

EDITED BY

STEVE DUCK
JULIA T. WOOD

CONFRONTING RELATIONSHIP CHALLENGES

UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIP PROCESSES SERIES
VOLUME 5

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Series Preface

This short series, *Understanding Relationship Processes*, responds to recent calls for attention to processes in relationships. A close look at the nature of processes in relationships will reveal that, over and above the importance of change, temporality, and an orientation to the future, there lies beneath most process thinking on relationships the implicit notion of competent use of knowledge across time. For example, this assumption is true of many elements of the work on relationships, such as the (competent) transition to marriage, (skilled) conflict management, (appropriate) self-disclosure, and (orderly) organization or (satisfactory) maintenance of relationships diachronically. The assumption also is contained in any discussion of intimacy assessment or creation of “a couple” (by which authors evaluate, usually implicitly, the degrees of intimacy or progress that are adequate, allowable, suitable, or competent) and is latent in discussions of relationship breakdown where researchers treat breakdown as failure or incompetence, contrasted with skill or competence.

Such competence is evident in, and constrained by, a variety of influences on behavior. In focusing on some of these topics, this series moves conceptually outward; that is, the series began with the contributions of individuals—and their developmental experiences—to relationships and moved toward social context and interpersonal interaction. Individuals bring into relationships their individual characteristics and factors that reflect their point in the life cycle and their developmental achievements. Individuals are influenced by the social settings (situational, cultural, linguistic, and societal) in which relationships take place; they are constrained and influenced by the structural, transactional, behavioral, and communicative contexts of their relationships; and they sometimes conduct relationships in dysfunctional environments or disrupted emotional contexts. The series takes these contextual themes in sequence and deals with the latest research and thinking to address these topics.

Accordingly, each volume focuses on a particular context or arena for relationship activity. The volumes of the series are as follows:

Individuals in Relationships. Volume 1 deals particularly with the ways in which internal or intrapersonal context is provided by structures of the mind or of knowledge that are prerequisite to success in relationships; however, rather than focusing on such things as if they were the end of the story, the chapters place such knowledge styles and structures in context by referring frequently to *behavioral* effects of such structures.

Learning About Relationships. Volume 2 covers especially the skills and experiences in childhood that lay the groundwork for competence as a properly functioning relater in adult life; the volume emphasizes the wide range of social sources from which development of competence is derived and the richness of the social sources from which developing minds acquire their sense of relationship competence.

Social Context and Relationships. Volume 3 focuses especially on the social structural constraints within which relation-

ships are located and the ways in which the two partners must negotiate and deal with the dialectical and interior pressures that are created by such contexts.

Dynamics of Relationships. Volume 4 deals with the dyadic management of relational conduct in the context provided by the earlier volumes and explores the issues of competent relational management that are created by the transactions of relating—not the factors that influence or prepare the ground for relationships, but the actual *doing* of them.

Confronting Relationship Challenges (Steve Duck & Julia T. Wood, coeditors). Volume 5 turns the series toward the difficult side of relationships and away from any implication that relationships are only good and delightful. Relationship processes encompass “binds” as well as “bonds” (in Wiseman’s [1986] elegant play on words), and both must be included in an understanding of relationship processes.

Under-Studied Relationships: Off the Beaten Track (Julia T. Wood & Steve Duck, coeditors). Volume 6 recognizes and begins to rectify existing scholarship’s tendency to focus on only particular types of relationships and particular issues in relationships, and thus to ignore or underacknowledge the range of real-world relationships and the myriad processes they entail. A full understanding of relationship processes must include consideration of theoretically inconvenient and/or socially disfavored instances as well as instances (or phenomena) whose value and importance traditionally have been acknowledged in research.

STEVE DUCK

Volume Preface

The first two volumes in this series, *Understanding Relationship Processes*, outline the contribution of individual knowledge to the conduct of relationships, whether from the point of view of cognitive structure or of the learning that takes place in childhood. The next two volumes explore the relational contexts provided by, respectively, various external, nonindividual, and nondyadic influences, and by interior, dynamic, transactional processes. Volume 3, *Social Context and Relationships*, focuses on contexts provided by various social, cultural, structural, and network processes. Volume 4, *Dynamics of Relationships*, focuses on the sense in which specific relational behaviors are located in *sequences* and in partners' continual accommodations to one another.

