JEO SCHOLARSHIP WEEKEND – FEBRUARY 2024

READING QUESTIONS

How We Use Theories in Communication

Communication theories help us better understand how people communicate and how we can be more effective communicators.

For our session, we will focus mainly on one theory of communication—Baxter & Bakhtin's Relational Dialectics Theory—to demonstrate how understanding a theory can enrich our understanding of discourses about interpersonal relationships.

Please read the assigned chapter and prepare for our discussion by making notes about your answers to the following questions.

1. Think about the lyrics of any popular music (song) about relationships. What aspect of relationships is covered in the song?
2. What kinds of discussions do you and your family have about relationships?
3. How about you and your friends; how are those discussions the same as or different from the ones you have with your family?
4. Relational dialectics is the dynamic and _____ struggle between _____about _____ relationships.
5. Express your response to #4, above, in your own words.
6. In the context of this theory, "monologue" is:

_____.

7. In the context of this theory, "dialogue: is:

_____.

8. What is an utterance chain?
9. Differentiate between "dominant discourse" and "marginalized discourse." Give an example of each.
10. Differentiate between "separation" and "interplay."
11. What are the four forms of interplay? Give an example of each for of interplay.

Relational Dialectics Theory

of Leslie Baxter & Mikhail Bakhtin

What do popular musicians and bands sing about? See if you can think of songs that address the following topics: (1) romantic or sexual attraction, (2) being in love, (3) the pain of breaking up, (4) romantic conflict, (5) the value of friendship, and (6) the value of family.

If you want to see some songs that I (Andrew) put in these categories, check out the first endnote at the end of this chapter.[1] If you listen to popular music, my guess is that you won't have trouble thinking of examples, particularly regarding romantic relationships. If you're struggling, just fire up your favorite music streaming service. One study of American pop music across 50 years found that *relationships and love* was the most frequent topic, appearing in every two out of three songs, while 30 percent of songs addressed *sex and sexual desire*, 8 percent concerned *family*, and 7 percent *friends/friendship*.[2]

Talk about relationships fills television, too. Shows like *Parks and Recreation* and *The Big Bang Theory* celebrate enduring bonds among a group of friends (as does the aptly named *Friends*). *Fuller House, Modern Family*, and *Parenthood* are fictional comedies about families, while reality shows like *Sister Wives* and *Married at First Sight* depict romantic relationship stories that probably seem bizarre compared to the experiences of our own family and friends.

Of course, family and friends engage in their own relationship talk. A parent tells you to spend less time socializing with friends. A friend urges you to blow off your parents. Students in your theory course gossip about a budding classroom romance. And there's a good chance your instructor has already chimed in with interpersonal advice of their own. Whether from people we know or the media we consume, we cannot escape this flood of relational talk. Thus, when it's your turn to speak about relationships, professor emerita Leslie Baxter (University of Iowa) believes your messages will flow from the discourses you've already heard.

Baxter's theory of relational dialectics treats talk as the essence of close ties. The first time she conducted a series of in-depth interviews, she quickly abandoned any hope of discovering scientific laws that neatly ordered the experiences of family, friends, and lovers. Baxter saw no law of gravitational pull to predict

interpersonal attraction, no coefficient of friction that would explain human conflict. Instead, she found people giving voice to competing discourses about their relationships—people caught in "a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies."[3] *Relational dialectics* refers to this dynamic and unceasing struggle between discourses about interpersonal relationships.

Relational dialectics
The dynamic and unceasing struggle between discourses about interpersonal relationships.

Over the past three decades, Baxter and other scholars have embarked on an ambitious research program to chart the tension and struggle that occurs whenever people talk about interpersonal relationships. This work has generated two versions of relational dialectics theory (RDT), which scholars often refer to as "RDT 1.0" and "RDT 2.0." In the first version of the theory, the central concept was *contradiction* between conflicting desires (such as wanting to self-disclose but also maintain privacy). Baxter now thinks *discourse* is the core concept, which she emphasizes in version 2.0.[4] Your professor may prefer one version of the theory over another. In this chapter we'll consider both, with emphasis on RDT 2.0 because most current research uses the revised version of the theory.

DISCOURSES THAT CREATE MEANING

Discourse
Streams of talk that cohere around a given object of meaning.

