A Tale of Two Voices:
Relational Dialectics Theory

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

Charles Dickens (1967), *A Tale of Two Cities*

Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1984a), *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

When I first encountered, in ninth grade, Charles Dickens's opening paragraph in *A Tale of Two Citie*s (1967), which I reproduced as the opening epigraph, I was struck by its complex simplicity. It remains to this day one of my favorite literary passages. What I didn't know then, but understand in retrospect, is that Dickens's novel displayed traces of what I now describe as a dialogic view.

This brings me to the second epigraph, by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984a), a Russian theorist of literature, culture, language, and philosophy, who developed, over a prolific career of some 50 years, a theory now known as dialogism (Holquist, 1990). Bakhtin's lifelong effort was a critique of theories and practices that reduced the unfinalizable, open, and varied nature of social life in determinate, closed, totalizing ways. To Bakhtin, social life was not a closed, univocal "monologue," in which only a single voice (perspective, theme, ideology, or person) could be heard: social life was an open "dialogue" characterized by the simultaneous fusion and differentiation of voices. To engage in dialogue, participants must fuse their perspectives to some extent while sustaining the uniqueness of their individual perspectives. Participants

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thus form a unity in conversation but only through two clearly differentiated voices or perspectives. Just as dialogue is simultaneously unity and difference, Bakhtin (1981, p. 272) regarded all of social life as the product of "a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies": the centripetal (i.e., discourses of unity or centrality) and the centrifugal (i.e., discourses of difference, dispersion, and de-centering). This dialogic view—that social life is a process of contradictory discourses—is a centerpiece of relational dialectics, formally articulated in 1996 by Barbara Montgomery and myself in our book *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), and subsequently the basis of multiple research studies conducted by various colleagues and myself (for reviews, see Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Braithwaite, in press).

This essay is a tale of "two voices"—the contradiction-ridden dialogue of relating. The tale lacks the Dickensian touch, with its richly painted characters and twists of plot, for which you have my apologies in advance. It is "a" tale, not "the" tale, because relational dialectics, like any theory, is not the exclusive possession of a single person but is jointly owned by all who have had a role in its development. My tale, then, is but one of many possible tales. It is the tale of how I came to think in dialogic ways about relating.

Polkinghorne (1988) noted that a narrative "transforms a chronicle or listing of events into a schematic whole by highlighting and recognizing the contribution that certain events make to the development and outcome of the story" (pp. 18–19). In telling a tale of two voices, then, I weave together a series of significant events, or turns, that I see as important to the development of relational dialectics.

A DUALISTIC TURN, CIRCA 1975

When I was in graduate school, one of my professors, Alfred G. Smith, impressed on me the value of what I call the opposition heuristic: "When you see X, ask about not-X." This heuristic brought me, early in my scholarly career, to the study of opposites. For example, whereas most scholars were studying relationship formation, I began studying the opposite—relationship endings (e.g., Baxter, 1979). Whereas most scholars were examining self-disclosive openness, I developed an interest in how non-open communication functioned (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985).

This opposition heuristic was dualistic, not dialogic, in nature. That is, I was beginning to wrap my scholarly interests around opposite phenomena, but I never linked them together to examine the unity of opposites.

A DIALECTICAL TURN, CIRCA 1982

When you study opposites, even dualistically, it doesn't take very long before you encounter the vast literature in dialectics. The core concept in dialectical perspec-

tives is, after all, the contradiction—a unity of opposites. The encounter for me be-gan with my reading of the Altman, Vinsel, and Brown (1981) essay in which a di-alectical perspective was taken on openness in relationships. The essay struck me as powerful on two counts. First, it displayed the intellectual courage of a scholar to shift perspectives from his prior and influential work (social penetration theory; Altman & Taylor, 1973) to a perspective that basically undermined the assump-tions of social penetration. Second, the essay impressed on me the importance of shifting from a dualistic way of thinking to a dialectical way of thinking. The power of this essay was underscored for me when Irv Altman and I happened by chance to be seatmates on a cross-country air flight; after a good 4 hours of nonstop and free-flowing talk about how to think dialectically, I broke through the dualistic barrier, at last. Irv Altman's influence on me was profound, and my intellectual debt to him is great.

