RELATIONAL DIALECTICS THROUGH TIME AND SPACE: WHAT *DOCTOR WHO* CAN TEACH US ABOUT OURSELVES AND RELATIONSHIPS

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies

School of Professional Studies

Gonzaga University

Under the Supervision of Dr. David Givens

Under the Mentorship of Dr. Joshua Misner

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

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December 2016
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Abstract

This narrative analysis utilizes Relational Dialectics Theory as the lens to examine the fictional relationship of a husband and wife from the long running television show *Doctor Who*. This study seeks to make relational dialectics understandable and accessible by examining the dialogue that this romantic dyad exchanges over the course of 14 episodes. The dialogues from these episodes were coded for one of five themes: appreciation, frustration, commitment, faith, and doubt. Each utterance of these themes was marked and counted and the percentage of total occurrences per partner was determined. These data were then used to analyze and discuss how they contribute to sense-making and the overarching themes of independence-interdependence, separation-closeness, forgiveness, unconditional love, and individuality that make up any complex relationship. Additionally, this thesis seeks to further fandom studies by utilizing this fictional universe to help better understand interpersonal communication theory and relationships.

*Keywords*: Relational Dialectics, romantic dyads, interpersonal relationships, discourse analysis, fandom, fan studies, *Doctor Who*, River Song
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Relational Dialectics through Time and Space: What Doctor Who Can Teach Us About Ourselves and Relationships

The Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) of Leslie A. Baxter and Barbara M. Montgomery (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996) offers a useful framework for understanding the tensions present in all interpersonal relationships, especially those of romantic partners. Relational dialectics is “a dynamic knot of contradictions in personal relationships; an unceasing interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies” (Griffin, 2012, p. 154). In addition, “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” (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). By using Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) to examine the complexities of a fictional husband-wife couple from the popular television series Doctor Who, this thesis explores how this well-known cultural medium can make communication theory accessible for non-academics while improving their personal understanding of intimate relationships, as well as exploring the “significance of the potential for dynamic individuality” (Decker, 2013, p. 156).

Doctor Who has the distinction of technically being the longest-running television series in history. (Rather than cancelling the show during the years it was not actually in production, the BBC chose instead to put Doctor Who “on hiatus.”) Premiering in 1963, the basic premise is that of a time-traveling humanoid alien, known simply as “The Doctor,” traveling throughout time and space, usually with an often-female platonic traveling companion from Earth. The title character is from a race called the Time Lords from the planet Gallifrey, who possess the ability to regenerate his physical form anytime he is mortally wounded. This ingenious plot device was
created in 1966 when the first actor to play The Doctor had to be replaced. After a 15-year hiatus, the BBC finally revived the series in 2005, and it has only grown in popularity since its return (Campbell, 2010).

A time traveler, by definition, lives life in a nonlinear fashion, and a Time Lord with his many regenerations, counts his days in centuries rather than decades. As one can imagine, this lifestyle leads to challenges in maintaining interpersonal relationships, making this an interesting narrative for examining Relational Dialectics Theory. The exceptionally complex relationship between The Doctor and his wife, Dr. River Song – a human archaeologist who happens to possess a bit of Time Lord DNA and a “vortex manipulator” that allows her to travel through time herself – provides powerful examples of relational dialectics captured in popular fiction.

This thesis will examine this dynamic relationship through a qualitative analysis of their spoken dialogue. Examining fourteen episodes this analysis will look specifically at examples of internal dialectics, the “ongoing tensions played out within a relationship” (Griffin, 2012, p. 156), as well as and how these examples can help viewers understand their own complex interpersonal relationships, allowing that none of us face the out-of-this-world challenges our couple of focus face, and therefore we can use the theory and the series to help us better understand our own relationships and ourselves.

**Importance of the Study**

This thesis hopes to further the popular knowledge and understanding of Relational Dialectics Theory and dialogue within interpersonal relationships by making the concepts and theories accessible and understandable to those outside of the academic community. By looking at specific examples of Relational Dialectics as played out in a popular television show, the goal
is to help viewers understand their own complex interpersonal relationships and more positively interact with their partners as they strive to maintain and develop their relationships.

The significance of increasing accessibility and understanding of such an integral part of most people's daily interactions is to develop a more peaceful, detached, and productive way of understanding the internal and external struggles everyone in a relationship feels at some point. This potential progression can be an important element in the evolution of one's personal identity and life-living philosophy. Relationships between powerful personalities do not have to fail just because they don’t fit a particular cultural context. There is value to be found in utilizing fan studies as a vehicle to make communication theory accessible to a wider audience, and this study endeavors to do just that.