The central concept of relational dialectics theory is *discourse,* or streams of talk that "cohere around a given object of meaning."[5] To picture how discourses shape the meaning of everyday objects, Baxter asks us to think about an apple.[6] Some discourses about apples emphasize health: "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." But when baked with sugar and a buttery crust, the discourse of apples and health encounters competing discourses about the dangers of eating too much dessert. Other discourses question the practices that produce apples, urging us to buy apples that are organic and locally sourced. When you visit the store to buy those natural apples, the sticker price might invoke discourses you've heard about saving money. Which of these discourses best defines the apple? Baxter would say all of the above, and more: "The meaning of *apple* is pretty complex."[7]

Social media hashtags are an excellent way to see discourses in action. One day I saw that #MondayMotivation was trending on Twitter. The tweets using this hashtag emphasized inspiration, such as astronauts aboard the International Space Station encouraging people to "strive for excellence,"[8] or Sudanese women creating masks to protect people from the COVID-19 pandemic.[9] This discourse was one of optimism and seemed to cheer, "It's the beginning of a new week! Go out, take hold of it, and change the world!" But I didn't have to look far to find alternative discourses of pessimism about Mondays. Using #IHateMondays, one user complained about returning to work after vacation,[10] and another posted a GIF of Garfield, exhausted, slipping back into his cartoon cat bed.[11]

Constitutive approach
The belief that communication creates, sustains, and alters relationships and the social world; social construction.

Baxter thinks such discourses *constitute,* or *construct,* what things mean. She says this *constitutive approach* "asks how communication defines or constructs the social world, including our selves and our personal relationships."[12] Several other theories in this book share this constitutive assumption, which is a hallmark of the socio-cultural tradition. You might recall that Mead's symbolic interactionism (see Chapter 5) claimed our concept of self is socially constructed in interaction with others. Later in this book, you'll find an entire theory devoted to understanding how communication speaks organizations into existence, a theory appropriately named the communicative *constitution* of organizations (see Chapter 23). And as this chapter's opening examples show, a great many discourses constitute our interpersonal

relationships. Therefore, when the discourses voiced by partners change, so does the relationship.

We can see the constitutive nature of discourse in how relational partners talk about their similarities and differences.[13] Much traditional interpersonal scholarship concentrates on similarities as the positive glue that helps people stick together. ("My idea of an agreeable person is a person who agrees with me.") This framework values self-disclosure because, by mutual revelation, people can discover similarities that already exist. We might summarize the claim of traditional scholarship this way: similarity (regarding attitudes, backgrounds, and interests) causes relational closeness.

Baxter's constitutive approach disagrees. She and other dialectical theorists consider differences just as important as similarities. Here's their key point: *The meaning of difference and similarity emerges through the discourses voiced by the partners.* For example, one of Em's relatives married a man who is 20 years older than she is. The difference in their age is a chronological fact. But whether she and her husband regard their diverse dates of birth as a difference that makes a difference is the result of the language they use to talk about it. So is the extent to which they see that age gap as either positive or negative. Meaning is created through discourses voiced over the course of the relationship.

This is a tough concept that probably challenges how you think about relationships. We tend to think about how *we* use *talk*. It's strange to think about how *talk* shapes *us*. If you're feeling confused, close the book for a moment and think about messages you've heard on some of the following interpersonal topics: *first dates, weddings, birth, adoption, family reunions, divorce, friendship, parenting, abuse, infidelity, long-distance relationships.* If you can think of some competing statements, you've identified struggling discourses that construct what these things mean.

DIALOGUE VERSUS MONOLOGUE

Monologue
Dominant talk that silences competing voices.

Dialogue
Multiple voices; talk where unity and difference play with and against one another.

To help make sense of the world of discourse, Baxter draws heavily on the thinking of twentieth-century Russian intellectual Mikhail Bakhtin. He lived during the Soviet Union's Stalinist regime and experienced its brutal oppression of academics who dared to defy the dictator. Given the totalitarian government under which he suffered, it's no surprise that Bakhtin's philosophy criticized *monologue*—a mode of talking that emphasizes one official discourse and silences all others. Thus, he rejected an alternative Marxist version of dialectics—popular with Soviet thinkers at the time—that claimed all dialectical struggles reach an inevitable monologue of final resolution. In counterpoint, Bakhtin embraced *dialogue* as "a process in which unity and difference, in some form, are at play, both with and against one another."[14] We might envision Bakhtin's dialogue as a rambunctious town hall meeting where different voices vie for acceptance.

