loves her job. Ross, becoming concerned with Rachel’s new life at work, exemplifies Baxter and Montgomery’s idea of “integration.” He wishes to spend as much time as possible with Rachel and does not consider what his partner wants. On the other hand, Rachel’s want to spend time by herself and do her job without Ross represents “separation.” Observing Ross and Rachel’s relationship from the outside sheds light

on situations and issues that the couple may have not even realized themselves, thus giving real people the opportunity to fix a problem before it may even arise. Although this observation does not give much insight on internal conflict and dialogue, Ross and Rachel give a good representation of how they truly feel. At the end of the clip, after the tension has been realized, they come to an understanding and agree that they must give each other some space while still remembering their love for each other.

### **Analysis**

Integration and separation are two dialectical concepts identified by Baxter and Montgomery that “cannot be understood in conceptual isolation of one another” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 88). Again, we see this idea at work in Ross and Rachel’s relationship. Until their relationship became serious neither one of them ever questioned their independence, but once their partnership became serious, autonomy became an issue. Rachel wishes to receive support and love from Ross while also having time to go to work and have her own life. Ross, on the other hand, wishes Rachel would devote her time to their relationship. The tension arises from the fact that Ross has always had his own identity and freedom; however, Rachel just received freedom from her family and wishes to succeed on her own. They face the challenge of balancing their autonomy with their dependence. Ross struggles to understand Rachel’s need for alone time, and this need of hers only makes him “tighten his grip” on her more. A study done by Hoppe-Nagao and Stella Ting-Toomey (2002) showed many women repeatedly referring to their independence as “being your own person and having your own identity” (p.147). This is exactly what Rachel is looking for and Ross is failing to understand.

In the same episode of *Friends* mentioned above, many scenes depict the tensions and strains Ross and Rachel experience. Right from their first scene together, Ross walks into Rachel's office unannounced:

Ross: Hi

Rachel: Hi, Sweetie!

Rachel: I've got some bad news.

Ross: What?

Rachel: I can get a quick bite to eat, but then I have to come back up here.

Ross: Come on sweetie! You've had to work late every night for the past two weeks, what is it this time?

Ross is disappointed that Rachel must work late because it is taking away from their time together. Rachel has a time-consuming job and the "lack of time puts strains on the togetherness aspect of the relationship" (Ting-Toomey & Hoppe-Nagao, 2002, p. 148).

Not only does tension arise verbally, but it also comes up nonverbally. When Rachel leaves to go to dinner with Ross, it is her coworker's last day so she goes to give him a hug. She is unable to fully do this because Ross keeps holding one of her hands. Rachel can only manage one arm around her coworker. Ross is so protective of Rachel and clingy that he does not like her affection towards anyone but himself. Unfortunately for Ross, Rachel has made plans to see Mark, the coworker, on Monday for a fashion seminar. This upsets and shocks Ross. He does not appreciate her making plans out of work when he is not involved. While Ross enjoys seeing Rachel every day, the constant companionship "may increase the feelings of 'stepping on each other's toes, 'being in each other's space' or 'limiting individual potential'" (Sahlstein, 2004, p.

690). Rachel knows this fashion seminar is going to benefit her career and she must go, and to her, going with a coworker and a friend is no problem; to Ross it is an issue.

In the next scene between Ross and Rachel from the episode, Ross brings up the fashion seminar and questions Rachel's decision to go.

Ross: Hmmm. Oh, no, no, I was just thinking about something funny I heard today.

Umm, Mark, Mark saying, 'I'll see you Saturday.'

Rachel: Yeah, at the lecture, I told you that last week, you said you didn't mind.

Ross makes a bigger deal out of her going to this seminar and not asking him to go. He also wishes she had not asked Mark. He feels threatened that Rachel is spending more time with another man, and it is taking away from his relationship with her. In reality, Rachel is benefiting herself and her career and using a coworker to help her do that. According to Ting-Toomey and Hoppe-Nagao (2004), Ross may just be feeling as other men do, "uneasiness and discomfort" (p.148) about Rachel having her own life and aspirations. He may not be comfortable with the situation, but their study also showed that independence is "a means of maintaining harmony and maximizing the satisfaction in the relationship" (p. 147).

Ross seems unwilling to change his ways and give Rachel space, so he suggests he go with her to the lecture:

Rachel: I don't know. You thought 'See you Saturday' was funny. Look honey, Mark is in fashion, okay? I like having a friend that I can share this stuff with. You guys would never want to go to a lecture with me.

Ross: Pa-haa!! I would love to go with you.

Rachel: Really!?



Her reaction could be read as ambiguous. She is excited that Ross is willing to experience something she loves, but she is also confused as to why Ross feels the need to be so close to her. It can be said, as Sahlstein (2004) found in her research, that Rachel likes the time apart from Ross because it has a “positive impact/force on their time together” (p. 700). Once at the lecture, Ross is bored out of his mind and tries competing for Rachel’s attention. Rachel is listening intently to what the lecturer is saying about sheer navy blouses as Ross begins to talk:

Ross (to Rachel): I’m really glad we came. (Rachel smiles and rubs his arm) You’re so pretty. I love you.

