

Using Relational Dialectics to Address Differences in Community-Campus Partnerships

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Abstract

Community and campus partners face inherent differences due to their distinct cultures, assumptions, practices, and constituencies. How partners handle the resulting tensions can impact how well the partnership functions. This article introduces relational dialectics as a framework to think about recurring tensions as natural and normal when partners span structural and cultural boundaries to work together. The authors show how three common dialectical tensions work in campus-community partnerships. Next, the ways in which partners can use learning conversations to gather detailed information related to the dialectical tensions are detailed. The authors then demonstrate different ways partners can manage the tensions, and they explain the potential impact(s) of each strategy on the partnership. Finally, the implications of relational dialectics for competency building, engagement practice, and research on community-campus collaboration are considered.

Introduction

Community and campus partners come to their joint endeavors “from different worlds” (*Sandy & Holland, 2006, p. 30*), making community engagement work complex and challenging (*Jacoby, 2003; Strand, Cutforth, Stoecker, Marullo, & Donohue, 2003*). Differences between community and campus cultures, structures, norms, and expectations contribute to the complexity and challenges of community-campus partnerships (*Carriere, 2006*).

When negotiated successfully, differences can be complementary and enhance partnerships (*Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Oliver, 1990*). When handled poorly, differences can lead to negative consequences like hurt feelings, jeopardized outcomes, or wariness about future partnerships. *Prins (2005)* notes a “common but often-ignored reality of community-university partnerships” is that “tension and (potentially) conflict are inherent in partnerships” (*p. 57*).

The Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (2006), Higher Education Research Institute (1996), the Kellogg

Commission (2001), and Wingspread meetings (Torres, 2000) have all established guidelines for community-campus partnerships. Each encourages partners to focus on trust, mutual respect, reciprocity, common interests, regular communication, and long-term sustainability when working together. Despite these valuable guidelines, however, precise processes for collaboration are not well understood and remain a “black box” (Thomson & Perry, 2006).

Tensions in Boundary-Spanning and Collaboration

Collaboration across community and university “worlds” requires partners to span physical, relational, psychological, structural, and cultural boundaries (Hayes & Cuban, 1997; Janke, 2008; Sandy & Holland, 2006). Faculty and community members must span boundaries to form and maintain partnerships for community-engaged research. Service-learning professionals or student leaders must cross boundaries. In all partnering, participants must address tensions from the differing norms, assumptions, cultures, and expectations that each brings to the partnership (Carriere, 2006; Janke, 2008, 2009).

Specific differences that present challenges between university and community representatives are well documented. For instance, faculty members tend to see teaching, research, and service as their “private work” (Battistoni, Gelmon, Saltmarsh, Wergin, & Zlotkowski, 2003); what and how they teach is largely within their purview. Faculty can think of themselves as experts that provide knowledge to the community (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009) and can fail to respect community knowledge (Buys & Bursnall, 2007) or to see community partners as peers (Ellison & Eatman, 2008; Freeman, Brugge, Bennett-Bradley, Levy, & Carrasco, 2006). Faculty and other campus representatives can even see communities as “pockets of needs, laboratories for experimentation, or passive recipients of expertise” (Bingle, Games, & Malloy, 1999, p. 9) rather than seeing themselves as immersed in various communities and as integral members of those communities.

Community members often perceive their environment as distinct from the campus. Community partners tend to have shorter timetables for implementing and completing projects, as well as different notions about when, how, and with whom one should collaborate (Sebring, 1977). Community leaders also want partnerships to directly affect their clients or enhance community capacities (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

Successfully navigating differences is important to any relationship, but is especially crucial to promote the core tenets of reciprocity, mutual benefit, and long-term sustainability in a dynamic community-campus partnership. In this article, the authors introduce relational dialectics as a new, positive way to think about inherent tensions and differences between partners. They provide an overview of relational dialectics and dialectical tensions and explain their assumptions. They explore how three common dialectical tensions work in community-campus partnerships. They stress the importance of learning conversations to gather additional details from partners. Then, they detail strategies to manage dialectical tensions, including the most likely outcome(s) of each strategy for the partnership. Finally, they consider implications of relational dialectics for community-engaged scholarship and practice. The overall goal is to create greater awareness that framing differences as dialectical tensions—rather than as problems to be eliminated—can help readers think in new ways, respond effectively to differences, and sustain their partnerships over time.