**Statement of the Problem**

Many people in traditional, contemporary Western relationships incorrectly assume that “happy” relationships are those free of tension. Relational Dialectics Theory, however, proposes that all relationships have times of tension, a push/pull between the couple and that it is in fact the ability to navigate these tensions through dialogue that creates a happy couple by strengthening the relationship bond while simultaneously strengthening the individual. Difference in interpersonal relationships can be a positive for individuality and relationship growth if those within the relationship identify, understand, and value those differences.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

This list of terms includes definitions specific to Relational Dialectics Theory as described in the primary texts by Baxter & Montgomery (1996) and Baxter (2011), and will be useful to understanding their context within this thesis.

*Centripetal:* forces of unity; moving toward centralization, or the center
Relational Dialectics through Time and Space

Centrifugal: forces of difference; moving away from the center towards the margins

Communication Praxis: the process of constructing meaning from the interplay of competing discourses

Competing Discourses: When two or more discourses (systems of meaning) negate one another in some way, more or less in a zero-sum manner

Dialectic Contradiction: the dynamic interplay between unified oppositions

Discourse analysis: close study of language in use

Discursive struggle: how opposing ideas or themes in a conversation bump up against each other

Interplay of discourses: how various themes in a conversation work together

Oppositions: two tendencies or features of a phenomenon that are actively incompatible and mutually negate each other

Totality: the assumption that phenomena can be understood only in relation to other phenomena

Utterance chain: the words said in one turn of a dialogue; the links of competing discourses bound by the links that come before and after

Links in the utterance chain:

Distal already-spoken: utterances in the culture at large, which are given symbolic life when voiced by speakers

Proximal already-spoken: discursive site in which the relationship’s past meaning bumps up against the meaning of the relationship in the present

Distal-not-yet-spoken: anticipation of how generalized others will respond to an utterance

Proximal not-yet-spoken: interaction of speaker with the hearer that anticipates a more immediate response than the distal
Organization of Remaining Chapters

The second chapter of this thesis will be a review of the literature with a focus on the philosophical assumptions that serve as a foundation for this study, Relational Dialectics Theory, as it relates to romantic dyads, the ways RDT has been utilized in previous studies, and the cultural significance and potential for outreach of fandoms in general. Chapter three will address the scope and methodology used for this analysis. Chapter four will be the analysis itself and will discuss the background and cultural significance of Doctor Who, the romantic dyad of The Doctor and River Song in detail, including a brief biography of the characters (The Doctor and River Song) being analyzed, their relationship to each other, and specific examples of where viewers can see relational dialectics play out, as well as how these examples can help viewers understand themselves and their own romantic relationships better and use the insight to more effectively communicate with their partner. This thesis will conclude with chapter five, discussing the limitations of the study, suggestions for further study, and final thoughts.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Between every potentially successful couple in a contemporary romantic context there is a give-and-take woven through their dialogue, whether they are speaking words or speaking non-verbally. This is the basis of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) – “that social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 3). Like the ocean tides, couples may advance and retreat from each other on a number of issues or at moments without diminishing the intensity of their intimacy or level of commitment to one another. In fact, RDT proposes that this “both/and” quality is actually beneficial for the health and satisfaction of romantic relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The idea that greater independence from one’s partner can actually contribute to the
quality of one’s romantic relationship is supported by RDT and can be witnessed in unconventional relationships where couples are perhaps separated by distance, work closely together in a professional setting, or come from different cultural, religious, or socio-economic backgrounds. “RDT is a theory of relational meaning making—that is, how the meanings surrounding the individual and relationship identities are constructed through language use” (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). By examining the relationship of an unconventional fictional couple through the lens of Relational Dialectics Theory, this paper seeks to add insight into the claim that greater independence for the individual can support long-term romantic relationships whether they are conventional or unconventional in design.

