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Introduction

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Theories, I have come to appreciate, are like living organisms. Growing a theory is a process akin to raising a child. A theory gestates quietly in a scholar's mind before it is birthed; it is presented to the world in the birth announcement of its formal articulation; it requires nurturance as it takes its initial steps into the scholarly conversation; and it ultimately establishes independence from the original scholar(s) who birthed it. Relational dialectics theory (RDT) was formally articulated in 1996 (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), and I have been blessed to witness the use of the theory by many researchers of interpersonal and family communication (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006b; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2008; Stamp, 2004). This book engages the RDT-informed research that has been published over the past decade and a half, embedding discussion of this work in an articulation of the next generation of RDT. A useful theory, after all, doesn't live off of its past. Theories are not static things; to stay alive, a theory must continue to develop and evolve. This latest articulation of RDT (which we might call RDT 2.0, but which I shall refer to hereafter simply as RDT) draws upon a richer palette of concepts than the 1996 statement of the theory. Like upgrades in computer operating systems, you don't need to be familiar with the 1996 statement of RDT to understand the current

articulation; however, the endnote to this chapter highlights the main differences between RDT 2.0 and RDT 1.0 for the interested reader.[1]

RDT is a theory of relational meaning making—that is, how the meanings surrounding individual and relationship identities are constructed through language use. It is inspired by the scholarly work of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote about culture, language, and literature from the 1920s into the 1970s and whose corpus of work has been labeled *dialogism* (Holquist, 2002). The core premise of dialogically grounded RDT is that meanings are wrought from the struggle of competing, often contradictory, discourses.

What's a discourse? Stated simply, a discourse is a system of meaning—a set of propositions that cohere around a given object of meaning. Let me illustrate the concept of a discourse with a simple example outside the realm of relating, drawn from Baxter and Babbie (2004). Suppose you are interested in what an apple means. Part of its meaning is captured by describing its attributes—its color (red, yellow, green), its size and shape (round with a diameter of about 3–4 inches), its taste (sweet or tart), and so forth. But the meaning of an apple doesn't stop here. Part of the meaning of an apple is its inclusion in the food group known as fruit. Part of the meaning of *apple* comes from understanding places where apples are grown, and in what seasons, and how they are grown and harvested. Part of the meaning of *apple* comes from understanding the various ways apples can be eaten—raw, cooked in an apple pie, and so forth. Part of what an apple means invokes beliefs about healthy eating ("An apple a day keeps the doctor away"). In short, the meaning of *apple* is pretty complex, consisting of many different propositions that collectively form a coherent web of meaning—a discourse—of appleness. All meaning making is similarly complex; the meaning of any concept is embedded in a larger web of meaning—a system of integrated bits of meaning.

RDT's core theoretical principle is that meaning in the moment is not simply the result of isolated, unitary discourses but instead is the result of the interplay of competing discourses. How do you know two or more discourses are in competition? Discourses are in competition when the meanings they advance negate one another in some way, more or less in a zero-sum manner. Thus, what an apple means in the moment when I walk into my kitchen and see one in the fruit bowl on my countertop is wrought from other discourses that might be circulating. For example, I might have just watched a TV program about the health dangers of pesticides used on apples, in which I was exposed to a discourse of healthy eating that excludes apples. I might have a memory flash of a recent conversation with a

friend in which I was exposed to a discourse on the latest fad diet in which apples are believed bad for you. I might be attending to a discourse of gratification in which I talk myself into having earned a piece of cake instead of a less desirable apple as a snack for completing some task. According to RDT, what something means in the moment depends on the interplay of competing discourses that are circulating in that moment.

But let's move to an example a bit closer to the domain of meanings of relevance to this volume—how relationships come to have meaning. Consider this excerpt from an exchange between two young adult males who told me that they had been the best of friends for the past five years. This excerpt comes from a much longer conversation in which they were asked to reflect jointly on their relationship while being tape-recorded:

B: Of course you know your habits are different than mine. They don't, they're not a problem in our relationship, at all. I mean, I don't know if a lot of people can say that about someone that they're good, you know, that they've hung tight with for five years, you know, and I guess that's the only reason why we have hung tight for five years is cuz we're not hung up on the trivial. It's not a problem for me.

A: The one thing I guess we do is argue.

B: Yes!

A: About trivial things. But in a comedic way.

B: Yeah.

A: You know, in a nonthreatening [way].

B: That's a good way to put it.

A: We get on each other's case about, like you know, anything.

B: That shirt you're wearing. You look like a fruit!