My thinking about dialectics was, during this period, heavily influenced by the Hegelian and Marxist tradition. Two important texts for me were Mao's (1965) *On Contradiction* and Cornforth's (1968) *Marxism and the Dialectical Method.* To-gether, these works enabled me to understand that the concept of contradiction car-ried entailments—about change, about totality, about praxis. They also biased me in the direction of thinking about change as movement from thesis to antithesis to synthesis.

My 1988 essay in the *Handbook of Personal Relationships* marks the apex of my Hegelian dialectical view. However, even before this essay reached publica-tion, I was feeling constrained by the almost mechanistic quality of Hegelian dia-lectics. I had moved beyond it before it was a line on my curriculum vitae. I real-ized, largely through reading Murphy's (1971) book on dialectics, that dialectics had a long intellectual history, much of which was antithetical to a mechanistic view. As Murphy (1971) indicated, dialectics represented a general worldview that is "destructive of neat systems and ordered structures, and compatible with the no-tion of a social universe that has neither fixity or solid boundaries" (p. 90). I em-braced this more liberating conception of dialectics, but didn't quite know where to take it.

DIALOGIC "BABY STEPS," CIRCA 1987

I was discussing my frustrations with a colleague of mine in cultural anthropology, who happened to occupy the office next door to mine at the college where I was working. After listening to my intellectual woes, she asked me to read a draft manuscript of hers in which a theorist by the name of Mikhail Bakhtin featured prominently. Although the manuscript was something about which I knew very lit-tle (I vaguely remember something about the discursive voices in Senegalese fash-ion), I was struck by the analytic moves positioned by Bakhtin's dialogism. I

started reading everything I could get my hands on by, or about, this dead Russian guy. He appeared to share my frustrations with Hegelian and Marxist dialectics and had 50 years worth of writing to elaborate his point.

Traces of dialogism began to appear in my dialectical work (e.g., Baxter, 1992b, 1994), but in retrospect, I realize that these early efforts had barely begun the long process of internalizing the full scope, and ramifications, of a dialogic view. I had embraced, at least superficially, his view that social life was ongoing contradictory flux between centripetal and centrifugal forces, but this is but one sense in which Bakhtin meant the term *dialogue.* It took me much longer to understand, and accept, the other senses of "dialogue" in his work.

A SOCIAL TURN, CIRCA 1990

Early on in my encounter with Bakhtin's dialogism theory (e.g., Bakhtin, 1986; Volosinov & Bakhtin, 1973), I realized that he centered social life in the "utterance." However, the utterance was not conceived as a communicative act of an autonomous individual; instead, Bakhtin's notion was notably social, not individual. The utterance, to Bakhtin, exists at the boundary between two consciousnesses; it is a link in a chain, a link bounded by both preceding links and the links that follow (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 94). Thus, I began to rethink the notion of communication as goal-directed strategies or manifest behaviors of individuals, instead conceiving it as an emergent process between interlocutors (Baxter, 1992b). Consistent with this sense of dialogue as the between, I initiated a program of dialogic research focused on jointly-enacted communication events, including intimate play (Baxter, 1992a), mundane events of relating (e.g., Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996), and ritualized events such as commemorations, storytelling, and reminiscences (e.g., Baxter & Pittman, 2001; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998).

In moving to the between, it is important to recognize that contradictions are not located in individual heads, serving as dilemmatic goals that direct individual's communicative strategies. Rather, from a dialogic perspective, contradictions are located in the communication between relationship parties.

However, Bakhtin also emphasized the utterance in a second sense. To Bakhtin, social life was constituted discursively in its language-in-use, its utterances. In adopting a dialogic approach to relating, I became attracted to constitutive, rather than representational or transmission, views of communication (e.g., Craig, 1999). Selves and relationships are constituted in the jointly enacted communication events of the relationship parties (e.g., Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Thus, contradictions do not sit "out there" as objective forces that drive communicative choices between partners. Contradictions are constituted in the discursive sea of what Bakhtin called "verbal-ideological" forces (1981, p. 272). That is, communication

is the interpenetration of united-yet-competing values, orientations, perspectives, or ideas (Holquist, 1981, p. 429).