The Dynamic Nature of Community-Campus Partnerships

Partnerships between campus and community members occur at different levels: between organizations, between groups within organizations, and between individuals from the community and from the campus. Whether the partnerships are inter-institutional and contain formal memorandums of understanding or are interpersonal between two colleagues, “interactions between persons [are] crucial for establishing the character and capacity of the activities in a relationship that contributes to meeting each individual’s goals as well as [to the] collective goals of individuals, groups, and networks” (Bingle, Clayton, & Price, 2009, p. 14).

Even though partners represent institutions, the negotiations occur through person-to-person interactions that are dynamic (Bingle & Hatcher, 2002). A community-campus partnership changes as partners get to know one another and explore their work and their identities (Janke, 2009). Further, the actions, attitudes, and perceptions of individuals may greatly influence the outcomes of a relationship or partnership (Huxham & Vangen, 2005).

Wood (2007) identifies “understanding and being comfortable with relational dialectics” as vital for building and maintaining a healthy relationship (p. 219). Community-campus partners stand to

benefit by learning to understand and deal effectively with dialectical tensions that occur within their relationships.

Overview of Relational Dialectics and Dialectical Tensions

Relational dialectics concern opposing tensions or connected opposites (*Sabourin, 2003*) that are normal in relationships. Dialectical tensions manifest as interdependent, mutually exclusive ideas reflecting the both/and nature of different perspectives rather than either/or thinking. Relational dialectics also emphasize the complexity of relationships and the richness of multiple systems of meaning held by the people involved in a partnership.

In complex relationships, differences can be seen as either positive or negative. Most often, however, such terms as “tension,” “dilemma,” or “negotiation” are cast in a negative light. If one experiences tension, encounters a dilemma, or is engaged in negotiation, a problem exists. Using dialectical reasoning, this adversarial perspective is replaced with the recognition that experiencing tensions is typical and inherent in any relationship, not necessarily negative. For example, each community-campus partner experiences conflicting possibilities: How much can I rely on this person now (e.g., a lot, very little)? How much information do I want to share, and on what topics at this point (e.g., everything, just some things)? Will my suggestion be appropriate for this relational situation (e.g., consistent, out-of-the-blue change)? In the most successful relationships, struggles related to dialectical tensions are addressed (*Altman, 1993*).

Scholars from psychology, communication, human development, business, and health care have used relational dialectics to guide their research. Topics studied using dialectical approaches include friendship (*Rawlins, 1992*), diverse families (*Sabourin, 2003*), postmarital relationships (*Graham, 2003*), stroke patients (*Palowski, 2006*), organizational groups (*Erbert, Mearns, & Dena, 2005*), global software teams (*Gibbs, 2009*), and community health initiatives (*Medved et al., 2010*). In addition, Kolb, Baker, and Jensen (2002) assert that a dialectical approach to conversational learning is central in experiential learning. Dialectics work through conversations that generate new ideas and concepts by increasing learners’ awareness of a tension or paradox between two or more opposites (p. 53). The new information adds to perspectives on social reality, fostering learning grounded in experience.

Relational dialectics have many applications in research and in educational practice. Community-campus partners can benefit from using dialectical thinking and response strategies to build partnerships that are collaborative, not combative.

Key Assumptions of Relational Dialectics

Scholars have used different assumptions in developing approaches to studying relational dialectics, but in general have focused on the same underlying collaborative processes for interacting. To unpack important concepts related to dialectical tensions, we turn to relational dialectics theory, which focuses on interpersonal dyadic communication. Relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) assumes that (a) relational life and relationships are characterized by change; (b) relational change is not linear but multidirectional, has many different possible meanings, and is never finished; (c) contradictions or dialectical tensions are inherent and fundamental in relational life; and (d) communication is central to organizing and negotiating relational dialectics that help each person (in a partnership to) constitute his or her social reality (West & Turner, 2010, p. 204). Four core concepts are found in most dialectical scholarship: contradiction, change, totality, and praxis (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 3).

Contradiction.

Contradictions are human tendencies that are incompatible and mutually negate one another, but are essential to relationships. “Many oppositions, not just one, are likely to exist in relation to a given bipolar feature” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 9). For instance, different contradictions could coexist with certainty, yielding dyads such as certainty-unpredictability, certainty-novelty, certainty-mystery, or certainty-excitement (p. 9).

For example, consider different certainty-related contradictions between a faculty member and a community partner engaged in service-learning. Early in their partnership work, the community partner might wonder about his or her roles and responsibilities when dealing with students (i.e., certainty-uncertainty tension). Discussion between the partners and/or written agreements could help address this tension and help the service-learning project proceed. Later on, however, a tension between certainty and unpredictability could be experienced when economic pressures make fewer financial resources available to the partners than expected. This new version of the tension (i.e., certainty-unpredictability)

would need to be discussed so partners could work together to decide how to proceed toward their service-learning goals with reduced funding.