A: And then the voices start to raise and we're a little louder, things start to, you know, rage. But that's just, I think, a rare, rare, rare, thing among friends is that we argue for fun.

B: With no repercussions. Yeah, with no repercussions.

A: You can tell by the tone of the voice.

B: And people see us doin' that and have said, you know, humorous things to me like, "Oh my God! What happened last night, you and him were in a huge fight." "I don't know what you're talking about."

A: Right.

B: We were playing off each other. It's a game. It's like who can push each other farther, you know, without crossing that line.

A: And the line is never even crossed. (Baxter, Foley, & Thatcher, 2008, IV#5)

This excerpt, like any conversational slice we could choose, is rich in dialogic overtones—competing discourses. The pair is involved in constructing their relationship communicatively. In this particular segment, the opening utterance says that the two are different in their habits. The friend concurs in this judgment, noting a bit later that they argue over their differences. The rest of the excerpt can be read as an attempt by these two friends to regulate and contain their differences— to minimize them, to trivialize them, to make light of them by attributing them to part of a humorous game. But why do the friends spend so much interactional effort in positioning their differences as nonproblematic? Why don't they simply take note of their differences in habits and move on in the conversation to the next topic? A RDT-informed analysis might note that the discourse of friendship in mainstream American culture is built on a premise of similarity, not difference. The fact that these two friends have different habits and argue is an anomaly to themselves, and to others, as well, based on one of B's later utterances. The only way for the friends to make sense of this discursive struggle—a cultural conception of friendship based on similarity against the discourse of their best friendship in which the proposition that they have differences features prominently—is to minimize those differences. Ironically, the two reconstruct their differences of habit into a similarity—a similarity of style in the ability they share to read each other's intentions and to play the game. The two friends not only talk about their ability to take difference and argument lightly, but they perform it for themselves and perhaps for the benefit of me, the researcher-addressee who would be listening to the tape of their conversation. B appears to insult his friend's taste in shirts, and his friend ignores the insult, thereby demonstrating their ability to trivialize their differences.

The conversation also deploys another element in the cultural discourse of friendship—the proposition that each relationship is somehow unique and private only to its two members. The friends appear to relish the fact that outsiders often misunderstand their arguments and incorrectly infer that something is wrong between them. This apparent satisfaction in outsiders' misunderstanding adds to their construction of their friendship as "tight," further offsetting the fact that they have

different habits. Ironically, it is their realization of their differences—and how those are managed—that serves as the basis of uniqueness.

This short excerpt manifests two discourses, at a minimum, that are at play: (1) the cultural discourse of friendship in which similarity is expected and a given friendship is expected to demonstrate its unique and private nature and (2) the discourse of this particular A-B friendship in which difference is centered. The meaning that is made from the interanimation of these discourses is one that preserves the friendship's meaning as tight. By the end of the conversation, this pair celebrates their differences, but in a manner that simultaneously constructs an overarching similarity in the two friends in their mutual joy at the way they position their differences as a game to be played. Later in the book, we will encounter the concept of a transformational hybrid—a way in which seemingly competing discourses are somehow merged through their interplay in a way that achieves a both/and hybrid meaning. These two friends have arguably enacted a hybrid in the way these discourses interanimate in this conversation.

Notice that my brief analysis of this conversational excerpt focused on the interplay of competing discourses. I analyzed these utterances not as representations of the speakers' inner thoughts, motivations, and needs. Instead, I interrogated the utterances for the underlying systems of meaning—the discourses—that were animating the meaning that was constructed of the friends' relationship. Bakhtin (1981d) used the term *voice* to refer to any discourse (i.e., perspective, ideology, standpoint, or system of meaning) that was circulating in language use. The title of the book centers this concept and casts it in verb form to suggest that relationships achieve meaning through the active interplay of multiple, competing discourses, or voices. These discourses are given voice by speakers' utterances, but the focus is not on the individuals, per se, who speak them but on the discourses themselves and how they interanimate in talk. Thus, the book offers a theoretical understanding of how relationships (and individual identities in relationships) are constituted in communicative messages.

❖ **EVALUATING RDT AS A THEORY**

One of my foremost goals in writing this book is to better position scholars with guidelines for evaluating RDT as a theory, as well as evaluating RDT-based research. In particular, I have concerns with three important misunderstandings about RDT, which I hope to address over the course of the book. First, a number of scholars appear to

ignore differences among various dialectical theories, collapsing them together as if they were a unitary dialectical perspective (e.g., Sabourin, 2006; Segrin & Flora, 2005). As addressed elsewhere (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006c; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998), RDT is but one of several theories that holds membership in a broader dialectical family, and differences are substantial from one dialectical theory to another. RDT is unique in its explicit grounding in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. I will not elaborate on other dialectical theories in this book, because that has already been done elsewhere (e.g., Baxter & Braithwaite).

