

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Papers in Communication Studies

Communication Studies, Department of

1-1998

Everyday Relating or “The Grout around the Tile” : Studying the Ordinary Aspects of Personal Relationships

Dawn Braithwaite
dbraithwaite1@unl.edu

Kathryn Dindia
dindia@uwm.edu

Valerian Derlega
vderlega@odu.edu

Mark Fine

Mark Leary

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/commstudiespapers>

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), and the [Other Communication Commons](#)

Braithwaite, Dawn; Dindia, Kathryn; Derlega, Valerian; Fine, Mark; Leary, Mark; Miller, Rowland; and Yingling, Julie, "Everyday Relating or “The Grout around the Tile”: Studying the Ordinary Aspects of Personal Relationships" (1998). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 124.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/commstudiespapers/124>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication Studies, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers in Communication Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Authors

Dawn Braithwaite, Kathryn Dindia, Valerian Derlega, Mark Fine, Mark Leary, Rowland Miller, and Julie Yingling

Published in *Personal Relationship Issues* 5:1 (January 1998), pp. 1–4.
Copyright © 1998 International Network on Personal Relationships.

Everyday Relating or “The Grout around the Tile”: Studying the Ordinary Aspects of Personal Relationships

Dawn Braithwaite, Kathryn Dindia, Valerian Derlega, Mark Fine,
Mark Leary, Rowland Miller, and Julie Yingling

Scholars across disciplines have emphasized the importance of everyday talk and relating in personal relationships (e.g., Barnes & Duck, 1994; Baxter, 1992; Cheal, 1988; Duck, 1994; Duck, Rutt, Hurst, Strejc, 1991; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Wood, 1995). However, researchers have tended to focus their inquiries on relational problematics and the “big issues” of relational lives (e.g., relational initiation, conflict, termination, turning points) rather than on the “stuff from which relationships are made”—everyday relating in personal relationships. Duck (1994) observed that “human beings face real, practical dilemmas in the conduct of their daily lives—not disembodied, lab-generated temporary dilemmas . . . but real issues they have to manage with real blood, real sweat, real tears, and real sleepless nights (p. 3). Julia Wood (1995) reflected that “In day-to-day conversations, people live out their relationships” (p. 231). She continued,

The fact that most talk in personal relationships is relatively unremarkable shouldn’t mislead us into thinking it is unimportant. Daily, mundane contact and connection between partners provides confirmation of their importance to each other, and it concretizes the reality of the relationship over and over again. Hence, the significance of everyday talk lies in its relationship level of meaning. . . . On the relationship level of meaning, commonplace conversation says, “I acknowledge you exist. know that you are there. You matter to me.” This is why routine talk contributes to intimacy. (pp. 231–32)

Clearly, everyday talk or everyday relating is an important venue for studying life in personal relationships, with the potential for providing great opportunities for scholars and practitioners. At the same time, studying everyday relating raises several significant challenges as well.

Background

In answering the call to explore everyday aspects of personal relationships, we planned a thematic symposium for the 1997 INPR [International Network on Personal Relationships] conference in Oxford, Ohio, titled, "Everyday Relating: Studying the Ordinary Aspects of Personal Relationships." We brought leading scholars together to facilitate discussion groups to explore how this diverse group would respond to the call to focus research attention on everyday relating. We asked the participants to consider: "How should we approach and study everyday relating in personal relationships?" We gathered panelists representing diverse disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and research methods. Panelists shared their perspectives and led discussions on three questions: (a) what aspects of everyday relating should we study, (b) what theoretical perspectives might we employ to study everyday relating, and (c) what research methods might we use to study everyday relating?

Discussion groups were facilitated by Graham Allan, Valerian Derlega, Kathryn Dindia, Steve Duck, Mark Fine, Stanley Gaines, Mark Leary, Rowland Miller; Julia Wood, Paul Wright, and Julie Yingling. As evidence of the fertile nature of this topic, it was evident that these groups covered a wide range of thoughtful and important issues, perhaps raising more questions than they were able to answer. In this essay, we attempt to summarize the results of this symposium, hoping that it is not an endpoint, but a continuation of a dialogue begun by others before us.

Insights from the 1997 Panel

As we began to synthesize and report on the discussions, we realized that the discussions focused on four topics (rather than the three questions we had given groups to discuss): (a) what is everyday relating? (b) why study everyday relating? (c) what are important aspects of everyday relating to study? and (d) methodological considerations.

What is everyday relating?