The present book, *Confronting Relationship Challenges*, Volume 5 in the series, moves us toward a different set of issues—that is, what can go wrong with relationships or what can make them troublesome. The consistent attention to values, benefits, and joys of relationships, coupled with scant attention to prob-

lems, challenges, and costs of relationships, has cultivated a body of scholarship that could be interpreted as suggesting relationships are unreservedly good things. Writers have indicated the benefits and blessings of relationships, the fact that they are close and supportive, and the evidence showing that we all regard them as central to our lives and happiness. However, that pleasantness has another aspect. That which can be pleasing can also deny pleasure; that which can be supportive can fail to provide support; that which can generate happiness can also prompt pain and, indeed, suffering.

The contributors to the present volume consider some of the ways in which relationships provide us with challenges. Not all aspects of relationships are good, even when the relationships are close, and some require considerable skills of management and tolerance. Relationships involve shame and anger as well as joy and love, acts of betrayal or letting down as well as displays of commitment. In addition to challenges within relationships, everyday irritations from outside relationships can also seep in to tarnish our connections with other people. And within relationships themselves there are dynamics that can create tension, resentment, and disappointment from time to time.

As well as looking at such aspects of relationships, the chapters in the present volume make the subtler point that relationships themselves are not simple positive/negative, black/white, good/bad, competent/challenging things. Many relationship experiences are an oxymoronic mixture of elements (love/hate, for example, or the sweet sorrows of parting). An obvious example is the fact that pain as well as growth can result from conflict. Furthermore, several aspects of relating are not self-evidently positive or negative, but may appear in the light of later occurrences to have been mixed blessings or perhaps the reverse of what participants first interpreted (or understood) them to be. Finally, retrospection may select and selectively edit different aspects of relational events as characteristic of those events, so that positivity is transformed into negativity, and vice versa.

This volume and this series thus challenge any appearance that relationships consist of single interactions devoid of contexts, unitary experiences devoid of nuance and reformulation,

or developments that are not transformative of meaning. Relationships are more than mere sequences of behavior or cumulations of individual acts; they gain their existence from the meanings of such sequences and cumulations—and the human processes of creating and sharing meaning are both complex and continuous (Duck, 1994a). In investing activities and communication with dynamic continuity, partners in relationships create a context within which to comprehend their connectedness to one another and to confront the challenges it brings.

In Chapter 1, Duck and Wood assert the importance of exploring both rough and smooth contexts of relationships and of considering how partners manage the two elements together to produce a sense of the relationship's character. Unpleasant relational experiences are important for the development of sound *theories* that should be able to account for negative relational experiences, recognizing them as common human experiences that are as fully part of relationships as are positive experiences. The combination of positive and negative experiences creates the wholeness that most people experience in their relationships.

Retzinger opens Chapter 2 by noting that quarrels are common in personal relationships. She then explores the role of anger and shame in the conduct of everyday relationships. Taking the view that conflict is a response to a lapse in the social bond and the emergence and handling of shame and anger, Retzinger seeks to fulfill the mission of the present volume by focusing on these processes that underlie conflict in personal relationships. She argues that when persons interact in conflict there are exchanges of meaning. Meaning is intricately tied to the bond between the individuals, the manner in which they communicate, and the emotions expressed and exchanged. As a result, some kinds of interaction may be more prone to conflict than others. Retzinger argues that if the role of emotions and meaning in conflict can be described, we may have a better understanding of how relationships are built, maintained, damaged, and repaired.

In Chapter 3, Wiseman and Duck deal with a common relationship that receives virtually no research attention, that of

enemies. Just as people have friends, they have enemies, antagonists, and opponents who try to make their lives more difficult and who interfere with their attainment of goals. Enemies are not merely conceptual abstractions, but persons who actively interfere with the processes of social life. They represent a particularly important and interesting relationship challenge for ordinary folks and also offer students of social relations some important theoretical challenges. Enemyship is a distinctive type of relationship that most existing theories of relationships are quite unable to explain. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that, far from being simple opposites, friendship and enemyship have a certain number of important similarities; however, they also have some distinctly different dynamics. For example, whereas mutual acknowledgment is a *sine qua non* of friendship, a feature of enemyship in many cases is its unacknowledged character—and *that* needs management.

Coleman and Ganong focus in Chapter 4 on the challenge of reconfiguring a “family” after divorce. Pointing out that the traditional model of “the family” overlooks a number of possible alternative structures that have recently come to prominence, the authors consider the comparisons between revision of parents’ and children’s roles in a family and between the processes that occur when two adults reconceptualize themselves and their roles after divorce. Coleman and Ganong indicate that the emotional challenges of reconfiguring a family are compounded by various institutional insensitivities that add to the difficulties of reconfigured families. This leads them to recommend that scholars develop models that contribute to the more complete institutionalization of postdivorce reconfigured families.