**Philosophical Assumptions: The Value of the Individual within Romantic Relationships**

There is a power to be found in encouraging others to discover themselves and their path and then giving them the space and freedom to develop themselves in that context. The key to such development is the rational distance to identify one’s cultural context and at what point one’s relationship might be running up against the sanctions of that cultural context. “As couples cocreate their relational world in the dynamic context of a society, they are bound to realize oppositions and contradictions” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 44). For example, a Christian and a Muslim’s religion both hold that there is only “one true God.” Other members of their respective communities outside of the relationship may criticize the couple separately for being in a relationship with “an infidel.” Yet the couple themselves, individually and together, might be struggling to find a deeper meaning behind the belief in a “one true God,” both as it relates to themselves as individuals in relationship with their God and how their future as a couple might grow and evolve with this mutual willingness to explore. This willingness may persevere despite the fact that people and even close friends representing the couple’s individual social contexts
might be harshly judgmental of their ongoing relationship. Our hypothetical couple has
differences that seem insurmountable to others in their individual communities, but they’re
common internal goal gives them a sameness with each other. “Within each is the seed of the
other. From a relational dialectics perspective, bonding occurs in both interdependence with the
other and independence from the other” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 43). Close personal
relationships are always a mix of closeness and separation, and it is the willingness to maintain
intimate dialogue with each other that strengthens the couple, and the individual, in the face of
internal and external pressure and criticism.

**Theoretical Basis: Relational Dialectics**

Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery published *Relating: Dialogues & Dialectics*, the
first authoritative text on Relational Dialectics in 1996. The primary focus of their book, and
theory, was “taking seriously the voice of the other—the voice of difference—in personal
relationships” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. xiii). Their dialectic perspective became what is
now known as relational dialectics was heavily grounded in the earlier work of Russian
philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. And while their theory has things in common with other
dialectical views, their “approach emphasizes a social self instead of a sovereign self, multivocal
oppositions instead of binary contradictions, and indeterminate change instead of transcendent
synthesis” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. xiv).

**The Literature**

Like any theory, relational dialectics has evolved since Baxter and Montgomery
introduced the theory in their 1996 text *Relating: Dialogues & Dialectics*. Numerous scholars
have utilized relational dialectics in the past several decades since to explore and explain
relationships in varying contexts. This literature review will provide a short survey of the
evolution of the theory from Relational Dialectics Theory 1.0 (RDT) to Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) as well as highlight a few of the different ways scholars have utilized the theory in past studies.

Baxter stated in her 2011 text *Voicing Relationships: A Dialogic Perspective* that “theories… are like living organisms” and that “growing a theory is a process akin to growing a child” (2011, p. 1). Baxter went on to explain the evolution of RDT from its infancy in 1996 to its most recent incarnation while also assuring readers that you need not be familiar with RDT 1.0 to understand RDT 2.0. That regardless of which incarnation of RDT you reference it “is a theory of relational meaning making” (2011, p. 2) of how meaning for the individual and relationship is constructed through the use of language (Baxter, 2011). The core theoretical principle of RDT is the “interplay of competing discourses” (2011, p. 2), and while there are differences in the vocabulary used to articulate the theory from versions 1.0 to 2.0, because the core principle of RDT has remained intact throughout its evolution this thesis will not make a distinction between the earlier and later versions of this theory, but for simplicities sake will refer to Relational Dialectics Theory simply as RDT.

In recent years RDT has been used to study a variety of relationship narratives and cultural contexts. What these studies have in common is a desire to further our understanding of the ways in which relationships are navigated through the words we speak to one another, the sense-making that takes place through competing discourses within relationships, and the perceptions of the individuals involved from the surrounding culture. Whether studying parent-child relationships as portrayed in television dramas (Fields and Johnson, 2013), competing discourses about romance in a cross-cultural context (Prentice, 2015), competing discourses about forgiveness (Pederson, 2014), similarity-difference dialects in intercultural communication
(Root, 2013), competing discourse among married couples about premarital cohabitation (Moore, Kienzle, & Flood Grady, 2015), relational dialectics in learning spaces (Rudick & Golsan, 2014), or remarriage dyads and their external networks (Wilder, 2012) RDT has been a useful tool for researchers.

By generating coding categories found within the dialogue and then determining the frequency that these categories are found within the dialogue being studied, researchers can identify overarching themes that speak to the initial research questions (Owen, 1984; Baxter, 2011; Wilder, 2012; Fields & Johnson, 2013; Moore, Kienzle, & Flood Grady, 2015). Once themes have been identified and competing discourses revealed a determination as to where the centripetal-centrifugal struggle places the power in the meaning-making process of the relationship (Baxter, 2011; Moore, Kienzle, & Flood Grady, 2015). This process helps researchers explore complex relationship issues, and where appropriate, study how these issues are portrayed within popular culture/media (Meyer, 2003; Fields & Johnson, 2013).