In taking a social turn, I complicated my understanding of dialogue and contradiction. The foundation was in place for what I now call first-generation relational dialectics.

FIRST-GENERATION RELATIONAL DIALECTICS, CIRCA 1993

About 1992, I proposed to use a sabbatical to begin work on a book about the dialectics of relating. I discovered, quite serendipitously, that a person I had met only a couple of times at various conventions, Barbara Montgomery, was also contemplating a book on dialectics. I called her, proposed a joint project, and in 1996 we published *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), the first formal articulation of the dialogically-oriented relational dialectics theory.

As we wrote the book, we realized that our dialogic approach to dialectics was quite distinct from that of other dialectical scholars, and we edited a follow-up volume (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998) to provide an opportunity for the differences (as well as similarities) among various dialectical approaches to become apparent.

The 1996 book that Barbara and I wrote bears little resemblance to our respective individual thoughts—the process of writing the book was a true dialogic experience, as Barbara and I attempted to describe in the book's final chapter. Barbara has moved on to academic administration and I miss her intellectual companionship in the ongoing evolution of relational dialectics.

A CHRONOTOPIC TURN, CIRCA 1995

The concept of the chronotope features centrally in Bakhtin's dialogism theory (Bakhtin, 1981). It means "time-space" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84) and underscores Bakhtin's position that social life is best understood locally and concretely. The implication of this concept is that contradictions are best understood *in situ.* Although I articulated three recurring families of contradictions that kept popping up in study after study—dialectics of integration–separation, stability–change, expression–nonexpression (e.g., Baxter, 1993)—it was never my intent to claim that these contradictions were exhaustive, and it also was not my intent that these contradictions should be used as abstract categorical "cookie-cutters." I have accumulated several years of empirical work to examine contradictions *in situ,* many of which have involved coauthored work on family relationships with my colleague, Dawn Braithwaite (e.g., Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002; Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, & Olson, 2002; Baxter, Braithwaite,

& Nicholson, 1999; Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Braithwaite et al., 1998). Considered as a whole, these situated studies underscore that contradictions such as integration–separation have multiple strands of meaning that are constituted differently depending on the particular kind of relating under study.

My family-based work with Braithwaite also legitimates, in my mind, relational dialectics as a theory of family communication. Although it is gratifying to see relational dialectics cited by family communication scholars (e.g., Galvin & Brommel, 2000; Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999), I think it is important to underscore a basic difference between relational dialectics and systems approaches. Many systems approaches point to underlying oppositions that families, as systems, orient to sustain dynamic equilibrium (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987). Families, for example, respond to oppositions of differentiation and integration and change and stability (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987). Oppositions, however, are distinct from the contradiction-ridden dialogue envisioned by relational dialectics. As Altman et al. (1981) argued over 20 years ago, any dialectical approach is antithetical to a systems view because of the core systems concept of equilibrium. According to family systems theory (Klein & White, 1996), family systems orient toward equilibrium; that is, families engage in "error correction" designed to sustain themselves in a state of dynamic balance. Relational dialectics does not conceptualize relating (familial and nonfamilial) as an equilibrium-driven enterprise. Equilibrium presupposes a center. Instead, relational dialectics, like dialogism more generally, displaces the notion of a center with a focus on ongoing centripetal–centrifugal flux. There is no center, only flux. Equilibrium is a concept grounded in stability. By contrast, relational dialectics, and dialogism more generally, emphasizes change. Equilibrium is based on the logic of balance: when a system is out of kilter, or out of balance with too much of one opposition, the system corrects itself by restoring balance. By contrast, relational dialectics, like dialogism more generally, views balance as distinctly nondialogic. To engage in dialogue, voices interpenetrate one another and thereby constitute and change one another. Balance is merely a holding action in which two phenomena, or oppositions, coexist but do not interpenetrate.