Second, a number of scholars have chosen to describe RDT as a model (e.g., Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2001) or perspective (e.g., Berger, 2005) rather than referring to it as a theory. The implication in these alternative labels is that RDT somehow falls short of theory status. Baxter & Montgomery (1996) readily admitted that RDT is not a postpositivist theory; that is, it is not a formal axiomatic theory of propositions and theorems designed to predict and causally explain an objective world. But they argued, it is still a theory. Turner (1986) wrote that "theory is a mental activity. . . . It is a process of developing ideas that can allow us to explain how and why events occur" (p. 4). Regardless of variations in types of theory, Turner further argued that theories have in common several basic building blocks: concepts, statements, and formats (p. 5). Concepts refer to abstract definitions of phenomena—features about the communicative world for communication theories—that are deemed important in the theory. The next chapter details the important root concepts in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, and in RDT as well, given its status as an appropriation of dialogism to interpersonal and family communication. Theoretical statements, and their grouping together into a theoretical format, provide a theory's claims about how concepts work. Taken together, a communication theory's web of theoretical statements—its format—helps us explain the communicative social world, or that subset of it targeted for theoretical understanding. Turner presented several different kinds of theoretical statements and formats, of which his articulation of the descriptive/sensitizing analytic scheme probably comes closest to capturing Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and, in turn, RDT. Descriptive/sensitizing schemes can be understood as

> loosely assembled congeries of concepts intended only to sensitize and orient researchers to certain critical processes. . . . [They] are typically more skeptical about the timeless quality of social affairs [than are positivistic schemes]. Instead, they argue that concepts and their linkages must always be provisional and sensitizing because the nature of human activity is to change those very arrangements denoted by the

organization of concepts into theoretical statements. Hence, except for certain very general conceptual categories, the scheme must be flexible and capable of being revised as circumstances in the empirical world change. At best, then, explanation is simply rendering an interpretation of events by seeing them as an instance or example of the provisional and sensitizing concepts in the scheme. (p. 11)

RDT, and Bakhtin's theory of dialogism more generally, is a descriptive/sensitizing theory. Its format consists of a set of basic concepts and theoretical principles that can be brought to bear in analyzing communicative life.

Third, RDT is often critiqued because it is regarded as too descriptive with an inability to predict and causally explain communicative phenomena (e.g., Miller, 2005). This criticism reflects a basic misunderstanding about theory. Theories come in different stripes and are designed to perform different work. The goal of RDT, and Bakhtin's dialogism more generally, is not prediction and causal explanation, as is the case with positivistic theory. Rather, its goal is to function as a heuristic device to render the communicative social world intelligible. The criterion to ask of such a theory is whether it helps the user understand some phenomenon beyond what common sense, and other theories, would tell us. Rather than the falsifiability criterion applied to positivistic theory—the belief that a theory holds merit to the extent that it is not challenged, or falsified, by empirical facts—a descriptive/sensitizing theory is evaluated by its capacity for heurism—its ability to be useful in assisting us in seeing things in ways different from what otherwise would be the case.

One of the ways a descriptive/sensitizing theory is heuristic is by providing a different framing of the phenomena of interest than what can be found in alternative theories or through common sense. Its theoretic framework directs our attention to different aspects or features of the phenomena, providing us with an alternative lens with which to see the phenomena. By way of previewing the remainder of the book, the next section summarizes the theoretical framework of RDT by discussing five different "seeings" afforded by the theory. This framework asks us to productively rework five important assumptions that characterize the dominant theoretical lenses to be found in the scholarly research on interpersonal and family communication. These reworkings are not intellectual "business as usual" ; instead, they challenge taken-for-granted assumptions with respect to five basic issues that characterize mainstream interpersonal and family communication scholarship: the false binary of public/private, the bias against uncertainty, the illusion of the monadic individual actor, the inattention to power, and the illusion of relationships as containers.