Fan studies as a discipline is still young, but it has been growing slowly over the past several decades. In recent years there has been a shift in the focus of fan studies from simply studying the curiosity of fans themselves and fan culture to engaging in an academic-fan dialogue (Booth, 2013). It has been suggested that there is place for “articulating a stronger bond between [academic and fan] enabled by dialogue and specific areas of overlap” (Booth, 2013, p. 121). The designation of “aca-fans” as a combining of scholars and fans is not necessarily welcome by academics or fans, but is slowly creating a niche for itself in communication, cultural, feminist, and media studies making it a valid approach to making theory more accessible through a fandom community (Jenkins, 2013).
Rationale

Traditional restrictive sanctions against people in unconventional relationships – include sanctions that might paralyze or otherwise handicap an individual’s growth of character, sense of compassion, and willingness to see other people and cultures as complementary rather than something to be eradicated as a threat to the status quo. RDT has been a useful framework for researchers as they struggle to find tools to improve relationships between complex, independent, people even as they strive to maintain their independence despite pressure from the dominant cultural paradigm to conform to traditional man/woman romantic roles. RDT helps make sense of the unconventional by making the “both/and” understandable, and looking at it in the context of a popular television show with an enormous fan base makes it accessible.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do the examples of Relational Dialectics presented in a complex fictional relationship help viewers understand their own complex interpersonal relationships?

RQ2: How can utilizing a popular fandom inspire and inform a broader audience about communication theories and their own relationships?

Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

The Scope of the Study

The scope of this study will be the analysis of the canonical relationship between the fictional couple of The Doctor and River Song as put forth in fourteen episodes of the long-running television show Doctor Who and specifically the dialogue spoken between these characters as well as dialogue between them and other characters in reference to their relationship. The focus of this study is on the meaning-making found in this couple’s dialogue in relation to themes of independence-interdependence, separation-closeness, forgiveness,
unconditional love, individuality, and devotion that make up any complex relationship. Additionally, this study seeks to further fandom studies by utilizing this fictional universe to better understand interpersonal communication theory.

**Methodology of the Study**

Due to the exploratory nature of this study in seeking to utilize a popular fandom to examine the ways in which relational dialectics are exhibited in a fictional romantic dyad, and how this example can help viewers make sense of their own relationships, a qualitative methodology is preferred, as “qualitative research allows us to be systematic and logically rigorous” while “analysis allows us to improve understanding, expand theory, and advance knowledge” (Neuman, 2015, p. 477).

First, a qualitative analysis that examines the contrasting discourses between the Doctor and River by honing in on the fictional couple’s relationship dialogue as presented in the *Doctor Who* episodes listed in Appendix A. Transcribed dialogue from the episodes will be coded by utterance or “kernel” of dialogue into one of five themed categories:

- **K-1**: Appreciation for uniqueness/individuality of partner and/or their attributes
- **K-2**: Frustration with partner’s differences, the choices they make, the way act or react
- **K-3**: Commitment/Devotion to the relationship and their partner
- **K-4**: Faith/Confidence in partner and in partner’s choices
- **K-5**: Doubt/Distrust in partner, in partner’s judgment/choices

For ease of reference the number of occurrences of each utterance link will be presented in Table 1. The number of utterances per partner with then be totaled per theme, and along with the percentage of the total number of utterances being analyzed, will be presented in Table 2. Second, the data will then be analyzed for patterns that illustrate themes of individuality and
difference while enforcing the strength of their relationship. These patterns will then be used to explore the research questions posed in this thesis as represented in this fictional relationship through a narrative analysis.

A narrative analysis was chosen as the most appropriate qualitative method for examining the research questions and discussing how the themes found in the data contribute to our understanding of the relationship being analyzed, as well as how this understanding might be useful to viewers of the television show in navigating their own interpersonal relationships. Narrative analysis is appropriate here for its usefulness in examining both the relationship being analyzed and the relationship of the viewers in the fandom who might benefit from this analysis, in addition to the connection between them (Neuman, 2015).

**Ethical Considerations**

There are no inherent ethical concerns for this study as the subject of the study is a fictional relationship from a popular television program. The data utilized in the analysis was coded from the publicly accessed teleplays of the BBC television program *Doctor Who*, and the coding results of analyzing the episodes in this study are included in the appendices (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). As there were no human subjects involved in the research, there was no risk of causing harm, and this study did not require an informed consent or anonymity/confidentiality statements (Neuman, 2011).