Rachel: Oh. (She puts her hand over his mouth).

This interaction between Ross and Rachel is a sure sign of tension. Ross cannot let Rachel be independent and free and he does not realize he is deterring her from the happiness of being successful in fashion. Instead, he is thinking of only himself and how he wants to be close to her.

The final scene between Ross and Rachel really depicts Ross’s reluctance to change his ways and give Rachel space. After the lecture they return back to Rachel’s apartment and they begin arguing over Ross’s rudeness.

Ross: (entering) So I nodded off a little.

Rachel: Nodded off!! Ross you were snoring. My father’s boat didn’t make that much noise when it hit rocks!

Ross: Come on! Forty-five minutes! Forty-five minutes the man talked about strappy backed dresses.

Rachel: Well, okay, how about four hours in a freezing museum auditorium listening to Professor Pitstains and he’s, ‘Hey everybody! Remember that thing that’s been dead for a gazillion years? Well there’s this little bone we didn’t know it had!’

Ross: First of all it's Professor Pittain! And second of all, that little bone proved that that particular dinosaur had wings, but didn't fly.

Rachel: Okay, see now, what I just heard: blah-blah-blah, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, blah-blah-blah, blah, blah.

Ross: Y'know what, 100 million people went to see a movie about what I do. I wonder how many people would go see a movie called Jurassic Parka.

Rachel: Oh, that is so...

Ross: No-no-no, a bunch of out of control jackets take over an island. (Makes an unusual sound, then he realises that he still has his jacket on and quickly tries to shake it off, thinking it's alive and attacking him.)

Rachel: Y'know, if what I do is so lame, then why did you insist on coming with me this morning? Huh? Was it so I just wouldn't go with Mark?

This fight between Ross and Rachel is a prime example of how they are suffering from the integration separation dialectical tension. This fight, though, can occur not only in a fictional show but in real life as well. Audiences form real connections with relationships within television. Michaela Meyer (2003) provides research that states that although an "individual character rarely provides a monologue on television programming, most issues surrounding the character are working through relationships on the show, not solely as individual decisions" (p. 1). The show *Friends* has to depict these two characters as fighting in order to show their true thoughts. For example, Ross must elaborate on his feelings about Rachel while talking to her, since he never gets a chance to speak directly to the audience, and Rachel must respond and tell him everything will be okay between them:

Ross: No. I... I wanted to be with you. I don't know, I feel like lately, I feel like you're slipping away from me, y'know. With this new job, and all these new people, and you've got this whole other life going on. I-I-I know it's dumb, but I hate that I'm not a part of it.

Rachel: It's not dumb. But, maybe it's okay that you're not a part of it. Y'know what I mean? (Ross looks confused) I mean it's like, I-I-I like that you're not involved in that part of my life.

Ross: That's a little clearer.

Rachel: Honey, see, it doesn't mean that I don't love you. Because I do. I love you, I love you so much. But my work, it's-it's for me, y'know, I'm out there, on my own, and I'm doing it and it's scary but I love it, because it's mine. I, but, I mean is that okay?

Ross: Sure, I-I-I... (hugs her and mouths No!!)

Rachel has the level head of the partnership. She knows that she and Ross will be fine together and they will stay together even if they have their own careers and lives. She has to explain this knowledge to him to make him feel secure and confident. The differences in their beliefs and personalities allow for them to grow and become stronger together—if, that is, Ross can learn to give Rachel some space.

### **Conclusion**

Relational dialectics can help a relationship to grow and despite occasionally causing tension can help strengthen the relationship in the end. Ross and Rachel had to talk through their tensions in order to learn exactly what they were facing. This research can be used to remind everyone that dialectical tensions do exist and if the couple is able to cope with them and overcome them, they can improve the relationship. Baxter and Montgomery had it right in their studies that dialogue is key to overcoming various tensions. Through communication, the

tensions can be diminished and dissolved. These events between couples can be used to further understandings of relationships. Ross and Rachel, although fictional, can be looked at by actual couples as a model for their own. Most people watch television shows and see the relationships depicted on them and compare them to their own. Ross's jealous state of mind and constant pull of Rachel to be closer to him can be seen as negative to some, while some men or even women may relate that characteristic to their own relationship. Rachel's independence may be viewed as strong by some men and women, while on the other hand it may be seen as neglect of her partner and what is important to him. This study also adds to existing knowledge and research done on not only relational dialectics, but also on a fictional working relationship that is an example for real-life couples. As television shows grow more popular and depict a wider variety of tensions, people who watch will have better models and examples to use in their own relationships. If more people would think of them as actual examples of what to do or what not to do, tensions could be avoided right from the start.

There are many ways this research could be furthered. One could continue to research the tensions between Ross and Rachel past episode 14 of season 3; their relationship as a whole and not just a few scenes presented. One could look at the other relationships of the show, the other fictional characters represented on *Friends*. Another great way to further the research of fictional relationships and how they can be used to help real relationships would be to look at other television shows, movies, or written fiction. There are so many relationships in the world and all can be examined in order to benefit others.

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