

A relationship by any other name:

**Vocabularies for personal relationships
and the experience and expression of emotions**

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The following letter appeared in Ann Landers' (1996, p. 2E) column this past summer:

Dear Ann Landers:

I am a man in my early 60s, divorced and retired. My sister is in her late 50s and widowed. We go to bed together twice a week. This has been going on since her husband died eight years ago. Actually, when we were teenagers, we fooled around a lot but never had intercourse. This is not a love match, but it is sex, and good sex at that.

We both enjoy these escapades and they always produce a good night's sleep. No one knows about this, and no one is getting hurt. Or do you think we are fooling ourselves?

No Name, No City, Please

Dear No Name:

Sick, sick, sick. If I had your address, I would send you a get-well card.

You say no one is getting hurt? I disagree. While you and your sister are practicing incest, you are denying yourself the opportunity to have normal relationships. I am talking about marriage.

The fact that neither of you sees anything wrong with such behavior suggests a moral dead spot that is unnatural and revolting.

How is it that this brother and sister enjoy how they relate with one another, but Ann Landers finds their relationship "sick, sick, sick"? This paper looks at how people define their personal relationships and what type of experiences and emotions are considered (in)appropriate based on these definitions. Let's consider another example.

Pedro and Madelline consider each other friends. Pedro wants a closer relationship with Madelline than she wants with him, and spending more time together just hanging out, going to the movies, and eating together signifies a closer relationship to him. Madelline feels like she does not want to spend so much time with him because they are not romantic partners, but "just friends"; "I just don't spend this much time with a guy unless I'm dating him. I'd rather spend this time with my female friends," she states matter-of-factly.

One way of thinking about Madelline's experience is that spending more time together with Pedro would be inappropriate considering how she defines her relationship, specifically in this example with male friends. Assuming that she and Pedro were romantic partners, then she might consider spending more time together appropriate. What makes certain experiences and emotions appropriate in one relationship, but inappropriate in another? My argument is straight-forward: we can understand what experiences and emotions are considered appropriate for a given relationship

based on how that relationship is defined. To explore this argument more fully, it is helpful to understand what a definition is, how definitions are created, and how definitions change over time. At the same time I am discussing what a definition is, how it is created, and how it changes, we can understand that the same can be said for “a relationship,” because how people define their relationships is what “a relationship” is (Duck & Pond, 1989; Shotter, 1992).

Before we continue, it is important to emphasize that I am not limiting how people define their relationships to only explicit, verbally-stated pronouncements, such as “Our relationship is a friendship.” Although explicit, verbal statements are one way we can understand how people define their personal relationships, others exist such as: routine patterns of interaction (how long people talk with each other, what is [not] talked about, how it is talked about, etc.), relationship symbols (wearing a friend’s necklace, eating at a favorite restaurant, listening to a favorite song, etc.), significant experiences (birth of a child, losing one’s job, death of a loved one, etc.). All of these (and more) are ways people relate with others and are considered means of defining “a relationship.”

Understanding the creation of personal relationships as a process of definition

Three key terms are implicated in this paper as we attempt to understand the creation of personal relationships as a process of definition. All three terms are intricately interconnected and must be understood in relation to each other; these terms are definition, process, and creation. As one can trace any finger down into the palm of the hand and return back up another finger, we can begin our understanding of any one of the three terms and end up at the others as illustrated by the following statements: definition is a creative process; creation is a process of definition; and a process creates definitions. This section will briefly discuss each of these statements and then illustrate how all three can be understood in concert by introducing the concept of “relationship flow.”

Definition is a creative process

What *is* a relationship? The key word in this question is the verb “is” which brings us into the realm of definitions (Burke, 1966). A definition is the articulation of an essence (Burke, 1945). The essence or substance of a subject or an object is supposed to identify what that subject or object intrinsically is, what it is in and of itself. However, the root of substance and essence means a “standing under” or “support,” that is, something that is necessarily external to the subject or object. To speak of what something necessarily is (intrinsic), we must speak of what it is not (extrinsic). Kenneth Burke calls this the paradox of substance.

Every time we speak we are confronted with the problem of articulating everything in the universe. According to Burke (1966) in his discussion of “terministic screens,” although we need to utilize definitions in our language, we can not encapsulate everything in our definitions and we necessarily exclude things. When we define, we select one thing out of reality, thus necessarily deflecting other aspects of reality; the definitions we choose reflects the reality that we have selected.