**Chapter 4: The Study**

**Introduction**

Relational dialectics are a useful tool for examining any interpersonal relationship, and romantic dyads with their intricacies are no exception (Moore, Kienzle, & Flood-Grady, 2015; Prentics, 2015; Wilder, 2012). To take full advantage of relational dialectics’ focus on
navigating competing discourses within relationships, this study focuses on an exceptionally complex fictional relationship, with the intent of illustrating how useful relational dialectics can be as a tool for relational understanding in even the most fantastical of personal circumstances. This study also seeks to add to the academic area of fandom studies by choosing to focus on a relationship from a long-running program with a large fan base, and it will begin with crucial background information to understanding the relationship being analyzed (Meyer, 2003; Hill, 2014; Hanson, 2015; Heiden, 2016).

**Doctor Who: The Show**

*Doctor Who* has a long history in television, stretching back to 1963. After a decades-long hiatus, the show’s current incarnation, sometimes referred to as “New Who,” began in 2005 with what was effectively season 27, episode 157 (though it is typically numbered as “series one”), and has only grown in popularity (Campbell, 2010). The sheer length of time that *Doctor Who* has been in the public’s consciousness means that even those who are not fans of the show have an awareness of it. What makes this show so enduring is the nature of the title character, which sustains the show’s popularity in the midst of changing the title character’s actor every few seasons.

**The Doctor: Hero and Husband**

“Doctor who?” That question has been asked repeatedly during the course of this television program by a multitude of characters and is one of the programs ongoing mysteries. For the purpose of this study, it is equally important to ask “who is Who” to River? The Doctor is a time traveler with an augmented life span that boggles the human mind, thanks to his species’ possessing two hearts and the ability to regenerate its bodies when close to death. Due to this peculiarity, The Doctor is often referred to by the number associated with his regeneration
(as indicated also by the new actor inhabiting the role). This study deals specifically with The Doctor’s 10th, 11th, and 12th incarnations, as these are times in his life where he is in a relationship with River Song. Since the show’s inception, The Doctor has always travelled with “companions”; sometimes they are aliens of differing species or men, but most often the companions are human and female. As someone who has lived hundreds of years, The Doctor has had more than a few romantic engagements, but River Song is the only person he calls “wife.” And even though they rarely spend more than a few consecutive days together, The Doctor always seems to be there when she needs him the most (Moffat, 2008-2015).

**River Song: Wanderer and Wife**

During 11’s tenure, he travels with Amy and Rory, a young couple who conceive their first child aboard The Doctor’s TARDIS, a time machine that travels within – and possesses the energy of – the Time Vortex (Moffat, 2011). It is eventually revealed that this child, born Melody Pond, grows up to be River Song. Due to her conception and early gestation inside the Time Vortex, she possesses Time Lord DNA, including an augmented lifespan, exceptional physical strength, and the ability to regenerate (Moffat, 2011). Unfortunately, this young family never has the opportunity to live together as a traditional family: Baby Melody is kidnapped by a villainous religious sect. Melody is psychologically programmed during her childhood to be an assassin, specifically the assassin who kills The Doctor (Moffat, 2011).

Through the course of several seasons of *Doctor Who*, viewers learn that Melody escaped her captors, regenerated after an injury, and managed to locate Amy and Rory as children, growing up alongside them as their best friend “Mels,” before regenerating again into the incarnation known as River Song (Moffat, 2011). River does overcome her compulsion to kill The Doctor and then spends several years studying to become an archeologist—a discipline that
appeals to her as the best way to track down and learn about the love of her life and his travels (Moffat, 2011). As River explains to the woman who originally kidnapped her, in the episode The Wedding of River Song, “It was such a basic mistake, wasn't it, Madame Kovarian. Take a child, raise her into a perfect psychopath, introduce her to the Doctor. Who else was I going to fall in love with?” (Moffat, 2011). River has many adventures on her own and with The Doctor, whom she eventually marries, making many personal sacrifices over the course of their relationship to ensure his safety. River keeps track of all of these out-of-sync adventures in her diary (which looks an awful lot like the TARDIS), so that they can always check to see where they are in their relationship (Moffat, 2011-2012).