In contrast to that public sphere of government, much of Bakhtin's scholarship considered how dialectics play out in popular fictional novels. He argued that a good book demonstrates dialogue in action. That might sound strange; after all, how could a story written by a single author be anything but a monologue? While bad literature may feature only the heavy-handed voice of a preachy author, Bakhtin believed excellent literature bubbles with multiple characters voicing multiple perspectives. He upheld Dostoyevsky's work as a great example of dialogic fiction. But if you haven't tackled *The Brothers Karamazov,* think of a book you've enjoyed. For me, that's the *Harry Potter* series, which features the diverse voices of wise Dumbledore, sly Snape, bookish Hermione, and half-crazy Luna. As their voices affirm,

intersect, and sometimes challenge each other, the meanings of these J. K. Rowling books emerge.

Baxter thinks the same spirit of dialogue animates interpersonal relationships. With our relational partners we speak in utterances, or conversational turns: *"How are you doing?" "Fine, I guess." "What, is something wrong?" "No, I said I'm fine. Why do you always assume something is wrong?"* As we express these utterances, our talk reverberates with words spoken before, words yet to come, and words we may never dare to voice. Baxter refers to all of these discourses spoken across the relationship as an *utterance chain.*[15] We can't fully understand a single utterance without considering this big picture.

Utterance chain
Discourses spoken across a relationship, including words spoken before and those yet to come.

Baxter and other relational dialectics scholars have examined many types of ties, including friend, co-worker, and lover. Throughout the chapter, I'll primarily draw on examples from research on family relationships. Although Baxter believes discourses create any interpersonal connection, much of the recent research using the theory has investigated the family. Perhaps that's because many families feature a diverse cast of characters and discourses that rival any novel.

THREE COMMON DIALECTICS THAT SHAPE RELATIONSHIPS

An uncountable number of discourses flow into our minds and out from our lips. And since these discourses often emerge from the cultural background, they don't occur at random. As Bakhtin put it, almost never are we "biblical Adams, dealing only with virgin and still unnamed objects, giving them names for the first time."[16] Rather, as we discuss supportive parents, faithful friends, clingy significant others, and know-it-all classmates, we echo discourses about relationships that we've heard before and expect to hear again.

In the initial research for version 1.0 of the theory, Baxter and her close colleague Barbara Montgomery (Colorado State University–Pueblo) interviewed hundreds of people regarding their relationships. Across these interviews, they heard people voice three recurring themes: *integration-separation*, *stability-change*, and *expression-nonexpression*. In version 1.0, they called these *contradictions*. A contradiction is formed "whenever two tendencies or forces are interdependent (the dialectical principle of unity) yet mutually negate one another (the dialectical principle of negation)."[17] According to Baxter, every personal relationship faces dialectical tensions. Maybe you've wanted to share an embarrassing secret with a friend (*expression*), but also feared shame (*nonexpression*). You're caught in a contradiction, feeling pulled in two directions.

Contradiction
Occurs when two forces are interdependent but negate one another.

You might picture these simultaneous, conflicting forces by imagining a game of "crack the whip" while skating with a group of friends. If you volunteer to be the outermost person on a pinwheeling chain of skaters, you're going to feel two opposing forces. As you accelerate, you'll feel the centripetal pull from the skater beside you, who has a viselike grip on your wrist. You'll also feel the opposing centrifugal force that threatens to rip you from your friend's grasp and slingshot you away from the group. Skill at skating doesn't reduce the pressures. In fact, the more speed you can handle, the greater the opposing forces. But it is the balance of these forces that makes the game fun (and also dangerous—we don't recommend giving it a try!).

That's the first version of the theory. In RDT 2.0, Baxter no longer prefers the word *contradiction* because it may tempt people to think she's talking about psychological conflict between different desires (such as wanting connection versus wanting freedom). Baxter thinks we have such internal motivations, but because

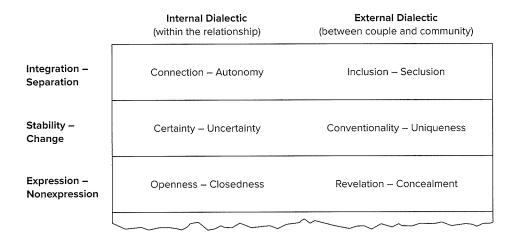|	**Internal Dialectic** (within the relationship)	**External Dialectic** (between couple and community)
Integration – Separation	Connection – Autonomy	Inclusion – Seclusion
Stability – Change	Certainty – Uncertainty	Conventionality – Uniqueness
Expression – Nonexpression	Openness – Closedness	Revelation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

FIGURE 11-1   Typical Dialectical Tensions Experienced by Relational Partners
Based on Baxter and Montgomery, *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics*

Discursive struggles
Two or more discourses compete for dominance over meaning.

Internal dialectics
Discursive struggles played out within a relationship.