When the two people in our opening interaction discuss being “in” a relationship, they implicitly refer to some kind of boundaries or limits so that certain aspects fall within these boundaries and certain aspects are excluded. This implicit reference exemplifies Burke’s argument in “terministic screens” (selection and deflection of reality) and the paradox of substance argument (to speak of what something is, we must also implicitly speak of what it is not).

How, then, is definition creative or generative? Let’s begin within an example. If Agnés defines her friendship as hanging out together and talking, with no explicitly sexual overtones, and then Agnés and Sally have a sexual experience with each other, they are confronted with a choice, a generative opportunity. Agnés can now say that sex is cool with friends, or at least with Sally (selecting a boundary that will both include and exclude sexual experiences), or she needs to re-define her relationship with Sally as say, romantic partners, assuming that this definition allows for sexual relations (of course another possibility might be that they never to speak to each other again, which

would also be defining of their relationship). The point is that Agnés' definition becomes unsatisfactory in light of current experiences (because of what it excluded, or deflected, in this case, sexual experiences with a friend), and she is thus confronted with choices (generative opportunities), two of which could be to define sex as part of friendship, or re-create her definition of her relationship with Sally with another name.

This is all to say that inherent within definitions is a creative process. We define our world, selecting certain aspects and deflecting others. Those aspects that are deflected are generative, or creative, opportunities that give rise to new definitions which strive to include that which was excluded, as well excluding certain aspects that were once included. This process is continuously going on and business can be considered always, already "unfinished" (Duck, 1990).

Creation is a process of definition

To say that "creation is a process of definition" is to argue that our discourse/language/definitions create, or constitute, experienced reality. The process of naming "defines what it is we recognize as constituting the world and our experiences in it" (Wood, 1992). Drawing on the writings of Mead (1934), Blumer (1969), and Spender (1984), Julia Wood presents "sexual harassment" as a compelling example of how naming constitutes reality. Wood argues that it is only in recent years that "sexual harassment" has been named. Prior to this time what we now refer to as sexual harassment happened frequently, but it was not experienced as such until it was spoken into a discursive reality and granted the cultural legitimacy that the process of naming, of definition, confers.

In their classic article "Marriage and the Construction of Reality," Berger and Kellner (1975) argue that "the reality of the world is sustained through conversation with significant others" (p. 219) and that "each partner's definition of reality must be continually correlated with the definitions of the other" (p. 224). Steve Duck (1990) echoes this concern for a focus on the importance of talk as a continual way of conducting the "unfinished business" of relating. Duck (1990) recognizes the "creative" functions of talk as something that "actually embodies the relationship and defines it" (p. 21). Gergen

(1988) adds to this perspective when he highlights the inherently social nature of discourse; that is, there is no reality independent of the discourse that constitutes it, and that this constitutive process is necessarily a “property of social interchange” (p. 40).

In light of the orientation offered thus far, we can understand that definition is a creative process and that the creation of reality is inexorably tied to a process of definition. Next, we will further explore the nature of processes by looking at how a process creates definitions.

Process creates definitions

A question the opening conversation broaches is, What does it mean for one to be “in” a relationship? Julia Wood defines personal relationships as “voluntary commitments that are constantly in process and marked by continuing, significant interdependence between particular individuals who are irreplaceable” (1995a, p. 6). One key aspect of this definition is the statement that personal relationships are always in process. Duck (1990) contributes to our understanding of this point as he speaks of relationships as “unfinished business.” By this, Duck means that relationships are continually changing and evolving, never remaining static; patterns that are created for how people relate with one another will be re-created and change over time (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Wood, 1995b). Duck and others (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Duck, 1990; Duck, West, & Acitelli, in press) offer a critique of existing research that views people “in” relationships. This “container” view of relationships “depicts relationships as monolithic entities passing along charted pathways and having a constant identity” (Duck, West, & Acitelli, in press, p. 25); this view represents relationships as static containers that individuals exist within and does not take into account the processual flow that characterizes human relatedness.

As an alternative to static views of personal relationships, Duck’s call for a more processual view (talking more about “relating” rather than being “in relationships”) impels relationship researchers to gain a fuller understanding of what a process is. Duck (1990, p. 18) defines processes as “transitions between states which are clearly recognized and easily *definable* end-points” (emphasis

mine) and identifies time as the essence of a process. Duck goes on to critique research on relationship processes as focusing too much on the end-points and not enough on the “movement that is continuous” between the end-points (p. 18). But to even talk about end-points is a deception. If a process is characterized by continuous movement and change, then there is really no “end.” For a fuller appreciation of the continual flowing nature of a process, we can turn back in time to pay a visit to the Sophists.

