

11

**Relational Dialectics of
Leslie Baxter & Barbara Montgomery**

A First Look at Communication Theory

9th edition

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Relational Dialectics

- Baxter and Montgomery analyzed tensions in romantic relationships and began cataloging contradictions
 - Forces that strain relationships among close friends and family members
 - **Relational dialectics** – dynamic knot of contradictions in personal relationships; unceasing interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies

The Tug-of-War-Dialectics of Close Relationships

- *Contradiction* is a core concept of relational dialectics
 - “Dynamic interplay between unified oppositions” (Baxter and Montgomery)
 - Draw heavily on Bakhtin who saw dialectic tensions as the “deep structure” of human experience
 - Bakhtin saw dialectic tension as opportunity for dialogue

The Tug-of-War-Dialectics of Close Relationships

❑ Contradiction (continued)

- Baxter: communication exerts simultaneous pulls on both ends of a taut line – a relational rope under tension
- Dialectical tension is a natural product, or unavoidable result of our conversations
- Contradictions can be constructive

Figure 11-1: Typical Dialectical Tensions Experienced by Relational Partners

	Internal Dialectic (within the relationship)	External Dialectic (between couple and community)
Integration – Separation	Connection – Autonomy	Inclusion – Seclusion
Stability – Change	Certainty – Uncertainty	Conventionality – Uniqueness
Expression – Nonexpression	Openness – Closedness	Revelation – Concealment

ASK DR. K

Long Distance Relationships

Critique: Meeting the Criteria for a Good Interpretive Theory

- ❑ Some communication scholars question whether *relational dialectics* should be labeled as a theory at all, however, it offers
 - New understanding of people
 - Community of agreement
 - Clarification of values
 - Reform of society
 - Aesthetic appeal

Bakhtin's Dialogue

Bakhtin saw dialectical tension as an opportunity for dialogue

RDT 2.0: Drilling Down on Bakhtin's Concept of Dialogue

□ Dialogue as a Constitutive Process

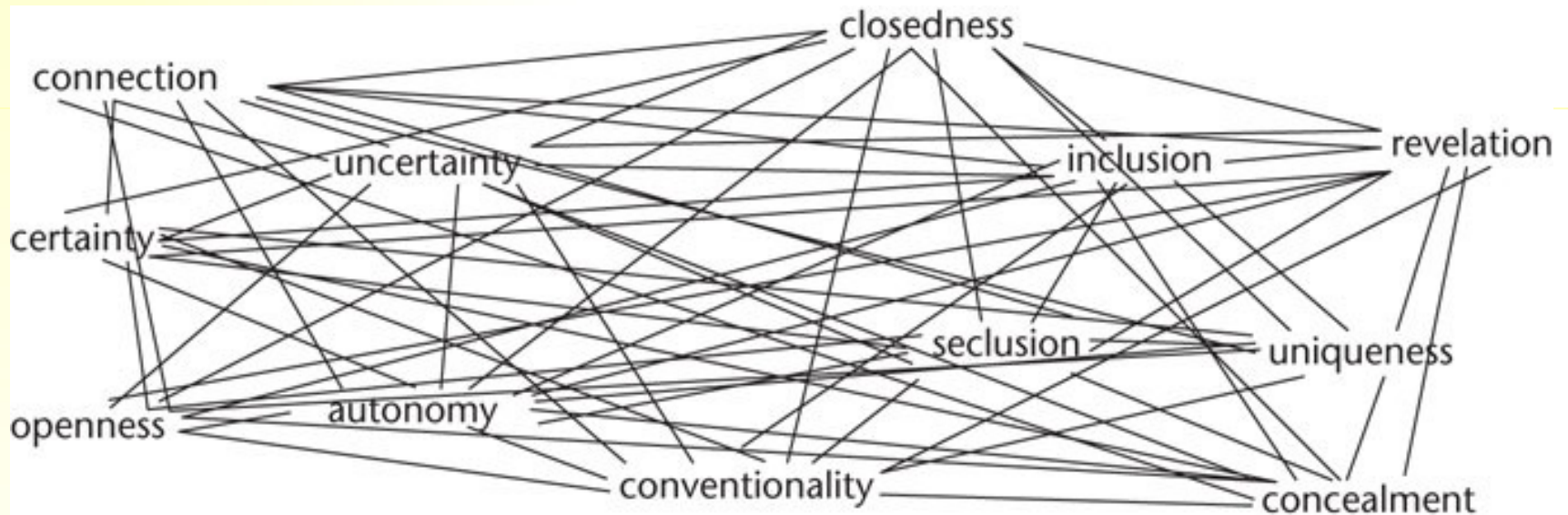
- **Dialogue** – communication that is constitutive, always in flux, capable of achieving aesthetic moments
- **Constitutive dialogue** – communication that creates, sustains, and alters relationships and social worlds

Let's look at some dialogue about *Friends with Benefits*

Second Generation of Dialectics

- Dialogue as an Aesthetic Moment
 - **Aesthetic moment** – fleeting sense of unity through a profound respect for disparate voices in dialogue
 - It's easy manage a “friends with benefits” relationship if partners just understand the rules

Figure 11-2: The Messiness of Personal Relationships



Second Generation of Dialectics

□ Dialogue as Dialectical Flux

- **Dialectical flux** – unpredictable, unfinalizable, indeterminate nature of personal relationships
 - **Spiraling inversion** – switching back and forth between two contrasting voices
 - **Segmentation** – compartmentalizing tactic by which partners isolate different aspects of their relationship
 - I'm your friend OR your lover