

I Need Some Space

Introduction

Relational dialectic theory states that communication is composed of opposing forces that determine its nature and relationship in social spheres. The opposing forces are dialectical tensions that relating partners grapple with in an attempt to resolve and choose between contradicting desires and values. The theory holds that relationship is a complex association of people under regulation of contradicting forces of influence, which drive and determine the bearing of a relationship. Sivertsen (2003) defines the dialectical theory of friendship as, “tensions between contradictory elements in relationships between friends ... friendships, at any stage in life, represent a complex set of challenges arising from dialectical contradictions innate in the very concept of being friends” (p. 2). Hence, for any relationship to stand the test of time, the partners have a daunting task of subduing their contradicting desires and values that have opposing forces leading to separation. At some instances, friends experience challenges of either mending or breaking their relationship due to the conflicting desires and values that come into limelight in the course of friendship.

The relational dialectic theory, a communication theory that elucidates contradicting elements of relationship, determines the nature and extent of friendship in social spheres. The theory views relationship as a combination of creative and destructive forces that need proper adjustment for any relationship to be successful and satisfy the emotional needs of the partners or friends. According to Baxter (2004),

Social life is an open ‘dialogue’ characterized by the simultaneous fusion and differentiation of voices. To engage in a dialogue, participants must find certain point at which their visions of the world can fuse, while sustaining the uniqueness of their individual perspectives. (p. 181)

For effective communication and satisfying relationship to occur among individuals, each individual should strive to have a common perspective for the sake of

understanding, and at the same time maintain unique perspective to enable fulfilling exchange of information. Therefore, dialectical tensions are an inherent part of relationship and communication, which demand constant attention and resolution for a healthy relationship and communication to occur.

According to the relational dialectical theory, four fundamental concepts that form basis of the theory are contradiction, praxis, totality, and process. Contradiction is a concept that defines opposing desires and values that an individual in relationship demands, yet they are mutually exclusive. The opposing desires and values create dilemma in a relationship, thus, making friends or relating partners to experience hard times. For instance, friends require autonomy and, at the same time, they need to be dependent. Such contradiction complicates the relationship because relating partners face dilemma of satisfying opposing desires given that they are mutually exclusive. Praxis is a dialectical concept that underscores behaviors, which create and re-create dialectical tensions during the course of relationship in social environment. Totality is a concept that requires the entire interpretation of the contradictions since they are interrelated in the fact that one defines the other. For instance, dialectical tensions between privacy and openness or dependence versus autonomy are not separate entities; therefore, they require interpretation in the full context of dialectic contradictions. Processes are the relational dialectical concepts that depict social relationship and communication as a dynamic process that is constantly evolving in the view of contradictions that regulate the nature and extent of relationships.

The study carried out to establish interaction dialectics of three characters from the sitcom *Friends*, namely, Chandler, Monica and Phoebe, in relation to the interaction dialectic theory clearly illustrated the importance of the theory in communication and relationships. The interaction dialectics emanated when Phoebe and Monica teased

Chandler that she gained much weight, which made her go ahead to ask other friends whether she had actually gained much weight, as her closest friends suggested. Her friends faced a serious dilemma of whether to tell the truth and hurt Chandler, one of the closest people, or lie and avoid hurting her. In order to evade dialectical dilemma of protectiveness and expressiveness, the friends' response was to avoid the complicity and stop moralizing, inventing poor excuses and pathetic attempts to maintain neutrality (Rawlins, 1998, p. 35). According to the study, the findings showed that dialectical tensions are inherent and critical in determining the course of relationship. Eventually, the relationship of the three friends continued in spite of the numerous dialectics that caused tensions, disagreements, and ambiguities. This essay utilizes relational dialectic theory to examine the case study "I Need Some Space" in order to explore interpersonal communication behaviors.

Application of Theory and Analysis of Case Study

The case study "I Need Some Space" portrays relationship of two great friends, Ashley and Jennifer, during their days in college. The two friends experienced many dialectical tensions that moulded their relationship during the period they stayed together in college. The case study depicts the good relationship of Ashley and Jennifer, which seem to be threatened as Ashley is slowly getting subjected under the friends' influence. Tracking the progress of their relationship, one can notice Ashley complaining that Jennifer does not give her freedom to communicate with other friends. Thus, Ashley withdraws from the relationship, and begins dating Steve and starts socializing with other friends, leaving Jennifer alone. Based on the relational dialectical theory, Ashley is facing dialectical dilemma of autonomy versus connectedness. Ashley confesses that she really values the relationship, "...but I guess the big problem is that I feel I don't have any freedom in our friendship. Every time I tell you I am going somewhere with

friends, you never ask whether you can come along” (Dinda, Hsu, & Graber, 2000, p. 76). Recognizing that Jennifer is her great friend and the fact that she is a roommate, Ashley finds it hard to separate completely from her. On the other hand, Ashley wants to have enough time while dating Steve and associating with other friends. Thus, Jennifer and her friends become the opposing forces that influence the way Ashley builds her social relationship.

In order to find the compromise between their contradicting desires and values, Jennifer and Ashley agree to live in separate rooms to have enough freedom to socialize with other friends. Despite the strong need of remaining together, they feel good when they live in separate rooms with different friends because the dialectical tension of autonomy versus connectedness is somehow resolved. Since they have too much autonomy from the influence of one another, they again feel the need of connectedness. Several weeks passed without Ashley and Jennifer meeting, which made them miss each other and recollect the happy moments they shared as roommates. Ashley has been busy dating Steve in spite of Jennifer warning her that he is a dangerous man. Then, one day Jennifer notices Steve kissing another girl along the corridor, which really troubles her, as she wonders how to break such hurting news to Ashley because she loves her a lot. However, the need of connectedness compels her to reveal what she saw Steve doing. After realizing that Steve is unfaithful to her, Ashley thanks Jennifer saying, “I want you to know how much our friendship means to me. You really saved me from making one of the biggest mistakes in my life. I do not know what I would do without you. Thank you” (Dinda, Hsu, & Graber, 2000, p. 78). Steve’s unfaithfulness brings Jennifer and Ashley closer and restores the bounds between them again, as it used to be before they lived separately.