External dialectics
Discursive struggles played out between a couple and their community.

she takes communication seriously, she thinks cultural discourses create and shape them. So to make it clear she isn't talking about conflict between needs or between people, Baxter refers to these themes as *discursive struggles* or *competing discourses*.[18] We'll now take a closer look at each of the three pairs of competing discourses that Baxter and Montgomery heard again and again in their interviews. These oppositional pairs are listed on the left side of Figure 11-1. The terms within the chart label these discursive struggles as they address two different contexts. The Internal Dialectic column describes the three dialectics as they shape the relationship between two people. The External Dialectic column describes the dialectics as they create the relationship between two people and the community around them. Baxter would be disappointed if you think Figure 11-1 represents an exhaustive list of competing discourses. Accordingly, the ragged edge at the bottom of the figure suggests that these opposing forces are just the start of a much longer list of discursive struggles spoken by people as they jointly author their relationships in real time and space. As I describe these themes, try to think of when you've heard them voiced in popular media or by people you know.

Integration and Separation

Within any given relationship, Baxter regards the discursive struggle between *connection* and *autonomy* as foundational. If one side wins this *me-we* tug-of-war, the relationship loses:

> No relationship can exist by definition unless the parties sacrifice some individual autonomy. However, too much connection paradoxically destroys the relationship because the individual identities become lost.[19]

Integration-separation
A set of discursive struggles regarding independence versus interdependence; freedom versus intimacy.

The struggle between *integration* and *separation* shapes all relationships, but children and parents may especially struggle with this dialectic during the college years. Children invoke the discourse of *autonomy* when they stress their growing adult independence. In the next breath, though, they may emphasize their desire

for ongoing *connection* with their parents. One dialectical study found college-aged daughters voicing this stay-away-close struggle. As one daughter said, "Sometimes the advice that I ask for, I do ask for it but what I receive is a little more dictatorial than I'm looking for."[20] Amber, a student in Em's communication theory class, voiced the tension created by conflicting discourses of autonomy and connection:

> My boyfriend Tyler is on the swim team and I know most of the guys well. The exceptions are the new freshmen, who Tyler said refer to me as "the girlfriend." When I heard this I was surprised how much it irritated me. I obviously value my connection with him, otherwise we wouldn't be dating. But as I told Tyler, I also have my own separate, independent identity outside of our relationship.

The discourses of *integration* and *separation* also address a pair's *inclusion* with and *seclusion* from other people in their social network. University of South Dakota researcher Carolyn Prentice heard both discourses when interviewing newly married couples and their in-laws. One bride described her desire for continuing *inclusion* with her parents: "My family's close and we'd always talked about when I got married, you know, my husband would come on our vacations . . ."[21] Couples also spoke about how they wanted *time alone* as a newly married couple—a discourse sometimes marginalized by their in-laws' dominant discourse of inclusion.

Stability and Change

Many cultural discourses emphasize *certainty* in the family: we reward obedient children, applaud responsible teenagers, and condemn deadbeat parents. At the same time, other discourses revel in *uncertainty:* we plan surprise parties, go out to eat on a whim, and even arrange a spur-of-the-moment weekend getaway. Without the spice of variety to season our time together, relationships become bland, boring, and, ultimately, emotionally dead.

Stability-change
A set of discursive struggles regarding routine versus spontaneity; traditional versus novel.

Speaking of which, few topics produce as much uncertain discourse in families as death. Shortly after the passing of famed singer Prince, the press reported that he did not leave a will.[22] Some expressed astonishment that such a wealthy celebrity wouldn't have one. My wife wasn't surprised. When she was an attorney, she found people avoided such estate planning. A will and an advance directive aren't just legal documents—they're discourses that acknowledge the *certainty* of death. This discourse of certainty struggles with other talk that values *uncertainty*. As one participant put it in a dialectical study of end-of-life conversations, "I didn't want to believe she was terminally ill. I wonder if I didn't call more because I didn't want to have it confirmed that she was getting worse."[23]

The external version of *certainty-uncertainty* is *conventionality-uniqueness*. Discourses of *conventionality* consider how a relationship is similar to other relationships, while discourses of *uniqueness* emphasize *difference*. Baxter heard both discourses when she interviewed married couples who had renewed their vows. One woman stressed how the renewal ceremony communicated *common* discourses about the value of marriage: "It was important for our children to see that. . . . I think they saw concretely what commitment can lead to. They heard our own witness to marriage. . . . They heard that from our own mouth and some other people, too."[24] At the same time, couples talked about how their renewal celebrated triumphs over *unique* struggles and hurts over the course of the marriage—experiences that were *theirs alone*. The best vow renewal ceremonies acknowledged both the convention- ality and the uniqueness of the couple's marriage.