❖ REWORKINGS: ALTERNATIVE FRAMINGS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Reworking 1: The False Binary of Public/Private

Interpersonal and family communication scholars often presume a popular binary of public life and private life, which Gal (2005) argued has been foundational to Western political and economic theory since at least the eighteenth century. *Public* anchors places, realms and spheres in which "individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment" (Hauser, 1998, p. 86). It is the discursive place where society and culture are presumably located and where individuals assume a variety of social roles (e.g., worker, neighbor, citizen, and so forth). By contrast, *private* anchors the study of communication by interpersonal and family communication scholars: the privatized havens of individuality (over community), home (as opposed to work), sentiment (as opposed to rationality), and love (as opposed to money) (Gal, p. 25).

The public-private binary undergirds our very conception of interpersonal communication. In a highly influential conceptualization, Miller and Steinberg (1975) argued that communication is interpersonal when parties make predictions about one another based on individuated, psychologically oriented information as opposed to information about their social roles (e.g., bank clerk) or cultural roles (e.g., Asian American). On definitional grounds, in other words, interpersonal communication escapes from the public sphere into the private sphere. This scholarly tradition helps us to understand why psychologized approaches and perspectives have long dominated the interpersonal and family communication research (Baxter, 1998; Cronen, 1998).

Certainly, this tradition has produced a voluminous body of work over the past forty years. However, this accumulation has not been without cost. In particular, as Hawes (1998) has argued, the public/private binary has contributed to the trivialization of everyday relational communication relative to the presumed significance of public discourse. Public life, in other words, often has trumped private life among communication scholars in general. However, the position of RDT theory, and other social constructionist positions, is that sociocultural phenomena are constituted in the interactions of so-called private life as much as in the public discussions of the so-called public sphere. Sociocultural life is deeply relational. Although I choose to emphasize individual and relationship identities throughout the book, the theoretical implications of RDT extend to all types of meanings that emerge from the interplay of competing discourses. For example, when parties talk about the federal

government, they are discursively constructing this social institution, giving it life as "real" through their talk.

Just as sociocultural life is deeply relational, so relating is a deeply sociocultural process. Traces of sociocultural discourses lurk in every utterance voiced by relationship parties—whether in joint conversations with their relational partner, in conversations with third parties (including fellow social network members or even strangers, including interviewers), or in the inner dialogues of intrapersonal communication in a speaker's mind. The utterance chain of talk is riddled with the potential for multiple discourses, many of which circulate in the broader public domain we refer to as *society* and *culture*. Taken as a whole, the argument of the book is that the binary of public/private is a false one. Instead, I argue the dialogic position that public and private interpenetrate in the utterance chain. For too long, scholars have perpetuated the tidy compartmentalization of knowledge in which culture, society, and relationships (both familial and nonfamilial) have occupied discrete domains. Taken seriously, dialogically based RDT obligates us to think outside these categorical boxes to understand their interpenetration in the utterance chain.

Reworking 2: The Bias Against Uncertainty

Relationships are constructed through time, and parties must address issues of continuity and change in the meanings of the relationship-of-the-past versus the relationship-of-the-present. At a given point in time, the interplay of competing discourses runs the risk of what shall later be labeled *dialogic contraction*—a discursive playing field so unequal that all but one monologic, authoritative discourse is silenced. If a discourse assumes an authoritative voice, meaning can become calcified because no alternative meanings are allowed. At stake in dialogically contractive talk is certainty in the centering of dominant discourses, perhaps to the extreme point of totalizing monologue. By contrast, at stake in dialogically expansive talk is uncertainty as silenced or marginalized discourses gain symbolic footholds in the negotiation of meaning, or as all competing discourses are supplanted by transformative meanings such as the hybrid meaning illustrated above with respect to the similar-yet-different friendship of the two young men. But I don't like the term *uncertainty* because of its negative connotations in existing research and theory in interpersonal/family communication. I prefer the term *dialogic creativity.*

As noted elsewhere (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2009; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), existing work is biased in that certainty is viewed

as positive, whereas uncertainty is regarded as negative and something people seek to reduce (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Later scholarship on (un)certainty has embraced a more complex view in its recognition that uncertainty can be positive to individuals under certain circumstances (e.g., Afifi & Weiner, 2004; Babrow, 2001; Brashers, 2001). However, this later body of work—roughly glossed as the uncertainty management tradition (in contrast to the Uncertainty Reduction Theory of Berger and Calabrese)—still privileges certainty. As Baxter and Braithwaite (2009) have argued,

> Language use is not without tendency, thus it is significant to note that PIT [Problematic Integration Theory], UMT [Uncertainty Management Theory], and TMIM (the Theory of Motivated Information Management] are theories of uncertainty management, not theories of certainty management. Thus, the presumption is that it is uncertainty that requires management—sometimes managed toward reduction and sometimes not. The prospect that certainty requires management—including the possibility of reducing it—goes unconsidered. In this sense, extant theory and research still privileges certainty, while recognizing exceptions under which parties are not motivated to reduce it. (pp. 28–29)

By contrast, the position taken in this book is that dialogic interplay is, under conditions of dialogic expansiveness, indeterminate. That is, meaning making is an unfinalizable process—it is pregnant with potential for emergent meanings that have not been uttered before. This quality of surprisingness (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 37), dialogic creativity, is not possible except under conditions of uncertainty. Absolute certainty is a monologue.