The Sophists believe that the world is in a constant state of flux, of pure experience. Our ability to articulate this experience is realized in a process of definition. Long before Burke, the Sophists saw definition as an attribution of a thing’s essence, that is, an expression of what a thing is (a positive) and what a thing is not (a negative). There is necessarily a process of exclusion in definition because the world is continually changing. The act of defining an experience can be seen as a deception for the Sophists because a definition masquerades as a complete capturing of a thing’s essence, that is, a certainty of what a thing is (and, always being both/and for the Sophists, what a thing is not). Due to the processual flux and inevitable exclusion within definitions, a definition does not capture everything that something is, that is, its essence. For the Sophists, deception is something to be valued as it represents an openness, an opportunity, a generative possibility, to the truth of “getting at” or capturing more of what is missing or hidden (the excluded portion) in the definition. Because a definition attempts to capture something which is in flux, definitions (language) must also be continually in flux.

If we understand the nature of a process to be continuous flux, then we are closer to understanding how a process creates definitions. Because we can not get around in our day to day lives amidst continuous change, we need to slow down this change; to slow down and make sense of the flux, we draw lines in the world as a means of boundary control. In short, we define the world. For example, when confronted with the challenge of trying to understand communication in its totality, we realize we

cannot do it. In response to this, we draw boundaries around those things that include what we will attempt to study and exclude all the other aspects. As we seek to understand different aspects, we re-draw the lines, we re-define our definitions.

The end-states to which Duck (1990) alludes are those parts that we recognize *only* because we have defined them. For example, in a model of relationship development, the various stages are recognizable because we have defined them and attached a label to them, a name. What we choose to label is dependent upon personal experiences, membership in social and professional communities, and cultural contexts. If we have different experiences, grow up within another culture, etc. we will draw the lines (name the stages) differently. Conversely, if we draw the lines differently, we will experience the flux differently. Burke (1945, 415) makes this argument in A Grammar of Motives: “In sum, one’s initial act in choosing where to ‘draw the line’ by choosing terms that merge or terms that divide has an anticipatory effect upon one’s conclusion.”

There is a sense, though, that one is stopping the flow when we define (although the Sophists are accurate in calling this a deception). Again, a definition posits an essence; “our relationship is a friendship”, this is what it *is*. However, this definition is really only decided “tentatively firmly,”¹ that is, it is a “working” definition, it will always, already change. Decisions are made only for the moment, and this is one meaning of the term “flowing definition.”

The argument presented in this section, then, is that because a process is characterized by continual flux, and that humans must have some way of making sense of this flux (ourselves being in flux and not separate from “it”), humans create flowing definitions (defined only for the moment) to get around in our everyday lives. Thus, a process necessarily creates definitions.

¹ The phrase “tentatively firmly” has been ripped off wholesale from Julia Wood.

“Relationship flow”: Definition, creation, and process in unison

A concept that unifies the terms definition, creation, and process is what I refer to as “relationship flow.” The term “flow” has been used by researchers to describe relationship processes (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), various sensations (e.g., the “flow” of optimal experience, being in the “flow”; Csikszentmihalyi, 1991), and states of existence (as in some Eastern thought). I use the term flow simply to connote the imagery of water *flowing*. This water is symbolic of the continual, fluid, ever-changing flux that the Sophists identify; for the purposes of this project, the water refers to a personal relationship. Water, such as a river, always flows in a certain pattern, but not necessarily towards any particular end-point nor does the pattern remain the same over time; it goes in the direction with that of its surrounding elements, such as land, rocks, and weeds. This pattern can be thought of as boundaries that simultaneously create the conditions to limit and enable the water to flow in that pattern. These boundaries refer to what I have previously discussed as a definition. When the land and rocks and weeds shift, so does the flow of the water; concurrently, the flow of the water over and around the weeds and rocks and land slowly erodes and affects them and changes the shape of the surrounding elements (a dialectical effect of relaters defining the relationship and the relationship defining the relaters). As the relationship and relaters change, the surrounding elements change, just as when the surrounding elements change, the relaters and the relationship changes. So then, the relaters and the definition (which creates, constitutes, bounds, limits and enables “a relationship”) are fluid and continually flow; that is, they are in process.

To describe a relationship as being in “flow” is not to say that patterns of relating are smooth and easy business, nor that it is always rapidly changing. Sometimes, the flow becomes stagnant (as in a pool of water), sometimes gentle, calm, and serene (like a babbling brook), other times smooth and consistent (like a steady stream), and other times rough and wild (like roaring rapids). The point is that whether the water is seemingly stagnant, steady, or rough, it is always flowing, even though we call it “stagnant,” “steady,” or “rough.” This is all to say that the flow is always occurring, it is always *doing something*.