"Would you guys mind if I slept alone for a change?"
©by Don Orehek, reproduced by permission.

Expression and Nonexpression

American discourses about relationships often prize *openness* as the route to enduring intimacy. Nevertheless, other cultural discourses warn us to *keep silent* about our opinions on sex, politics, religion, and other controversial topics. Meanwhile, journalists and bloggers warn us about government and business encroaching on our "right to privacy." The discourse of *expression* clashes with the discourse of *nonexpression*.

Expression-nonexpression
A set of discursive struggles regarding transparency versus secrecy; privacy versus disclosure.

Baxter and her frequent University of Nebraska–Lincoln colleague Dawn Braithwaite found these discourses at play in stepfamilies. Specifically, they asked college-aged children about their relationship with the biological parent who didn't live with them at home. On one hand, participants emphasized their desire for *openness* with the nonresidential parent, an openness threatened by not living together: "Since I don't live with him, it's hard for him to understand what's going on in my life and he really, really wants to be a part of it and I try, but he's not there and it's hard because he doesn't understand, he doesn't see it."[25] At the same time, participants described how they *avoided topics* that might make the nonresidential parent feel inferior. For example, some participants suppressed stories of positive experiences with their stepparent. They feared that might lead the nonresidential parent to voice a discourse of jealousy.

Just as the *openness–closedness* dialectic is an ongoing discursive struggle within a relationship, couples and families also face choices about what information to *reveal* or *conceal* from third parties. Fear of rejection may raise the stakes, as University of Denver dialectical scholar Beth Suter heard when interviewing lesbian

couples. One participant spoke from both discourses when describing how she and her partner *conceal* their identity during family holiday gatherings: "As long as they treat her respectfully . . . I don't feel any great need to shove it down their throat . . . But that's also hard too, 'cause there's a lack of acknowledgement."[26] Although her words submit to the family's dominant discourse of *concealment*, she also voices a marginalized discourse of *openness* about her relational and sexual identity. Discourses on the periphery often struggle with those at the center.

HOW MEANING EMERGES FROM STRUGGLES BETWEEN DISCOURSES

Dominant discourse
Talk that is central and prominent, with power to define meaning.

Marginalized discourse
Talk that is peripheral, lacking power to define meaning.

Separation
Voicing different discourses at different times.

Interplay
Voicing different discourses at the same time.

Thus far, I've talked about competing discourses as though they sit on a level playing field—as if each were a separate channel on your music playlist and shuffle mode gives equal time to all. Bakhtin believed this is rarely, if ever, the case. Like a rock radio station that devotes just an hour each week to country hits, it's common for some discourses to possess more prominence than others.

Family talk reveals relationships in constant flux as some discourses move to the center and then recede to the margins. How do families manage these discourses in ways they find satisfying? Baxter thinks that's the wrong question, because saying that people "manage" discourses "implies that contradictions, or discursive struggles, exist outside of communication."[27] She'd rather consider how patterns of talk position certain discourses as *dominant* or *marginalized*.[28]

Baxter's work has identified two such overarching patterns, differentiated by time. In one pattern, competing discourses ebb and flow but never appear together. She calls this *separation*.[29] It's like a radio station that plays hip-hop on weekdays and techno on weekends—both forms are there, but they exist side by side without changing each other. In contrast, *interplay* voices multiple discourses in the same time and place.[30] It's like a musician who fuses genres to create something novel. One of my favorite such artists is violinist Lindsey Stirling, who gained fame on YouTube by synthesizing classical styles with electronic dance music—both forms are present at the same time, and both give her music its distinct flavor. In the world of interpersonal dialogue, Baxter thinks a similar creative fusion generates new meanings from divergent discourses.

Both separation and interplay can be further broken down into specific types. Separation may occur as *spiraling inversion* or *segmentation*, and interplay may occur as *negating, countering, entertaining,* or *transforming*. Figure 11-2 charts these differences using discourses about whether to have a taco or a burger for lunch. In the next sections, I'll illustrate each type with examples from research on how families talk about adoption. Although dialectical scholars emphasize that discourses construct any family relationship, talk may serve a particularly crucial role when family ties form apart from a biological connection.