Creativity has received scant attention by scholars of interpersonal/family communication. Those few who attend to creativeness tend to view it as an individual accomplishment of message production (e.g., Greene, 2008). The kind of creativity envisioned by RDT (and dialogism more generally) is not something achieved by the individual; rather, it is a consequence of intertextuality. It is an emergent meaning in which old discursive positions are somehow shaken up—either by altering the playing field with respect to which discourse is centered and which is relegated secondary status, or by transforming meaning more fundamentally through semantic synergy of some kind.

The critique of the bias against uncertainty is more profound than legitimating uncertainty. Existing work on uncertainty reduction/management operates with a presumption of a preformed self—that is, the view that an individual's identity is formed prior to the

interaction and becomes knowable to another through the individual's self-disclosive revelations as well as a variety of information acquisition strategies deployed by the knower (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975). By contrast, the dialogic self conceived in this book is always under construction through interaction with others who are different from oneself. The parties' various horizons of discursive seeing are brought into play with and against one another, and selves are shaped out of this discursive interpenetration. Thus, communication is conceived not as an information carrier through which already-formed selves can be known—the view represented by the uncertainty reduction/management tradition. Communication is a dialogic struggle, and out of this struggle identities are shaped. Of necessity, these identities are always indeterminate, fluid and fleeting in the interactional moment.

Reworking 3: The Illusion of the Monadic Individual Actor

Interpersonal/family communication scholars have generally presumed that a monadic individual is the analytic linchpin in studying communication. In a classic articulation of the place of the individual in communication science, Hewes and Planalp (1987) explicitly stated that there are two fundamental properties of communication—impact and intersubjectivity— that support the centrality of the monadic individual. With reference to impact, Hewes and Planalp asserted, "Perhaps no other property of communication is so commonly linked to its definition than impact. If person A's behavior affects person B's subsequent behavior or cognitive/emotive state, then communication has taken place; if not, then it has not" (p. 147). Thus, by their criterion, an adequate account of human communication must identify the mechanism(s) that generates the degree of impact that a person's behavior has on another. With respect to intersubjectivity, Hewes and Planalp argued that shared knowledge between interactants is necessary for communication. Impact and intersubjectivity are so foundational, argued Hewes and Planalp, that they "are properties against which any explanation of human communication can be judged adequate" (p. 149).

Of course, impact and intersubjectivity are not neutral criteria by which to evaluate any theoretical approach to communication, because they presuppose the centrality of the individual as the key to meaning production. These may be perfectly legitimate criteria by which to judge individually centered theories of communication, but they are biased against more socially oriented approaches, such as RDT. The very language of these properties reveals their bias. Impact is calibrated by the

extent to which one individual affects another individual's actions or inner states. Intersubjectivity presupposes preformed, intact subjects who can understand one another in varying degrees.

Both impact and intersubjectivity are subsumed in Deetz's (1992) property of effectiveness, which he argued has long been the dominant motif in mainstream communication research in general. With effectiveness as the dominant intellectual backdrop, it is hardly surprising to find that cognitively oriented work holds a place of prominence in current interpersonal/family communication research (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008a). Researchers focus on how autonomous individuals plan and then implement communication messages; the metric of effectiveness is the extent to which a speaker's goals are accomplished.

RDT eschews the individual as the centerpiece of relational communication, arguing instead for a move to the social, in which meaning is located in the "between"—that is, in the interplay between competing discourses. After a decade of engaging students and fellow scholars on this point, I am convinced that this decentering of the individual is the single most challenging aspect of RDT for people to understand. Let me summarize in the following core premises the argument elaborated throughout the book:

- A speaker's utterance is not a mere representational expression of his or her inner state but is instead an intertextual utterance chain.

- An utterance chain is a profoundly social phenomenon in which the words of the moment respond to prior utterances and address anticipated responses not yet spoken.