One further point needs to be made regarding the personal, social, and cultural contextualization of the patterned definitions of relationship flow. The definitions and meanings available that the relaters can draw on are informed by personal factors (e.g., previous relationship experiences, familial background; Bartholomew, 1993), social standpoints (e.g., gender, race, class, sexual orientation; Kramarae, 1996; West, 1995; Wood, 1995b), and cultural meanings (e.g., what it means to be “a friend”; Duck, West, & Acitelli, in press; Mead, 1934). The definitions that a given culture, a social community, and personal experiences provide enable and constrain the types of relationships and ways of relating that people have generally available to work with. This is all to say that relaters and relationships must be contextualized in terms of personal experiences, social communities, and cultural meanings (Duck, West, & Acitelli, in press).

(In)appropriate experiences and emotions

Now that we have a framework provided by “relationship flow,” we can easily move to a discussion of (in)appropriate experiences and emotions in personal relationships. Taking the notion of boundaries that enable and constrain particular ways of relating, those experiences and emotions that fall within the boundaries are considered appropriate to the person-in-relationship, while those that fall outside of the boundary are considered inappropriate. Relationships (definitions of how people relate) do not remain static, however; they are continually changing – always, already flowing. Definitions of relationships are characterized by this dual nature of both a motion and a thing. That is, boundaries are created and we can talk about “a relationship” (as a thing) and these boundaries are also shifting (as a motion), including certain experiences and excluding others. So, what is considered appropriate at one point in time or in one space may be inappropriate in another space or time.

An example will illustrate this flowing nature of definitions. Mike and Kendra have been married for two years and Mike occasionally feels a sense of loneliness. Mike is having a hard time telling Kendra about these feelings because he has always heard from his family and the larger culture that being lonely is inappropriate in marriage. After all, one reason why he got married is so that he

would not have to feel lonely anymore. Kendra noticed Mike seemed unhappy and asked him what he was feeling. Mike reluctantly told her about his feelings and was surprised to find out that she occasionally experienced similar feelings. Each in some way was a little hurt that the other felt lonely in their marriage relationship; both felt that, by definition, being married meant that each partner satisfied all of the other's relational needs. Over time and many conversations later, they came to the joint realization that each could not fulfill all of the other's relational needs and that feeling lonely at times is natural and does not necessarily mean they have a bad marriage. Through these conversations, Kendra and Mike decided to (re)define their marriage relationship so that it could allow for these feelings of loneliness; no longer would they be considered inappropriate.

For another example, and as a way of summarizing some of the main arguments of this paper, let's revisit Ann Landers' (1996) column and No Name's relationship with his sister (let's call her No Shame). The relationship between No Name and No Shame is defined as siblings (definitions articulate what a relationship is and, necessarily, what a particular relationship is not). In the social and cultural contexts of No Name and No Shame, there are certain meanings ascribed to sibling relationships (relaters' personal definitions are informed by larger cultural meanings and social communities). In their culture, a sibling relationship is characterized by an incest taboo that limits, or more accurately prohibits, sexual experiences between siblings (definitions create boundaries that enable and constrain certain types of experiences and emotions). Although they "fooled around a lot" while growing up, they still think they may be "fooling" themselves that their sexual relations are acceptable (those experiences that fall within the boundaries of the relationship are considered appropriate for that relationship, while those that fall outside of the relationship definition are considered inappropriate). By having sex, No Name and No Shame (re)defined their relationship to include sexual experiences (people's definitions for their personal relationships constitute what "a relationship" is), although according to the larger social and cultural definition for a sibling relationship these experiences are inappropriate (the nature of any definition is always, already flowing, that is, it is never static; as definitions flow, the boundaries shift, and thus, so do what

experiences and emotions are understood as [in]appropriate). If the context in which No Name and No Shame grew up in named their relationship differently, for example, as lovers, then their sexual experiences could be considered appropriate and not “sick, sick, sick” (relational experiences and emotions are enabled and constrained, as constituted by a different definition, in a relationship by any other name).

This paper has provided some theoretical background, specifically from rhetorical theory, for the process of how definitions enable and constrain (in)appropriate experiences and emotions. By learning about how personal relationships are defined by their participants, we can more fully understand how experiences and emotions come to be considered (in)appropriate. The subsequent papers on this panel discuss two studies on the experience and expression of inappropriate emotions in the context of personal relationships; first, Sharon Varallo investigates the “inappropriate” feeling of loneliness within the context of intimacy and second, Kelby Halone examines the inappropriate experiences of deception and exploitation within friendships.

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