AN AESTHETIC TURN, CIRCA 2000

Bakhtin (1981) viewed social life as a fragmented, disorderly, and messy dialogue of competing discourses. In this chaos, order is not given but a task to be accomplished (Bakhtin, 1990). Occasionally, parties can create a fleeting moment of wholeness in which competing fragments and disorder are temporarily united. These so-called aesthetic moments (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 67) create momentary consummation, completion, or wholeness in what is otherwise a fragmented life experience.

Moments of aesthetic wholeness are not to be mistaken with the almost mechanistic movement from thesis to antithesis to synthesis that characterizes Hegelian dialectics. In fact, Bakhtin (1986) was highly critical of Hegelian dialectics because of its mechanistic progression toward synthesis. Aesthetic moments are fleeting, not permanent. They are not the culmination of a thesis-to-antithesis progression, but are emergent occasions where the difference of opposition interpenetrates in ways that create a sense of coherence or wholeness.

Bakhtin's work (1990) emphasized aesthetic moments in which persons complete one another; this sense of completion is very close to what Buber meant by an "I–Thou" relation (Buber, 1958; for an extended discussion of Buber's I–Thou dialogue, see Cissna & Anderson, 1998).

Bakhtin's notion of the aesthetic moment was hinted at in the 1996 articulation of relational dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), but I am now flushing this out in more expansive ways. Montgomery and I noted that a relating self is not a preformed, autonomous entity; instead, self becomes in and through interaction with the partner. Further, we argued that relationships are close not because preformed selves are revealed but because the parties' selves are given shape through relating. I am currently attempting to understand better how this process of coconstruction of selves happens in relating (Baxter & West, 2003; Dun & Baxter, 2003). The complex interplay of similarity and difference plays an important role in this construction work.

In addition, however, I am broadening Bakhtin's focus on the consummation of selves to examine other kinds of aesthetic moments of relating. Relationship parties appear to experience several kinds of consummatory moments in their friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships, including the wholeness of temporal continuity with the past and with the future, the wholeness of a relationship forged out of distinct selves, and a sense of oneness with the flow of the conversation or with the immediate surroundings (Baxter & DeGooyer, 2001).

I have studied communication rituals for several years now, beginning with my work on dyadic traditions (Baxter, 1987). Rituals are repeating events in which parties pay homage to some object, often their relationship (Goffman, 1967). Rituals are powerful communicative events because they have the capacity to unite oppositions (Turner, 1969). I am now conceptualizing rituals as a form of aesthetic moment (Baxter, 2004).

Montgomery and I (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 65) articulated a number of kinds of "praxical improvisations," including two that we labeled *integration* and *recalibration.* These two praxical moves shared in common a fleeting moment in which oppositions were united in unique ways. I am now thinking of integration and recalibration as particular kinds of aesthetic moments. Both are fleeting events in which opposing discourses somehow complete, or consummate, one another. I also suspect that some of the turning points of relationship development are

transformational because they are experienced as aesthetic moments by the parties (Baxter & Erbert, 1999).

A TURN TO THE CARNIVALESQUE, CIRCA 2002

Bakhtin used the term *dialogue* in yet another sense, perhaps best captured in his work on the medieval carnival (Bakhtin, 1984b). Bakhtin's carnivalesque—the carnival sense of the world—is characterized by "mockery of all serious, 'closed' attitudes about the world, and it also celebrates 'discrowning,' that is, inverting top and bottom in any given structure" (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 443).

Although Montgomery and I attempted in our 1996 book to "discrown" dominant conceptions of communication and relationships, in which discourses of closeness, certainty, and candor were privileged and opposing discourses were muted, we did not place much emphasis in the book on the carnivalesque. Although I have continued to bring a carnivalesque eye to reconceptualize such processes as commitment (Sahlstein & Baxter, 2001) and social influence (Baxter & Bylund, 2004) along dialogic lines, the move to the carnivalesque also obligates scholars to adopt a critical sensibility and examine how it is in interaction that some voices (perspectives, values, ideologies) are centripetal centers whereas other voices are centrifugal margins. In short, a dialogue-as-carnival view focuses our scholarly gaze on matters of power in relationships.