In Chapter 5, Wright and Wright assert that it would be most useful to shift the currently dominant focus on the relational challenges represented by codependency as a personality syndrome to codependent relating as a process that emerges and persists within a particular kind of personal relationship. They point out that a process view is implicit, if not explicit, in most present-day approaches to codependency treatment. These approaches emphasize the necessity of the codependent’s altering

her or his pattern of relating to the “dependent” in order for any personal or relational change to occur. One implication of the proposed model is that codependent relating is not likely to surface apart from an appropriate “mix” of personal and situational influences. Those influences include the self-attributes of not one, but two individuals, whom we label as a “codependent” and a “dependent.” Wright and Wright thus offer an exciting new—relational—way to conceptualize the codependency challenge.

In Chapter 6, West explores the particularly dark challenge of relationship violence through the lens of an ideological analysis. Taking the view that ideology is built into the way in which we all conduct our relationships and also shapes the contexts and partners’ options within those contexts (compare Volume 3 of this series, *Social Context and Relationships*), West presents the case that an ideology of “normal” family structure and the relative power of men and women pervades the ways in which violence in relationships is treated. Presenting evidence that various cultural institutions are ideologically invested in supporting a family structure in which some relational partners are seen as the “property” of other people, West indicates how such contexts affect those persons who are the victims of violence in relationships.

Bowen and Michal-Johnson consider in Chapter 7 one of the most pressing social challenges of the present age: HIV/AIDS. They examine three specific high-risk relational situations that militate against individuals’ protecting themselves against HIV/AIDS: alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and relationship violence. Their treatment of each of these contexts is consistent with this series’s focus on processes, as they specifically concentrate on the personal and interpersonal processes that increase or decrease the HIV risk of sexual activity. Just as this particular volume challenges many of the assumptions that underlie traditional understandings of relationship goals and behaviors, Bowen and Michal-Johnson ask us to consider how HIV risk challenges traditional assumptions about relationship processes.

In Chapter 8, Lyons and Meade develop an analogy between the remodeling of a home and the changes that take place in a

relationship when one of the involved persons develops a serious chronic illness. They ask what relational adaptations are necessary to accommodate to the physical problems and what challenges the partners particularly face in coping with such adaptations. Lyons and Meade offer an intriguing interpretation of some of these changes in terms of dialectical theory and stress the paradoxical unity of competing forces in the relationship that are brought about by the illness and its management.

In the final chapter, Harvey, Barnes, Carlson, and Haig discuss the impact of memories on the process of grieving and the effects of bereavement as these experiences affect the survivors of the deaths of loved ones and how those deaths have affected them over a period of time. The authors discuss the idea of being "held captive" by memory, as both a positive and a challenging experience for the survivor. Because such memories constitute an important context for the continued life of the surviving person, the memories construct and shape not only feelings about the dead loved one but also the survivor's experience of everyday life. Another topic of the analysis is how habits connected to interaction with dead loved ones also may exert continued power over the bereaved person.

Together, the chapters in the present volume add considerable depth of perspective to our understanding of relationship processes by indicating the dynamic crucible in which amalgamation of the everyday-life routines and forces of communicative, psychological, sociological, and developmental influences takes place. They thus follow up on the argument implicit in the third and fourth volumes of this series, that relationships have many sides that are lived by the participants in contexts, not merely "outcomes" produced by cognitive states or relational history. Relationships are constructed and forged by real human beings facing everyday dilemmas and dynamically wrestling to construct meaningful interpretations of themselves, each other, and their relationships as all evolve and interact in continually changing contexts.

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Contents

Series Preface <i>Steve Duck</i>	vii
Volume Preface <i>Steve Duck and Julia T. Wood</i>	xi
1. For Better, for Worse, for Richer, for Poorer: The Rough and the Smooth of Relationships <i>Steve Duck and Julia T. Wood</i>	1
2. Shame and Anger in Personal Relationships <i>Suzanne M. Retzinger</i>	22
3. Having and Managing Enemies: A Very Challenging Relationship <i>Jacqueline P. Wiseman and Steve Duck</i>	43
4. Family Reconfiguring Following Divorce <i>Marilyn Coleman and Lawrence H. Ganong</i>	73
5. Codependency: Personality Syndrome or Relational Process? <i>Paul H. Wright and Katherine D. Wright</i>	109
6. Understanding How the Dynamics of Ideology Influence Violence Between Intimates <i>James T. West</i>	129

7. HIV/AIDS: A Crucible for Understanding the Dark Side of Sexual Interactions <i>Sheryl Perlmutter Bowen and Paula Michal-Johnson</i>	150
8. Painting a New Face on Relationships: Relationship Remodeling in Response to Chronic Illness <i>Renee F. Lyons and Darlene Meade</i>	181
9. Held Captive by Their Memories: Managing Grief in Relationships <i>John H. Harvey, Melanie K. Barnes, Heather R. Carlson, and Jeffrey Haig</i>	211
References	234
Author Index	263
Subject Index	271
About the Contributors	274