**A Most Unconventional Relationship**

The first time The Doctor, in his 10th incarnation, and viewers of the show meet Professor River Song, in the 2008-episodes *Silence in the Library* and *Forest of the Dead*, we learn that River has arrived from The Doctor’s personal future. While she has been married to him for years, he has never seen her before and is understandably suspicious of this dynamic woman who speaks to him with such authority (Moffat, 2008). This incongruity is a key factor in their relationship – their timelines are never in sync – and this time displacement has them living their respective lives back-to-front (Moffat, 2008-2015). As relationships go, this is a fairly significant challenge, which River acknowledges – “Whoo! Life with a time traveler. Never knew it could be such hard work” – to Ten just before he confirms her worst fear that this is The Doctor in the time before he knows her (Moffat, *Silence in the Library*, 2008). This study will show that this challenge does not keep either of them from being committed to their relationship. Even when their competing discourses produce frustration and doubt, they both also exhibit appreciation for (and faith in) each other.
Results of the Study

Understanding the results of this study requires an awareness of the temporal challenges that our subjects face, and while their challenge is fictional – and though it’s unlikely any of us will struggle with the challenges inherent to time travel – Baxter points out that “temporality features prominently in the discursive struggle of the given and the new. On conceptual grounds alone, time is, of course, central to any struggle of the past with the present” (2011, p. 94). The total number of utterances of each of the five themes that the dialogue in this study were coded for include: appreciation for partner’s individuality, frustration with partner’s choices, commitment to partner/relationship, faith in partner’s choices, and doubt or distrust in partner’s actions or motivations and can be found in in Table1. This section will provide a detailed overview of these data for roughly one-third of the 14 episodes analyzed. These particular episodes were chosen because they are touchstone moments in this couple’s relationship where there are examples of noticeable tensions between partners within the themes being observed, as “turning points are potentially occasions of major identity shift in which the inherited relationship identity is upended in some significant way” (Baxter, 2011, p. 94). The sample episodes detailed below include: Silence in the Library/Forest of the Dead (2-part story), Let’s Kill Hitler, The Wedding of River Song, and The Husbands of River Song.

The first two episodes being examined mark the beginning of The Doctor’s relationship with River, even though it is occurring near the end of her personal timeline and their relationship from her perspective. As you can imagine, this creates quite the discursive struggle! One of the things the data shows in the couple’s first interactions (Silence in the Library) is that The Doctor (predictably) exhibits quite a bit of doubt/distrust for River [6 utterances] while she exhibits only appreciation for him [7] and faith in his abilities and judgment [9]. River also
shows an immense amount of commitment to him and their relationship [9], even though she realizes that he is in a different place in their relationship. By the second of these 2-part episodes (Forest of the Dead), The Doctor’s doubt has lessened [4]. Perhaps more significant is that his appreciation of River’s uniqueness [2] and his faith in her [6] has grown. As an extension of this faith in her, The Doctor has also begun to exhibit a commitment to River and their relationship [2], which is yet to come for him. And while River’s faith [10] and commitment [9] have remained steady, her frustration level with The Doctor [7] has risen significantly as they have had to negotiate their differences through an intense and life-altering situation (Moffat, 2008).

The episode Let’s Kill Hitler takes place two seasons later, after The Doctor has regenerated into his 11th incarnation. Because this event comes later in The Doctor’s timeline, he has experienced many adventures with River, and even though they have not yet wed, he is deeply committed to her. This is when The Doctor sees River regenerate from her previous incarnation of Mels into River. This is the moment she becomes River. This is River before she knows The Doctor. The situation is now reversed from the Silence in the Library: The Doctor knows River and has foreknowledge of who she will grow to become, but she only recognizes him as the target she has been trained to assassinate, an act she is almost successful in accomplishing. The most interesting finding from analyzing this episode is that even after this new River (who still identifies herself as Mels) poisons him, The Doctor remains so committed to her safety and relationship that he expresses it with more utterances [10] than in any other episode. Throughout this episode, The Doctor also expresses appreciation for River’s individuality [3] and faith [5] in her ability to choose a different path from that of which her childhood captors placed her on. In the end, his faith and commitment opens River’s mind and heart to the possibility that she might be able to become the woman he already believes her to be.
She ends up showing her own burgeoning commitment [2] to him by sacrificing all of her remaining regenerations to save his life from the poison that she used on him. This episode ends with The Doctor leaving a brand new TARDIS-blue diary on River’s hospital nightstand and exclaiming that she won’t simply be good after her recovery, “she’ll be amazing” – before leaving her alone to create her own identity, because foreknowledge is dangerous and he does not want to overly influence or hinder her personal growth. The next time we see River she is studying archeology at Luna University (Moffat, 2011).