Separation: Different Discourses at Different Times

In order to understand talk about adoption through the foster system, Baxter analyzed 100 online narratives written by adoptive parents.[31] She found two discourses running throughout the stories. One discourse emphasized how *adoption fulfilled the dream of being a parent*. The other discourse focused on how *adoption benefits the foster child*. What struck Baxter was that most blog posts emphasized one discourse or the other. Both discourses were present in the online stories as a whole, but rarely encountered each other in specific posts. Baxter interpreted this to mean that

SEPARATION: Keeping the Discourses Apart	INTERPLAY: Voicing the Discourses Together
	Negating: Dismissing a discourse. "Burgers are the worst food ever."
Spiraling inversion: Separated by time. "Burgers on Monday; tacos on Tuesday."	*Countering:* Replacing a discourse. "I tried tacos, but I prefer burgers."
Segmentation: Separated by topic. "Burgers at home; tacos at the office."	*Entertaining:* Considering alternatives. "Do I want tacos or burgers for lunch today?"
	Transforming: Combining discourses. "I'll put salsa on the bun to make a taco burger."

FIGURE 11-2   Examples of Struggling Discourses

most bloggers saw each discourse occurring in a trade-off. In other words, the child's benefit occurs at the expense of the parent's fulfillment.

That's *separation*, and it isn't unusual. Simultaneous expression of differing voices is the exception rather than the rule. At any given time, most relationship partners bring a dominant discourse to the foreground while pushing others to the margins. This often occurs via two typical patterns:

Spiraling inversion
Switching back and forth between two discursive struggles, voicing one and then the other.

1. *Spiraling inversion* switches back and forth across time between two contrasting discourses, voicing one and then the other. In parents' interaction with their adopted children, spiraling inversion often characterized the openness and closedness of their talk about the adoption. For example, Meredith Marko Harrigan (SUNY Geneseo) found that parents openly discussed the adoption during "adoption-related rituals . . . [including] the children's birthdays, the anniversary of the day the parents first met their children, and the anniversary of the day their children's adoptions became official."[32] At other times, closedness was the dominant discourse unless children voiced an interest in talking about the adoption.

Segmentation
A compartmentalizing tactic by which different discourses speak to different aspects of the relationship.

2. *Segmentation* compartmentalizes different aspects of the relationship. Time isn't the primary distinguishing factor; instead, the topic is. Adoptive parents might engage in this pattern when revealing and concealing information to third parties. Harrigan's study found that parents were almost always willing to reveal "basic facts" such as "their children's birth countries, heritages, and ages," and to talk about the adoption from the parents' point of view.[33] But the *child's* point of view and details regarding the birth family were considered off-limits, no matter when a third party might ask.

Compared to the monologue of one dominant discourse, separation is a step in the right direction, says Baxter. At the same time, separating discourses across time neglects the potential benefits of a more direct dialogue. It reminds me of my picky approach to food when I was a kid. For example, if I were eating pizza, I would eat the pepperoni, then the cheese, and then the crust. That's diversity of a kind, but now I know it's not as tasty as putting the ingredients together. Like food, interpersonal relationships *may* become even more appetizing when diverse discourses appear at the same time. I emphasize the word "may" because, like ketchup and ice

cream, some discourses clash horribly. Despite that risk, dialectical scholars believe the best recipes for interpersonal relationships include multiple discourses.

Interplay: Different Discourses at the Same Time

In the separation section above, you read how Baxter found that foster-to-adopt narratives pitted a discourse of parental fulfillment against a discourse of what's best for the child. In a related study, she examined how adoptive parents talked about their child's relationship with the birth family.[34] In these narratives she observed a culturally dominant discourse of *family-as-biology*—in other words, that biological families are ideal and adoptive families are second best. This contrasts with a more marginalized discourse that "judges family not by genetics but by the way members act and feel toward one another."[35] This talk emphasizes *family-as-interaction*.

These discourses often appeared together in the same narrative. Here, I'll use Baxter's findings to describe four forms of interplay, starting with those that are more like a monologue and moving to those that are more dialogic.

Negating
Mentioning a marginalized discourse in order to dismiss it as unimportant.

1. *Negating* mentions a discourse in order to dismiss it as unimportant. In order to champion family-as-interaction, one adoptive father noted that "there are other kids in the neighborhood who have been with their parents their whole lives who are smoking pot, being destructive and shoplifting."[36] This statement invokes the discourse of family-as-biology, but only to reject it as flawed.

Countering
Replacing an expected discourse with an alternative discourse.

2. *Countering* replaces an expected discourse with an alternative discourse. One adoptive mother described how she wanted the biological mother to know her son, but after several negative experiences she ended that contact. Although her talk values the discourse of family-as-biology, ultimately the discourse of family-as-interaction trumps it.

Entertaining
Recognizing that every discourse has alternatives.