- A speaker's utterance, understood as an utterance chain, is always part of a larger dialogue; there is nothing autonomous about a speaker's utterance because it is always already embedded in a larger utterance chain.

- The utterance chain is the site where discourses—systems of meaning constituted in language use—are at play in constructing meanings of the moment.

- Identities (of individuals and relationships) are meanings wrought from the interplay of competing discourses.

- Because individual and relational identities are constructed in the play of competing discourses, they cannot be finalized prior to communication.

Thus, from a dialogic perspective, the selves in communication are not preformed, autonomous entities but instead are constituted in communication. Speaker identities are subject to the discourses animating language

use. As Deetz (1992) so eloquently put it, "The self is not independent of texts but always finds itself in them. Western linguistic conventions, however, name a subject, making the 'I' a possible object of concern" (p. 139). As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) observed, self as an autonomous monadic entity is a narrative that feels comfortable in mainstream U.S. society, but it is a narrative nonetheless. The monadic actor is a social construct that is produced from within a discourse of individualism, and it is reified as natural in mainstream U.S. communicative practices.

The focus of RDT is not on individual subjective experience. Certainly, discourses are voiced (in both said and unsaid ways) when individuals talk. However, the focus is not on the individual but on the discourses that are circulating in that talk. The goal is not to examine how one individual affects another (impact) or how two or more individuals come to understand one another (intersubjectivity). The goal is not to understand how an autonomous individual manages contradictory needs or how two parties achieve their goals through jointly managing contradictions. The theoretical and analytic quest is to understand how the play of discourses constructs meaning.

As such, RDT aligns itself much more readily with the alternative to effectiveness that Deetz (1992) advanced by which to determine the heuristic value of a communication theory: participation. In the context of the study of discourses, participation focuses on which discourses can be voiced in a given social moment, and by implication, which discourses are marginalized or silenced. True to its dialogic roots, RDT focuses on how meanings are wrought from the interplay of centripetal-centrifugal struggle, a question that squarely merits evaluation not by any effectiveness criteria such as impact, intersubjectivity, or goal accomplishment but rather by the criterion of participation, understood as the interanimation of discourses.

Thus, RDT scholars should be critiqued if they fall back on language in which competing discourses are presented as individual needs, because this presupposes a monadic individual. The interplay of competing discourses cannot productively be viewed as a matter of strategic management, as if competing discourses exist "out there," independently of communication, and toward which communication tactics are deployed in order to control the contradictory process. Competing discourses, like self-identities, are *of* communication, *not* outside it.

Reworking 4: The Inattention to Power

RDT positions issues of power squarely at the analytic center by taking seriously Bakhtin's concept of centripetal-centrifugal struggle. Power, in other words, is conceived as a relation between discourses.

Overwhelmingly, the RDT research to date has stopped the analytic project prematurely by simply identifying the competing discourses present in given texts, without examining their interplay. In taking the interplay of competing discourses seriously, it is difficult to presume that all discourses are equal in the play for meaning. In idealized dialogue, such equality of discursive footing is present. However, in everyday talk, a more likely scenario is that competing discourses are not equally legitimated. Some are centered (the centripetal) and others are marginalized (centrifugal). In the instance of monologue, all but a single totalizing discourse is erased.

This dialogic conception of power departs significantly from the conception that prevails in mainstream interpersonal/family communication. The mainstream approach locates power as a characteristic of individuals, not discourses. This is hardly surprising in light of the presumption in favor of the monadic individual discussed above. From this traditional perspective, power is a discretionary matter of scholarly interest: A scholar interested in studying power is free to do so (and many have), but a scholar need not feel required to study power. In short, from the traditional perspective, power-located-in-the-individual is but one of many potentially interesting variables worthy of scholarly attention. RDT makes it difficult to ignore power-located-in-discourse. Centripetal-centrifugal struggle is central to understanding the intertextuality of competing discourses, and thus the meaning-making process.

The centering of power in RDT may be off-putting to scholars who to this point have, for one reason or another, steered clear of critical approaches to interpersonal communication. In fact, Braithwaite and Baxter's (2008) content analysis of the interpersonal communication research suggested that only a scant 2.9% of research articles in communication journals from 1990 to 2005 were critical in orientation, a percentage only slightly higher in the research on family communication with 3.5% critical presence (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006b). Historically, both interpersonal and family communication have been dominated by research that is postpositivistic in nature, a set of assumptions to which the critical project is antithetical.

But not all critical perspectives are the same, and the critical stance articulated in this iteration of RDT does not locate power in individual subjects or in social groups. Instead, the focus is on how relating parties are subject to the competing discourses that animate their talk.