Everyday relating is pervasive, it occurs every day. At the same time it goes unnoticed and is considered unimportant. Perhaps it goes unnoticed and is considered unimportant because it is so pervasive, the cliché of not noticing the forest for the trees. Perhaps it goes unnoticed because it is routine rather than strategic. One group concluded that everyday relating involves interacting and behaving in ways that are not as planned, conscious, and systematic as some other kinds of relating. Thus, everyday relating may be more "natural" and "unforced" than more deliberate types of relating. Someone used the analogy that everyday relating is "the grout around the tile."

Clearly, all of the groups agreed that everyday talk and relating is important in personal relationships. In fact, some of the groups established its importance by contrast, noting that people deprived of everyday talk in their relationships find they miss it. Several groups cited the example of people in long-distance relationships: When asked what they miss about a long-distance partner, people often report missing these mundane sorts of encounters. According to one group: "Everything important to relationships is mundane."

Interestingly, groups used a variety of phrases to talk about everyday relating: "mundane," "ordinary interactions," "everyday talk," "routine relating," "commonplace conversation," "minute-to-minute relating," and "routine talk" were among them. In the group discussions and in the discussion that occurred as the whole group came together, we observed that participants went back and forth in their usage of these phrases.

Several groups questioned the wisdom of using terms like "mundane" to represent this type of interaction, as they felt these terms were pejorative and had negative connotations. One group sounded a cautionary note about telling others that we are studying "mundane" topics and "everyday relating," which might threaten our accountability as academics, as we are expected to deal with "bigger" issues.

Why study everyday relating?

As the group discussions ensued, many reasons for studying everyday relating were discussed. One group reiterated that we seem to spend most of our lives in "mundane, seemingly trivial encounters," yet researchers have largely ignored this type of interaction. Another group felt that everyday relating provides a context for study that looks mundane, but in which many "nonmundane" and very important relational action and interaction takes place. They gave as an example a couple talking in bed at night. They may talk about seemingly trivial issues such as who paid the electric bill and/or what happened at work that day. How the couple interacts during this activity of getting ready to go to sleep may also symbolize and reinforce a sense of intimacy. Thus, studying everyday, ordinary social interaction can be a focal point for understanding how close relationships are enacted.

Several of the groups concluded that another advantage of studying everyday relating is that, if the researchers are successful in their attempts to study it, these encounters provide more naturalistic encounters, allowing researchers to see "between the lines" of what people say or what they do when given a chance to behave in very systematic and controlled ways. Thus, everyday encounters allow researchers to overcome limitations of the laboratory or paper and pencil measures. One group explained that everyday relating involves dynamic adaptation that is ordinarily gradual and unnoticed, a "weaving of the fabric." Finally, groups expressed that studying everyday talk allows researchers to study hierarchy and power in relational life.

Important issues for study

This was the topic discussed in most depth by the groups. One group cautioned that scholars may have studied everyday relating more than we realize, perhaps not referring explicitly to "everyday talk" or "everyday relating" by name. One group gave as a research exemplar Dreyer and Dreyer's (1984) study on dinner time in middle-class families with

small children. Other examples include research on children's game playing and studies in interpersonal synchrony.

Another group began by reminding us that studying everyday talk is useful because it highlights many different types of relationships beyond those dyadic relationships we routinely study (e.g., romantic and marital). For example, they pointed out that we need to study everyday relating in collegial, sibling, and friendship relationships.

In a related point, participants stressed that we need to move beyond examinations that focus on dyadic relationships to view personal relationships embedded in larger webs of social relationships (e.g., Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Duck, 1993). As stated by one group participant, "one important aspect of everyday relating that isn't often reflected in relationship scholars' theories or research is the degree to which interactions within the husband-wife dyad tell us something about interactions in a myriad of other relationships." We cannot afford to view the dyad in a vacuum; the dyadic relationship occurs in a context that involves many more than just the two relationship partners themselves. This is especially true for married couples who have children at home. Most of their interaction is not dyadic; it involves other members of the family and sometimes the family as a whole.

One group highlighted two important functions of everyday relating worthy of study. First, they discussed the affirmation function of this type of talk, such that everyday talk affirms the "bond between people." In contrast, this type of relating may be noted most in its absence: when such behaviors disappear, people begin to question the other person's interest in the relationship. Any particular mundane behavior (or its absence) may have little effect, but they are "cumulatively impactful" over time. A second function of everyday relating is that it helps to affirm the individuals' social acceptability . . . people derive certain psychological benefits from the mere fact that others choose to interact with them at all, irrespective of the content of the encounter. Many instances of everyday relating may involve mutual "belongingness endorsement."