3. *Entertaining* recognizes that every discourse has alternatives. Upon finding the social media profile of her son's biological mother, one adoptive parent pleaded for advice: "So do I owe it to her to let her know he's ok? Do I owe it to my son to open up his adoption and have contact with her?"[37] These words reveal that the author is caught in the discursive struggle between family-as-interaction and family-as-biology, with neither emerging as dominant.

Transforming
Combining two or more discourses, changing them into something new.

4. *Transforming* combines two or more discourses, changing them into something new. Many discourses about foster-to-adoption treat it as a zero-sum game: when the adoptive family wins, the biological family loses, and likewise for the adoptive parent and child. Only a few stories transcended this win–lose assumption, such as the adoptive parent who wrote, "I am so grateful for this child who stretches, tests, and teaches me every day. I am sorry for how she came to be in my life but eternally grateful that she's mine."[38] In her talk, sacrifice for the child becomes a means to parental fulfillment. Sorrow honors the birth family yet celebrates the adoptive family. She acknowledges multiple discourses and transforms them into something different and greater.

Aesthetic moment
A fleeting sense of unity through a profound respect for disparate voices in dialogue.

Perhaps the highest form of transformation is the *aesthetic moment*: "A momentary sense of unity through a profound respect for the disparate voices in dialogue."[39] Parties are fully aware of their discursive struggle and create something new out of it. That mutual sense of completion or wholeness in the midst of fragmented

experience doesn't last—that's why Baxter calls it a *moment*. But memories of that magic moment can support them through the turbulence that goes with the territory of any close relationship.

For families, a special vacation or a child's high school graduation may be aesthetic moments. Baxter suggests that a meaningful ritual, such as an annual family reunion, can be an aesthetic moment for all participants because it's "a joint performance in which competing, contradictory voices in everyday social life are brought together simultaneously."[40] The marriage renewal ceremonies studied by Baxter seemed to be aesthetic moments for some participants.[41] Religious ceremonies may also become aesthetic moments, where people with diverse beliefs and practices feel they are one in the family of God. Informed by his Jewish faith, ethicist Martin Buber believed such experiences help us and others become more fully human.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: MARTIN BUBER'S DIALOGIC ETHICS

In her book *Voicing Relationships*, Baxter notes that Martin Buber's ethical approach is particularly compatible with relational dialectics theory. Buber was a German Jewish philosopher and theologian who immigrated to Palestine before World War II and died in 1965. His ethical approach focuses on relationships between people rather than on moral codes of conduct. "In the beginning is the relation," Buber wrote. "The relation is the cradle of actual life."[42]

I-It relationship
We treat the other person as a thing to be used; created by monologue.

Buber contrasted two types of relationships—*I-It* versus *I-Thou*. In an I-It relationship we treat the other person as a thing to be used, an object to be manipulated. Created by monologue, an I-It relationship lacks mutuality. Parties come together as individuals intent on creating only an impression. Deceit is a way to maintain appearances.

I-Thou relationship
We regard the other person as the very one we are; created by dialogue.

In an I-Thou relationship we regard our partner as the very one we are. We see the other as created in the image of God and resolve to treat them as a valued end rather than a means to our own end. This implies that we will seek to experience the relationship as it appears to the other person. Buber said we can do this only through dialogue, but what he meant by *dialogue* was slightly different than what Bakhtin meant. Baxter notes that Buber's dialogue is more equivalent to Bakhtin's aesthetic moment.[43] It requires self-disclosure to, confirmation of, and vulnerability with the other person. It's a deeply ethical form of communication, and Buber believed it creates a *Between* through which we help each other become more human.

Narrow ridge
A metaphor of I-Thou living in the dialogic tension between ethical relativism and rigid absolutism.

Buber used the image of the *narrow ridge* to illustrate the tension of dialogic living. On one side of the moral path is the gulf of relativism, where there are no standards. On the other side is the plateau of absolutism, where rules are etched in stone:

> On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of the Between.[44]

Duquesne University communication ethicist Ron Arnett notes that "living the narrow-ridge philosophy requires a life of personal and interpersonal concern, which is likely to generate a more complicated existence than that of the egoist or the selfless martyr."[45] From the perspective of relational dialectics theory, Buber's approach honors both the discourse of individual identity and the discourse of interpersonal responsibility. It's an approach that, according to Baxter, provides "an

opportunity to construct new meanings, not simply reproduce old systems of meaning."[46] If you take Baxter, Buber, and Bakhtin's ideas seriously, which discourses should you voice, and which should you silence?