I am just beginning to study relating as carnival, using the notion of reported speech as my analytic launching pad (Volosinov & Bakhtin, 1973). Reported speech is talk in which a speaker invokes the voice of another for purposes of co-opting it, eliminating it, or legitimating it (whether such legitimation takes the form of disagreeing or agreeing with it; Bakhtin, 1981).

SECOND-GENERATION RELATIONAL DIALECTICS, CIRCA 2002

I have recently articulated a "second-generation" iteration of relational dialectics (Baxter, 2004). The key difference between the first and second iterations of the theory is one of shifting figure-ground. First-generation relational dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) positioned the concept of contradiction at the centerpiece of the theory, with other dialogic elements occupying a more muted background. In contrast, second-generation relational dialectics positions the several meanings of "dialogue" with more or less equal footing—dialogue as centripetal–centrifugal flux, dialogue as utterance, dialogue as aesthetic moment, dialogue as a critical sensibility. Were it not for my desire to emphasize continuity between

the two iterations of the theory, I might be tempted to introduce the label *relational dialogics* to describe this second-generation iteration.

ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

I point to three major limitations in my work, which I seize as simultaneous challenges and opportunities for the future of relational dialectics. My work to this point has been too distanced from naturally occurring talk between relating parties. I have relied on partner talk in only one study (Baxter & West, 2003). Relational dialectics needs a firmer empirical base in talk between relating parties. I am currently collecting data with Erin Sahlstein on how discourses of "We" and "I" are interwoven in the talk between parties in marital, cohabiting, LDR, and established dating pairs. However, much more work is needed, drawing in particular on the methods of discourse analysis and conversation analysis. I do not mean by this suggestion that quantitative efforts should be abandoned—especially when frequencies, intensities, and patterns are questions of interest.

My work to date can also be critiqued for its simplistic emphasis on only two voices at a time. Although my narrative tale is about "two voices," future work needs to construct the narrative tale of "multiple voices" in centrifugal–centripetal flux. The term *opposite* is too easily understood as "binary opposite," when in fact, many discourses can be competing at once.

My work also has lacked a longitudinal focus. Relational dialectics is a theory of flux, yet I have only studied flux through parties' retrospective self-reports of dialectical change (e.g., Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Future research needs to study discourse through time, studying shifts and transformations in the dialogue of discursive voices.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Stories, as we all learned when growing up, have a moral to them. I close this story by making some "so what" observations that apply not only to relational dialectics but, I suspect, to most processes of theory development.

Moral Number 1: Theories Are Not Stagnant

Theories change and grow over time. I have described first and second generations of relational dialectics to mark major points of change in the theory, but the several turns I described in this story suggest that this theory has changed gradually. I suspect that most theory development is a process of gradual change.

Moral Number 2: Theoretical Coherence Is Often Retrospective

As I examine this essay, I realize that the development of relational dialectics seems too similar to the growth of a plant—seeds of development were there all along and just needed proper light and water to grow. Although I liked *A Tale of Two Cities* (Dickens, 1967)when I read it, I certainly didn't know at the time why I liked it, and its themes were not a "burning question" to which I sought answers throughout my career. Sense making, including the coherence brought to the telling of this tale, is almost always retrospective. I experienced the process of developing relational dialectics as much more chaotic than this tale constructs it to be.

Moral Number 3: Serendipity Plays a Larger Role Than We Would Like to Admit in Theory Development

Although I would like to claim that relational dialectics has evolved as the exclusive result of rationality applied to solving intellectual problems, my actual experience is one in which unforeseen, serendipitous events happen which in turn take thinking in new directions. Thus, although theory development is gradual, it's actually quite unpredictable.

Moral Number 4: Theory Development Is Not the Action of Autonomous Scholars

If you study my tale, you will see that others have been instrumental in helping me think through various theoretical issues. Certainly, a theory's impact depends on whether other scholars find it heuristic in rendering intelligible their own research questions. In Bakhtin's terms, theory growing takes place in the utterances between scholars, not in the actions of autonomous scholars.

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