Ashley and Jennifer are once again connected to each other and they have no desire to live separately after realizing that their friendship is more important than autonomy. They decide to live in an apartment together to have ample time and space where they can share their pain and joy. Before the breakup and the reconciliation, the dialectical tension of openness versus strain emerged because Jennifer started dating a strange man. Ashley was wondering what kind of boyfriend Jennifer had for she had been hiding him from her. At this stage of relationship, Jennifer faced a dilemma whether to tell the truth about her boyfriend and hurt Jennifer, or make it a secret and avoid hurting her. Jennifer struggled with the dilemma of openness versus strain until one day when Ashley discovered that Steve was Jennifer's boyfriend. When Jennifer was caught, she regretted keeping the relationship in secret; she thought, "there goes the greatest friendship I have ever had, I know there is probably no way Ashley is ever going to forgive me for what I have done to her" (Dinda, Hsu, & Graber, 2000, p. 79). Therefore, the dialectical dilemma of openness versus strain continued to haunt her as it destroyed their relationship.

After noting that their relationship is very critical for their future, Ashley and Jennifer decided to forget about their past and dwell on their future. At this instance of their relationship, Ashley and Jennifer were experiencing dialectical dilemma of novelty versus predictability. They both desired to have the best relationship, but the disheartening experiences of the past did not allow them to bring some novelty into their relations; on the contrary, they foresaw that their relationship would last longer if only they loved and respected each other once more. According to Dinda, Hsu and Graber, during the final year in college, Ashley and Jennifer "...decided to live together again and promised each other to make their last year their most memorable and positive experience" (2000, p. 81). Although they could not change their past, Ashley and

Jennifer predicted that their future would be much brighter if they forgave one another. The most dominant strategy of managing dialectical tensions in relationship according to this study is separation. When Ashley and Jennifer started arguing, they agreed that they should live in separate apartments to alleviate relationship strains. As soon as they restored their relationships again, they agreed to stay in one room. Neutralization is another strategy that lessened dialectical tension in the relationship since both Ashley and Jennifer were very apologetic when they had such a devastating conflict.

Critique of Participants in Case Study

If Jennifer knew about relational dialectic theory, she should have realized that Ashley was striving to achieve autonomy while she was making her to be more connected. Jennifer would have understood that Ashley needed some independence and, thus, allowing Ashley to socialize with the people she likes would be the best way out. From naive perspective, one would think Ashley hated Jennifer, for she did not want to spend enough time with her while accusing her of inviting herself to the outings they went with her other friends. On the other hand, Ashley would not have been so defensive and hurtful when leaving Jennifer if she had guessed that something was wrong with the relationship. Ashley should have realized that Jennifer was struggling to connect with her while she was also striving to gain autonomy. The differences in resolving dialectical dilemma of connectedness versus autonomy resulted into their disagreement in the first instance and the need to separate and live in different rooms. In the second disagreement, if Ashley understood that Jennifer wanted to bring some air of novelty into the relationships, she would not have gone ahead and pestered her to reveal the secrets of her boyfriend. Moreover, if they had understood relational dialectic theory, they would not have changed their rooms in order to achieve autonomy, strain, and/or predictability as dialectical elements that they strived to attain.

The relational dialectic theory enhanced my understanding of the case study by illustrating the dynamics of relationship in terms of opposing desires and values that determine the nature and bearing of the relationship. Based on the relational dialectic theory, I understood that Ashley and Jennifer failed to form strong relationships because each of them had opposing desires in the dialectical dilemma of autonomy versus interconnection. While Jennifer wanted to get closer to her friend, Ashley wanted to achieve autonomy and create enough time to spend with Steve and keep in touch with other friends. Moreover, Jennifer needed strain in order to keep her secrets while Ashley wanted openness for she had nothing to hide. Therefore, the differences in the resolution and choosing of dialectical dilemmas resulted into disagreement in the relationship, which illustrates that the differences in the dialectical needs and values are potential sources of conflict in relationships.

Conclusion

The relational dialectic theory is a communication theory that has a wide scope because it is applicable in various forms of relationships, such as romantic relationship, marriage, family; and even in workplaces. The theory defines the course of relationship based on the available dialectical dilemmas. Concerning the testability, the theory proves to be valid, as the dialectical forces in a relationship are practically falsifiable, and in terms of parsimony, the theory clearly elucidates the dialectical elements that regulate communication and relationship. Heuristic value is another attribute that the theory has for it provides opportunity for other researchers to prove the application of theory on various kinds of relationship, such as marriage and work relationship. In the case study, the theory clearly demonstrated that dialectical forces are responsible for relationship conflicts, but it failed to provide that the confounding factors may mediate the influence of dialectical forces. Furthermore, the theory also failed to explain

instances where relationships breakdown without any reunion or reconciliation. For thorough exploration of interpersonal communication, the theory needs expansion in terms identification of more dialectical forces that influence relationships and incorporation of confounding factors that may invalidate the empirical findings. Therefore, relational dialectic theory clearly illustrates factors that determine interpersonal communication and the course of relationship.

References

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