CRITIQUE: AESTHETIC MOMENTS, YES; AESTHETIC APPEAL, PERHAPS NOT

Baxter offers relational dialectics as a *sensitizing theory,* one that should be judged on the basis of its ability to help us see close relationships in a new light.[47] As I briefly address the six criteria for evaluating an interpretive theory (see Chapter 3), you'll find that relational dialectics stacks up quite well.

1. **A new understanding of people.** The theory offers a new way to make sense of close relationships. Some students feel relieved when they read about relational dialectics. That's because the theory helps them realize that the ongoing tensions they experience with their friend, family member, or romantic partner are an inevitable part of relational life. Competing discourses aren't necessarily a warning sign that something is terribly wrong with their partner or themselves.

2. **A community of agreement.** Among interpretive scholars, relational dialectics theory has inspired a strong community of agreement. In the RDT 2.0 revision, Baxter all but excludes objective scholars from that community. She's performed quantitative research on relational dialectics in the past, and although "the first articulation of RDT was more ecumenical with respect to methods," she now thinks the theory should move forward through qualitative research, perhaps exclusively.[48] The theory might have a broader community of agreement if it took more of an *entertaining* or *transforming* stance toward scientific discourses.

3. **Clarification of values.** By encouraging a diverse group of people to talk about their relationships, and taking what they say seriously, Baxter models the high value Bakhtin placed on hearing multiple voices. Yet she has critiqued dialectics research for heavy reliance on self-report data from surveys and interviews, and she has lamented the relative lack of dialogue studies focusing on talk between relational parties.[49] Recent research on online communication is closing this gap because it lets us easily examine the record of what people are saying.[50]

4. **Reform of society.** Not only does Baxter listen to multiple voices, but her theory seeks to carve out a space where marginalized voices can be heard. Relational dialectics encourages critical sensibility that's suspicious of differences in power.[51] By seeking to foster dialogue rather than monologue, the theory is a force for change in personal relationships.

5. **Qualitative research.** RDT emphasizes the importance of qualitative work when using the theory. Baxter's most recent book on RDT includes an entire chapter that explains how to analyze the discourses present in relationship talk. Relational dialectics theorists take the power and potential of qualitative research seriously.

6. **Aesthetic appeal.** Relationships are complex, and Baxter deserves praise for the effort she's exerted in understanding them. Bakhtin provides a rich set of ideas for considering relational discourses, but unraveling his multistranded conception of dialogue is no easy task. And translating nuanced philosophical

ideas from one language to another is never simple. Although Baxter's *Voicing Relationships* is a masterful treatise, it's also a tough one to work through, perhaps because she emphasized accuracy over artistry in presenting Bakhtin's ideas. In this chapter I've described the highlights of the theory and tried to further translate Baxter's imposing vocabulary into more approachable terms. If you want a few more details on how her ideas appear in the original work, check out the endnotes for this chapter.

Nevertheless, in describing *fleeting moments of wholeness*, Baxter holds out an attractive ideal to which we can aspire—an image that could make slogging through the morass of struggling discourses feel less frustrating. Baxter's early colleague Barbara Montgomery suggests that experiencing the pull of opposing discourses can actually be fun:

> I have been told that riding a unicycle becomes enjoyable when you accept that you are constantly in the process of falling. The task then becomes one of continually playing one force against another, countering one pull with an opposing motion and adapting the wheel under you so that you remain in movement by maintaining and controlling the fall. If successful, one is propelled along in a state of sustained imbalance that is sometimes awkward and sometimes elegant. From a dialectical perspective, sustaining a relationship seems to be a very similar process.[52]

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. How many different synonyms and equivalent phrases can you list that come close to capturing what Baxter means by the word *discourse?* What do these words have in common?

2. Which of the theories discussed in this book would Baxter consider simplistic or *monologic?* How might those theories become more *dialogic?*

3. Look at your most recent text message conversation. What *discourses* do you see? How do these discourses reflect things said in the past? Things you anticipate saying in the future?

4. Think about the last time you had an argument, debate, or verbal conflict. Were the discourses *negating, countering, entertaining,* or *transforming?* How would the conversation be different if the discourses struggled in a different way?

CONVERSATIONS

View this segment online at www.afirstlook.com.

At the start of the conversation, Leslie Baxter states that all communication involves the interplay of differences, which are often competing with or in opposition to each other. She explains why this dialectical tension isn't a problem to be solved, but an occasion for a relationship to change and grow. Baxter cautions that we've been seduced into thinking relating is easy, when in fact it's hard work. Most of the discussion centers on ways to cope with the interplay of differences we experience. She urges partners to reflect carefully on rituals that celebrate both their unity and diversity, and offers other practical suggestions as well.