Five episodes later, *The Wedding of River Song* sees The Doctor more frustrated [8] with River and her choices than ever before as he cannot comprehend why she would jeopardize the stability of reality for everyone in the Universe just to protect him. River has her own moments of frustration [3] trying to make him understand that for her the risk of losing him is a greater suffering than she can bear because she appreciates him so much [3]. In this newest challenge they both show faith [2&1] in each other and an equal commitment [6&7] to their relationship. This is when they become husband and wife, and though nothing about their relationship is conventional, they both consistently choose to make each other their priority in trying situations (Moffat, 2011).

The final episode of this analysis will focus on the 2015 Christmas special *The Husbands of River Song*. In River’s timeline, this episode happens directly after *The Angels Take Manhattan* and right before she goes on the archeological adventure that takes her to *Silence in the Library*. She is looking for The Doctor because she needs his help, but she has intersected his timeline at a much later time for him, which means this Doctor is actually the 12th incarnation and the only “face” that River does not know about. This time it is The Doctor who knows it’s his wife and River who doesn’t recognize him, leading The Doctor to many moments of
frustration as he watches his wife flirt with and pretend to marry two different men. But he is still in awe and appreciation of River’s unique individuality and committed to their relationship. River spends much of this episode equally frustrated yet appreciative of this stranger who keeps asking her questions that make no sense – until she finally looks into his eyes and really sees him and realizes that it’s her Doctor. River always places a great deal of faith in The Doctor even when she has moments of doubt, and this insight is what fuels her commitment to him and their relationship (Moffat, 2015).

Discussion

The raw numbers in Table 2 show that River has more utterances than The Doctor in all but one category, K-5, simply because she has more overall utterances measured (215) compared to The Doctor’s (126). But when looking at the data as percentages of their total utterances, the themes that emerge are easily recognizable. This is a couple who has a deep appreciation for each other’s unique individuality, with 17% of The Doctor’s utterances and 20% of River’s conveying this theme – even though at times their differences are exceptionally (and equally) frustrating, at 25% of “frustrated” utterances for each of them. Occasionally, one or the other has moments of doubt or distrust in their partner’s motivations or behaviors – 11% for The Doctor and only .9% for River – but those moments are greatly outnumbered by the moments of faith that they exhibit in each other’s abilities and choices (17% for The Doctor and 21% for River). Most significant is that the dialogue between these two partners shows a consistent commitment to each other and their relationship, at 31% for The Doctor and 33% for River.

Our fictional couple experiences exaggerated relationship challenges due to their status as time travelers who must learn to navigate their lives and their relationship in the face of repeatedly meeting each other in the wrong order. When we consider relationship change from a
relational dialectics perspective, “relationship change involves both centripetal and centrifugal movement rather than centripetal unidirectionality alone” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 72). Our fictional couple’s challenges have more in common with everyday challenges inherent in all relationships, however, than it might first seem. A viewer of the show might be struggling in their relationship because they feel like their partner is pulling away from them. What might they learn from watching River continue to remain committed to The Doctor even when he is questioning her strategies for handling a situation? Viewers may recognize that “relationships move both ‘upward’ and ‘downward,’ both ‘toward’ and ‘away from,’ both ‘forward and ‘backward’” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p.72). Because they are watching an example of it play out in front of them on a favorite television program, it makes the concept more understandable and can help couples with their own meaning-making process (Meyer, 2003; Fields & Johnson, 2013).

These two very unique individuals, who have a great appreciation for each other despite their significant differences, have found a way to positively frame their differences as potential fuel for their individual growth (Moffat, 2008-2015; Baxter, 2011). Because this relationship is grounded in appreciation, faith, and commitment, it allows both partners the freedom to explore their own interests and desires, as well as express their frustrations and moments of doubt without critically jeopardizing their relationship. This speaks directly to the overarching themes of independence-interdependence, separation-closeness, forgiveness, unconditional love, and individuality illustrated in The Doctor and River’s relationship (Moffat, 2008-2015).
Chapter 5 Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

Because this study focused on the dialogue of a fictional couple, it is limited in the sense that no personal interviews with the couple being studied were possible. The scope of the study was potentially limited because there was only one researcher working alone to code the dialogue being analyzed, leading to the choice to limit the coding categories to five. Time constraints were also a factor in the researcher’s decision to limit the scope of the study to only the dialogue from the 14 full-length episodes, without including dialogue from BBC licensed mini-episodes, radio broadcasts, books, or comic books. These limitations also affected the researcher’s depth of connection of the subject matter to the Doctor Who fandom through websites, discussion boards, fanfiction, or fan-produced YouTube videos.