Change.

Change is also a core concept. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) say, “stability punctuates change, providing the baseline moments by which change is discerned” (p. 10). Conville (1991) conceives relational change as operating via a helix or spiral, in which repetitive interactions concerning tensions occur at different levels or phases over time, reflecting the dynamic nature of the relationship. Recurring dialectical tensions that ebb and flow in a relationship can contribute to changes and growth in a partnership.

For instance, consider a community-campus partnership that starts out with relatively short, semester-long service-learning projects but gradually expands into a long-term community-based research and service initiative that addresses a complex community problem. Both the faculty member and community partner have likely developed well-established ways for working together. They have built a basis of trust and can draw from a set of common experiences and knowledge to relate to one another even when unwanted or unexpected issues arise. When this kind of change happens, the partnership has demonstrated growth, moving from being transactional toward becoming transformational (see Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009; Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Hua, & Morrison, 2010; Enos & Morton, 2003).

Totality.

Totality, another core concept in relational dialectics, emphasizes the idea that the social world is a series of interrelated contradictions where internal tensions occur between people in dyads, and external tensions occur when members of the dyad interact with (or represent) larger social units (Rawlins, 1992; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Altman (1993) refers to the tensions that occur when two people communicate as *interactional* and those due to organizational structures or policies that influence the partners as *contextual*.

To illustrate interactional and contextual tensions that can occur in the same relationship, recall the service-learning partnership detailed previously. Early on, the faculty member and the community partner may have experienced awkwardness and dissonance as they addressed any personality differences or diverging

expectations while talking about their intended work together. These experiences concern the certainty-uncertainty dialectic at an interactional level. However, when the two partners experience the loss of campus-based funding, the uncertainty-unpredictability tension stems from contextual-level changes as they face university-centered budgetary cutbacks. Thus, the totality of the partnership includes multiple interrelated contradictions that can come from internal as well as external sources.

Praxis.

Finally, praxis refers to ways people respond to ongoing tensions, ranging from denial that a tension exists to conversations about total recalibration or transformation of the relationship (Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Different responses have different levels of functionality for the relationship; some promote more positive outcomes than others. Relationships are constantly evolving as a result of how individuals respond to the tensions inherent in their interactions with others (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; West & Turner, 2010).

For example, in the service-learning example with funding loss, the partners could choose functional praxical responses by taking the attitude that “we will get through this together” and then using supportive communication to work toward solutions that are mutually beneficial. This approach, rather than focusing on one partner “getting what I want,” is likely to lead to a stronger partnership.

Praxical choices, then, are more than momentary decisions about how to respond to the tensions experienced; the interaction response chosen helps establish the tone and overall interpersonal climate that can promote future positive (or negative) possibilities for the partnership. Wood (2007) says, “Interpersonal climate is the overall feeling or emotional mood between people” (p. 214). Communication is the “primary influence” that shapes interpersonal climate (p. 214). Thus, the praxical choices made to address dialectical tensions could influence the interpersonal climate in a community-campus partnership and potentially impact the sustainability of shared endeavors.

Notably, relational dialectics draw attention away from individuals to pose questions about competent relationships, groups, or interactions (Wilson & Sabee, 2003, p. 29). Analyzing community-campus partnerships through the lens of relational dialectics calls attention to the spectrum of naturally occurring tensions that individuals experience as they navigate relationships.

Three Dialectical Tensions in Community-Campus Relationships

Relational dialectics scholars consistently point out three dialectical tensions that occur in all relationships: *autonomy-connection*, *novelty-predictability*, and *openness-closedness* (Baxter, 1990; Brown, Werner, & Altman, 1998; Wood, 2007). These tensions are likely to (and in the experiences of the authors, do) exist in community-campus partnerships at both interactional and contextual levels. At the interactional level, tensions based on individual perceptions and behaviors come out in interactions. At the contextual level, tensions arise due to the organizational structures and cultures that shape the contexts in which the partners work.

Table 1. Three Common Dialectical Tensions in Relationships

Dialectical Tension	Meaning: Pole 1	Meaning: Pole 2
Autonomy vs. Connection	Autonomy refers to independent actions by a single partner.	Connection refers to joint actions by both partners.
Novelty vs. Predictability	Novelty concerns doing something new.	Predictability concerns doing something in a familiar or routine way.
Openness vs. Closedness	Openness means freely sharing information.	Closedness means keeping information private.

Autonomy-connection.