Reworking 5: The Illusion of Relationships as Containers

The title of this book, *Voicing Relationships,* underscores that when we give voice to discourses, their interplay creates relationships.

However, this view stands against the grain of mainstream interpersonal and family communication scholarship. The most common image of relationships in the interpersonal and family communication literature is still that of a container. Relating parties communicate within the container of their relationship, and different kinds of containers (friendships, long-distance relationships, marriages, etc.) can be compared with respect to how communication is enacted. Certainly, relating parties bring to a current interaction the definition of their relationship built up over a history of prior interactions; they do not enter a current interaction *tabula rosa.* These discursive traces are just that, and they are far from finalized. The view presented in this book is that relationships are not static things—containers—in which communication takes place. Rather, the position of RDT, like that of many social constructionist views, is that relationships are constituted through the communication practices of the parties. The unique contribution of RDT is to argue that the engine of meaning making is the interplay of competing discourses. Relationships are, then, meanings rather than contextual containers. They are constructed in communication, rather than being mere settings in which communication occurs. Rather than studying communication in relationships, RDT would have scholars study relationships in communication (Baxter, 2004).

However, RDT moves beyond the container imagery in a second, arguably more profound, way. Because talk is conceptualized as an utterance chain, all talk can be viewed as relational communication. That is, any utterance is part of a dialogue in which it responds to prior discursive utterances and addresses anticipated discursive responses of others. The discursive voices of others are with us in our talk. The very concept of an utterance, thus, is relational.

These five reworkings represent what is at stake in this volume. Taken as a set, they provide us with an alternative way to make sense of relating from that found in the mainstream interpersonal and family communication literature. The issue is not whether this alternative way of seeing is falsifiable but rather, whether viewing relating through the alternative theoretical framework of RDT is heuristic—does it help us to see interpersonal and family communication in new ways that open up alternative understandings compared to what is available through other theories and through common sense.

❖ OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The five reworkings that I have just previewed do not "map" in a neat and tidy one-to-one correspondence to the chapters that follow.

Instead, these reworkings infuse all of the chapters. So let me conclude this introductory chapter by providing you with a concrete map of the remaining chapters of the volume.

Chapter 2 provides an introduction to the life and work of Mikhail Bakhtin. It summarizes Bakhtin's work in chronological order, which is important because it was first made available to Western readers in almost a reverse chronological order and with a time lag of several decades. This chapter also introduces the key concepts in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which will be developed in subsequent chapters. The chapter also attempts to locate Bakhtin's theory of dialogism inside the broader intellectual conversation among scholars of interpersonal and family communication. In particular, I position Bakhtin's theory of dialogism according to its paradigmatic commitments and its social constructionist conception of communication. Finally, I position RDT within Bakhtin's dialogism project; many appropriations of dialogism exist throughout the social sciences and humanities, and each is somewhat different from the others depending on what is emphasized from Bakhtin's writings.

Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to the central dialogic building block of communication: the concept of the *utterance chain.* The Bakhtinian conception of communication is decidedly one of interdependence of messages, a concept others refer to as *intertextuality* (Allen, 2000). These chapters elaborate on the kinds of intertextual discourses that are voiced in a given utterance. We can imagine an utterance as a chain of prior and anticipated utterances, all of which have a foothold in the construction of meanings at the moment. The utterance chain adds complexity to scholarly understanding of communication.

In particular, Chapters 3 and 4 point to four specific discursive sites in the utterance chain where competing discourses can be identified. The first of these underscores that relating gives life to culture; when relationship parties speak, they invoke systems of meaning that circulate in the broader culture. The second discursive site emphasizes that relating is the interplay of the relational past with the relational present; in every utterance, relationship parties engage in the constitutive acts of reproducing the relationship's past system of meaning and creating a new system of meaning, as well. The third discursive site focuses on the Self-Other relation. In anticipating the partner's response, relationship parties enter the discursive dance of negotiating similarity to, and difference from, one another. The fourth, and final discursive site brings us full circle back to culture as relationship parties anticipate the evaluative reactions of third parties—both particular family members and friends and the generalized other of society—to the relational actions of the parties. This site draws attention to the clash of competing visions of the ideal.