Other groups discussed the need to expand the study beyond verbal manifestations to study nonverbal symbols and metacommunication. Nonverbal behaviors are important to study because they often operate outside of one's consciousness and it is hard for outsiders to observe and interpret them. In a related comment, one group discussed the importance of studying relevant aspects of the physical environment, which provides a context or setting in which ordinary interactions occur, and which, in turn, can influence relationship outcomes.

Another issue raised was the need to study a wider variety of emotions of everyday relating, going beyond the current focus on love. The point was made that we need to study a range of everyday emotions more fully; love tends to receive the majority of scholarly attention, but other emotions deserve more study.

Finally, several groups noted the necessity of studying power and hierarchy within everyday encounters. One group pointed out that everyday relating may go unnoticed and simply reify current power structures. Those with more power may have less of a need and less pressure to modify their behavior in a variety of different types of situations. They have the power of being able to act "themselves" to a large extent. Those who are marginalized may have less power over this.

This same group also discussed the effects of different social systems of everyday relating: How do race, social class, age, sexual orientation, and gender affect minute-to-minute relating? Different groups of people interact and relate in similar and different ways from each other, but, in addition, we need to take into account that some individuals, by nature of their particular social location (e.g., white, heterosexual, middle-class male) have more power than others, and these power differentials affect everyday relating. The group pointed out that everyday relating is very important to feminist analysis. Several groups discussed the need to study these issues, and feminist theory and critical theory were suggested to help bring these issues to light.

Methodological considerations

The groups spent considerable time talking about how to study everyday relating. They cautioned about self-report versus actual behavior in these encounters as well as issues of the researcher as “insider” and “outsider.” Research methods that were suggested by the groups included:

Recording methods:

Diary research
Iowa Communication Record
Beeper studies/time-sampling procedures

Observational methods:

Ethnographic studies/naturalistic observation
Intensive interviews
Videotaping or audiotaping actual interactions
Narratives
Discourse analysis

Finally, groups suggested sites or contexts for studying everyday talk. Several groups suggested studying long-distance relationships, looking at how these relational partners replaced the opportunity for everyday talk in their personal relationships. Participants also suggested email documents/chat rooms/exchanges and films that depict everyday relating (e.g., “Harry and Tonto”).

Conclusions and Future Directions

Participating in the small group discussions on everyday relating was invigorating, as was reflecting on and summarizing these group discussions. Many of these ideas are not new; they have been proposed by others before this panel. However, we hope we have exponentially multiplied the critical mass of those calling for the study of everyday talk in relationships. Of course, it is easy to talk about the importance of studying everyday relating and then to continue to study strangers getting to know each other or married couples resolving conflict in the lab. The hard part will be conducting research on everyday relating. Hopefully the INPR panel on Everyday Relating and this article will remind people of

the importance of such research. We are proposing a follow-up panel on everyday relating for the 1998 INPR conference in which several research exemplars on everyday relating will be read (before the conference) and discussed at the conference as models for future research. Duck (1990) stated that relationships are “unfinished business.” So is relationship research.

References

- Barnes, M. K., & Duck, S. (1994). Everyday supportive contexts for social support. In B. R. Burleson, T. L. Albrecht, & I. G. Sarason (eds.), *Communication of Social Support* (pp. 175–194). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Baxter, L. A. (1992). Forms and functions of intimate play in personal relationships. *Human Communication Research, 18*(3), 336–363.
- Braithwaite, D. O., & Baxter, L. A. (1995). “I do” again: The relational dialectics of renewing marriage vows. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 12*, 177–198.
- Cheal, D. (1988). The ritualization of family ties. *American Behavioral Scientist, 31*, 632–643.
- Dryer, C., and A. Dreyer (1984). Family dinner times as unique behavior habitat. *Family Process, 12*, 291–302.
- Duck, S. (1990). Relationships as unfinished business: Out of the frying pan and into the 1990s. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 1*, 5–29.
- Duck, S. (ed.) (1993). *Social Context and Relationships*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Duck, S. (1994). *Meaningful Relationships*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Duck, S., Rutt, D. J., Hurst, M. H., Strejc, H. (1991). Some evident truths about conversations in everyday relationships: All communications are not created equal. *Human Communication Research, 18*, 228–267.
- Leach, M. A., & Braithwaite, D. O. (1996). A binding tie: Supportive communication of family kinkeepers. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 24*, 200–216.
- Wood, J. T. (1995). *Relational Communication: Continuity and Change in Personal Relationships*. Belmont CA: Wadsworth.