The autonomy-connection tension occurs as partners struggle with functioning together or working separately. For example, at an interactional level a community partner might want a faculty member to attend a social event to benefit the agency. The faculty member might decline, wishing to spend limited non-work hours with family. This might lead the community partner to question the faculty member's commitment to the agency's overall mission rather than just to their joint project.

The autonomy-connection tension could also manifest contextually. For instance, the university review board might express concern at listing the community partner as a qualified member of the research team, with privileges including access to collected data. This university-centered issue could impact the partnership if the community partner wanted access to the data. Such structural concerns play out in partnership dyad conversations.

Novelty-predictability.

In novelty-predictability tensions, partners struggle over responding creatively to a situation versus using well-established procedures. For example, a tension could occur when an enterprising campus staff member decides to contact community members using social networking for the first time (rather than by phone or e-mail). This change could contribute to unpredictability, as the community partner expects the existing modes of interaction and may be uncomfortable with the new approach (i.e., novelty).

At a contextual level, the novelty-predictability tension might occur in service-learning projects with students. For example, a faculty member may allow her college students to actively develop a curriculum for a tutoring program by creating new activities each semester. The faculty member would likely be comfortable with working regularly with new students on new projects; this is what she normally does in her teaching work. On the other hand, the community partner that facilitates the tutoring program may not want novelty. He normally establishes one program used throughout the year so that the tutors know what to expect; he can also count on predictable results. Organizational structures and related novelty-predictability tensions could become a conversation topic for these partners.

Openness-closedness.

Issues with openness-closedness occur when partners struggle over whether to share information readily or to keep things private. Baxter (2004b) notes that openness can refer to self-disclosure of previously unknown information, but openness can also be defined as receptivity to different perspectives and a willingness to change one's own beliefs and attitudes. Dialogue is important not just to identify the tension that exists in the relationship (i.e., openness-closedness) but also to flesh out how each partner is experiencing it (i.e., as a need for more disclosure or, alternatively, as a need to develop receptivity to a different perspective).

Further, like the other tensions, openness-closedness can originate between the partners or because of something happening within one of their institutions or communities. At an interactional level, faculty members and community partners might differ on how much feedback to give a student working in the community. A faculty member might give detailed feedback, but a community partner might wonder if too much feedback about the need for extensive changes in the student's submitted project might prevent that student from doing future work with the agency.

At a contextual level, a community agency working with protected populations might have organizational rules or legal restrictions about sharing sensitive, private information on the people they serve with students or faculty. Alternatively, the openness-closedness tension could surface when a student becomes aware of sensitive information concerning physical abuse while working in the community, and then struggles over whether to share this information with the class as part of the classroom assignment. (Hopefully, the student would share this important information with the faculty member in charge and/or with the primary community partner so appropriate action could be taken.)

As these examples illustrate, the three common dialectical tensions can manifest themselves in community-campus partnerships in a variety of ways. Partners can potentially enact collaborative methods as they determine how to best address these differences.

Learning Conversations About Dialectical Tensions

Recognizing the presence of a dialectical tension is an important first step to managing the effects of that tension on a partnership. The approach taken to address the differences matters greatly, however, and can lead toward collaboration, or not. Any partner (i.e., faculty member, student, community person) that takes a learning orientation is likely to explore the other partner's views and ideas rather than just to rely on his or her own perspective. Such a learning orientation is important for boundary spanners to practice, as they should be careful listeners who see connections, think holistically, and embody other personal characteristics that promote change and bring out the best in others (Thomas, 2004, p. 7). Kolb et al. (2002) state that "dialectical inquiry aspires to holism through the embracing of differences and contradictions. . . . An inviting attitude about differences in opinion and perception is key to the process" (p. 54). Similarly, Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999), scholars associated with the Harvard Negotiation Project, recommend shifting one's perspective from proving a point or persuading the other to a learning conversation in which

you want to understand what has happened from the other person's point of view, explain your point of view, share and understand feelings, and work together to figure out a way to manage the problem [tension or difference] and move forward. In so doing, you make it more likely that the other person will be open to being

persuaded, and that you will learn something that significantly changes the way you understand the problem [tension or difference]. Changing our stance means inviting the other person into the conversation with us, to help us figure things out. (pp. 16–17)

Campus and community partners can benefit by taking a learning stance to understand the context and nuances of each person's position or perspective when dealing with differences.