Chapter 5, on centripetal-centrifugal struggle, centers the process of interplay. In the dialectically centered research, the notion of interplay has often been ignored in the focus on the mere coexistence of binaries. Researchers, myself included, have too often used RDT to identify lists of paired oppositions, without examining how those opposing discourses struggle interactively. The action sits in the struggle, and Chapter 5 takes a clear process approach, emphasizing various ways in which competing discourses struggle. This chapter envisions a continuum of struggle whose endpoints are monologue and idealized dialogue. As introduced above, monologue is the presence of an authoritative discourse so dominant that other discursive positions have been silenced if not eliminated. Idealized dialogue, by contrast, features the give-and-take of discourses that are positioned as fully equal in value. The vast majority of utterances are probably situated somewhere in the middle of this continuum, involving the interplay of multiple discourses, some of which are more valued or central than others as the Bakhtinian terms *centripetal* and *centrifugal* suggest (Bakhtin, 1981d). This chapter thus positions the concept of power centrally.

Chapter 6 concludes the book by formalizing a qualitative or interpretive method by which to analyze utterances dialogically. Over time, my own RDT-based research has become more qualitatively oriented and less quantitatively oriented. Although I still think that quantitatively oriented approaches are useful in attempting to make statements about frequencies and patterns, in the end they privilege an oversimplified conception of discursive struggle and seek to finalize what is inherently unfinalizable. I have struggled over the past decade with the traditional qualitative tool kit, attempting to identify an approach consistent with the RDT theoretical lens. The product of my current thinking on methodology is addressed in Chapter 6, where I present *contrapuntal analysis,* a specific kind of discourse analysis that is compatible with the tenets of Bakhtin's dialogic perspective. I conclude this chapter with a sample contrapuntal analysis to concretize the method for the potential researcher.

❖ ENDNOTE

1. I would draw the interested reader's attention to five interrelated differences between RDT 2.0 and RDT 1.0 as articulated in Baxter and Montgomery (1996). First, this articulation of the theory underscores that contradiction—the unity of opposites—is a discursive struggle, not a conflict between individuals, and not a psychological tension within an individual between competing needs or motivations. *Discourses* are struggling. Thus,

utterances are studied for the discourses that are given voice instead of being positioned as representations of speakers' inner thoughts and needs. To be sure, individuals can align their respective viewpoints with given discourses, but the objects of analysis are the discourses not the individuals. To mark the centrality of discourses to RDT, this volume will use such phrases as "discursive struggle" and "competing discourses" instead of the term "contradiction" which frequented RDT 1.0. Although RDT 1.0 argued that the individual was a narrative artifact of a discourse of individualism, this book makes that point with what I hope is greater consistency and clarity. Second, an individual's utterance is conceived not as a psychological phenomenon but instead as a social unit in which discourses that are already spoken are in play with anticipated responses from real or imagined addressees of the utterance. An utterance is thus reconceptualized from an isolated sequence of words uttered by a speaker—a turn at talk—to an *utterance chain* in which multiple discourses (some already spoken and others not yet spoken but anticipated) can be identified. The utterance chain is the framework used in RDT 2.0 to situate different kinds of discourses in play with one another. Although the concept of the utterance chain was briefly mentioned in RDT 1.0, it is given a central place in this latest articulation of the theory. One upshot of this conceptual move to the utterance chain is that competing discourses can rightfully be studied in the utterances of individuals—for example in interview settings or in diary records—not just in the conversations between relating parties. Individual and relationship identities are constructed whenever and wherever we have uttered language. Third, it is the *interplay* of competing discourses where the action sits—the interplay of discourses is how meanings are made. RDT 2.0 devotes substantially more attention than RDT 1.0 to the ways in which discourses can interpenetrate. Of necessity, this requires a closer attention to the details of language use than was provided in the 1996 articulation of the theory. As a consequence of attending more microscopically to the details of uttered talk, RDT 2.0 reworks the concept of praxis introduced in RDT 1.0. Fourth, competing discourses are rarely on an equal discursive playing field; some discourses are typically more dominant or more central than other more marginalized discourses. This discursive inequality draws attention to the issue of *power*, conceived not as something individuals have but as a characteristic of discourses. Although RDT 1.0 extensively used the term *centripetal-centrifugal struggle*, that articulation of the theory did not attend to the implications of discursive inequality inherent in the centripetal-centrifugal distinction. Fifth, and last, RDT 2.0 elaborates on a qualitative or interpretive method by which to examine the interplay of competing discourses, a method labeled *contrapuntal analysis* after a term first used by Bakhtin (1984b). The first articulation of RDT was more ecumenical with respect to methods, arguing that all methods were potentially valuable. This volume favors more qualitative/interpretive work, and formalizes a particular kind of discourse analysis that may prove helpful to future researchers.