1

*For Better, for Worse,
for Richer, for Poorer:
The Rough and the Smooth
of Relationships*

Steve Duck

Julia T. Wood

The present series is devoted to the exploration of processes of relationships, which is a subject that proclaims the central importance of the continuities and contexts of particular features of relationships to our understanding of how relationships work and how they fail. Over the course of time, relationships are associated with both happy and unhappy feelings and sometimes with bittersweet moments where the two blend. Also, partners presumably experience variability in each other's (and their own) feelings and behavior across time. In short, relationships hardly ever turn out to be the monotonic enterprises that labels such as *friendship*, *marriage*, and *love* all too easily suggest. In the processes of everyday living, even close partners encounter challenges and travails, hit

flat spots, have relational “bad hair days,” and generally mix the rough with the smooth in ways wisely foreseen by the writers of traditional wedding vows. The present chapter and this book series assert the importance of exploring both rough and smooth contexts of relationships and especially the value of considering ways in which partners manage the two elements together to produce a sense of their relationship’s character.

The observation that ordinary folk regard “relationships” as central to happiness (Klinger, 1977) has too long obscured the fact that relationships are also sources of frustration and challenge. Even people who read the relationship literature know that processes of relationship dissolution dog ordinary experience (Duck, 1982; Orbuch, 1992), that violence occurs in intimate relationships (Christopher, Owens, & Stecker, 1993; Deal & Wampler, 1986; West, 1993), and that friends and lovers can be mean, petty, vindictive, and cruel to one another. Well before many of us were born, the lyrics of popular songs bemoaned the dark side of relationships, one in particular noting, “You always hurt the one you love.”

Despite the obviousness of pain and challenge in relationships, for every 50 research studies on love, there might be only a single analysis of hate (Shoenewolf, 1991); for every 75 on caring, there may be only 1 on neglect (La Gaipa, 1990); for every 100 studies of attachment, we find a single study of revenge (Emmons, 1992); and for every 1,000 on attraction, there might be only a handful on repulsion or the “pangs o’ despised love” that Shakespeare eloquently identified 400 years ago (Hindy, Schwartz, & Brodksy, 1989).

In this chapter we will discuss some of these “darker sides” of relating that present continual challenges to relaters, yet have so far been largely overlooked by both research and theory. The remaining chapters in the present volume identify specific challenges, some of them common (management of shame and anger), some of them less common yet still familiar (grief, the reconfiguration of family structure after divorce, enemies), and others more remote from most lives but still realities (sexual aggression and violence, high-risk sex, physical handicaps). We focus in the present chapter on a range of less-than-pleasant

relational experiences in personal relationships. We believe not only that such experiences stand in need of fuller exploration per se, but, more important, that study of them is important for the development of sound *theories* of relationships and relating. To this end we propose a preliminary model that offers criteria for differentiating among relationship challenges that are worthy of study in future attempts to develop relational theory.

Theories should be able to account for negative relational experiences not by regarding them as special or unusual cases, but by recognizing them as common human experiences that are as fully part of relationships as are positive experiences. It is the combination of positive and negative experiences—and the definition and management of the one in the context of the other—that creates the wholeness that most people experience in their relationships. Furthermore, labels such as *positive* and *negative* are too often simplistic and misleading. Many “positive” relational elements have implications that may be “negative” (e.g., family love involves obligations both real and “felt”; Stein, 1993), and some processes traditionally regarded as “negative” may have “positive” outcomes (as some conflicts may actually result in relationship development and growth; Lloyd & Cate, 1985) or may be interpreted by partners as salutary for their relationship (e.g., conflicts can lead to the assertion of individuality, generation of respect for another’s strongly held views, or clarification of boundaries of relational roles; Wood, Dendy, Dordek, Germany, & Varallo, 1994).

Thus we not only challenge the tendency to overlook negativity as an integral part of relationship life, we also are skeptical about the tendency to see negativity and positivity as clear and unequivocally opposite. Rather, we suspect that “good” and “bad” relational experiences are sometimes a matter of personal definition and personal meaning, but always intertwined, sometimes seamlessly, in the broader human enterprise of making sense of experience (Duck, 1994a, 1994c). In this chapter we therefore concurrently place the “dark side” in the context of the overall process of relating, depict the two as inherently connected rather than as distinct parts or types of relationships, and question how labels of darkness or negativity are imposed.