Recommendations for Further Studies

There is potential to expand this particular study as noted above by analyzing more dialogue specific to this relationship, as well as for coding the dialogue for more than five categories, which would allow for a deeper and wider analysis of this relationship. Because Doctor Who is such a long-running television program, there are any number of interesting relationships that could be utilized to study relational dialectics from other relationship perspectives, such as platonic friendship, mother-daughter, or even between enemies, allowing an opportunity for unique discussions of sense-making.

As the area of fan studies and fandom studies continues to grow in the academic community, there is potential to further study relational dialectics within other fictional universes and within other genres. It would be interesting to expand this study to include ethnographic interviews with fans of Doctor Who to gain their perspective on the romantic dyad of The Doctor
and River Song as they have watched them, and whether or not their perspective changes after seeing the RDT data collected during this study.

Another potential area for further study of relational dialectics and dialogue would be to study the dialogue of different relationships written by the same writer – in this case Steven Moffat – for a different fictional universe, such as *Sherlock* or *Coupling*, to look for consistencies or inconsistencies in how the writer conveys the character’s discursive struggles within their relationships.

**Conclusions**

This study set out with three goals in mind: First, to make relational dialectics as a concept, and as a theory, more accessible and understandable by utilizing it as a framework to examine the fictional relationship of The Doctor and River Song (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Meyers, 2003; Fields & Johnson, 2014). Second, to illustrate how this example could be used by viewers of the show to facilitate their own thinking and sense-making about relationships and personal identity (Baxter, 2011; Wilder, 2012). Third, to take advantage of the quickly growing area of fan and fandom studies by adding a new dimension to the dialogue between fans and academics, as well as exploring real-world themes in a highly popular fictional universe (Booth, 2012).

Through looking carefully and analytically at the dialogue that The Doctor and River exchanged through the course of their relationship, this study was able to highlight the relationship challenges this fictional couple endured — like their partner not physically recognizing them or realizing that they don’t always follow the same moral code— while repeatedly choosing to appreciate each other’s individuality and remaining committed to the relationship. This demonstration of how these characters made their own sense of meaning in
the face of challenging circumstances hopes to contribute to the ongoing goal of meaning-making in individuals lives and in interpersonal relationships.
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In S. Moffat (Executive producer) Doctor Who. Cardiff, UK: BBC Wales


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Appendix A

Episodes to be analyzed:

**Series 4**

Silence in the Library / Forest of the Dead

**Series 5**

The Time of Angels / Flesh and Stone

The Pandorica Opens / The Big Bang

**Series 6**

The Impossible Astronaut / Day of the Moon

A Good Man Goes to War

Let's Kill Hitler

The Wedding of River Song

**Series 7**

The Angels Take Manhattan

The Name of the Doctor

**Series 9**

The Husbands of River Song
Table 1.  

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doctor Who Episodes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>K-1</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.9 Silence in the Library</td>
<td>The Doctor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>River</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.10 Forest of the Dead</td>
<td>The Doctor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>River</td>
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<td>5.4 The Time of Angels</td>
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<td>River</td>
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<td>5.5 Flesh and Stone</td>
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<td>River</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.12 The Pandorica Opens</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5.13 The Big Bang</td>
<td>The Doctor</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 The Impossible Astronaut</td>
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<td>River</td>
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<td>6.2 Day of the Moon</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.7 A Good Man Goes to War</td>
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<td>River</td>
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<td>6.8 Let’s Kill Hitler</td>
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<td></td>
<td>River</td>
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<td>6.13 The Wedding of River Song</td>
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<td></td>
<td>River</td>
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<td>S.17 The Husbands of River Song</td>
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Table 2.  

<table>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Occurrences</td>
<td>Percentage of total utterances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-1</td>
<td>21</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-2</td>
<td>31</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-3</td>
<td>39</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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K-1: Appreciation for uniqueness/individuality of partner and/or their attributes

K-2: Frustration with partner’s differences, the choices they make, the way act or react

K-3: Commitment/Devotion to the relationship and their partner

K-4: Faith/Confidence in partner and in partner’s choices

K-5: Doubt/Distrust in partner, in partner’s judgment/choices