Imagine, for instance, that a community partner is growing frustrated with what he sees as lack of contact from a female student to complete the service-learning work that would benefit the constituents of his agency. Although it might be easiest for him to assume that she is lazy or uncommitted, taking a learning stance would require him to withhold judgment and seek more information from the student (or faculty member). Asking questions about the student's challenges with the project as well as her personal context could yield valuable information regarding reasons for the delay. Such learned information could alleviate the frustration the community partner is experiencing and allow him to work with the student (and faculty member) to develop an alternate plan of action. In contrast, assuming that the student is lazy or uncommitted does not move the needed work forward and results in a poor service-learning experience for everyone involved.

As another example, think of a faculty researcher who is having difficulty contacting community interviewees for a community-based research project and finds himself annoyed with the community partner who agreed to facilitate introductions. Instead of assuming that the community partner is no longer committed to the project or does not value the research, the faculty member could start a learning conversation. He could talk with the community partner to gather specific details about what is happening and find out why she hasn't been making the introductions in the ways he expected. Then they could work together to address the research goals.

Wilson and Sabee (2003) point out that partners give life to the contradictions of personal relationships through communication (see also Janke, 2008; Prins, 2005; Thomas, 2004). Conversations can uncover either obvious or under-the-surface areas of dialectical tension or can pinpoint differences to which community-campus partners need to be aware. Even so, different conversations may be needed to address specific concerns and to draw out varied kinds of information.

For instance, Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) contend that difficult situations benefit from three types of conversations: the *what happened conversation*; the *feelings conversation*; and the *identity conversation*. The *what happened conversation* clarifies and finds out more when one or both partners have experienced an unexpected or unwanted situation. The feelings conversation uncovers information about each individual's internal response to a past situation, an ongoing issue, or even plans for the future. The *identity conversation* gets at the way each partner conceives of his or her personal identification with the collaboration. Each of these conversations could yield valuable information about dialectical tensions for the partners.

A what happened conversation might occur between a faculty member and a male student when the student fails to submit information to his group. The group research project is intended to provide needed information to the community partner. The faculty member might begin a learning conversation by saying, "I understand your part of the research project has not been completed. Can you tell me what happened?" Once the student answers, the faculty member could work with him to plan next steps for the research.

A feelings conversation might ensue when the faculty member shows up at an agreed-upon meeting time and location only to learn that the community partner is actually in another meeting and not available. The faculty member might assume the community partner does not value her time and the planning it takes for her to get away from campus. Their next conversation might proceed with the faculty member saying, "I missed you when I came out for our last meeting. I felt hurt and unappreciated when you didn't let me know that you had a change in plans. The time I have available to be off-campus is quite limited." After they discussed this further, the partners could come up with a way to update one another if there were unexpected changes so that they could both feel positively about the partnership and their work together.

An identity conversation might happen when the community partner finds out that the faculty member working with him on a service-learning project has been featured in the university's alumni newsletter. In the article, the faculty member described the service-learning project and praised the students but didn't mention the community partner. The community partner might confront the partner in a learning conversation by stating, "I saw the article on the service-learning work we've been doing together. It didn't mention me or my organization. I thought we were equal partners in this work, but that wasn't obvious in the

article.” Then they could continue to share thoughts about their individual and partnership identities and make decisions about who would be included in future publications. (See Janke 2008, 2009 for more on partnership identities.)

Another approach to learning conversations involves asking primarily *how* and *what* questions. Table 2 offers sample questions about the three common dialectical tensions to help community-campus partners carry on an important learning conversation. For example, partners can openly discuss what roles each takes (i.e., autonomy-connection), whether they want to try a new approach (i.e., novelty-predictability), or what types of information they expect to share with one another (i.e., openness-closedness).

Table 2. Discussion Questions to Address the Tensions

Dialectical Tension	Topic/Issue	Discussion Questions
Autonomy vs. Connection	Partnership Definition & Interpersonal Relationship Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we want to relate to each other? • What roles/responsibilities do we each take now? • What do we do together and what do we do separately? • What level of connection is good for me/for you/for us in this situation? (or, at this time?)
Novelty vs. Predictability	Expectations of Partner & Partner Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we define what to expect in this relationship? • When do we stick to the way we did this before? • When can we try a new approach? • What level of predictability is best for me/for you/for us in this situation? (or, at this time?)
Openness vs. Closedness	Sharing Information & Managing Privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we determine what information/ideas to share? • What can we talk about? (What can't we talk about?) • What information do I need/you need to do the work? • What is the best way to share (or not) about this situation?

Using inviting questions and having a learning conversation helps partners gather details to consider as they make strategic choices about how to address the dialectical tension(s) they experience.

Strategies to Address Dialectical Tensions

After holding learning conversations, partners still need to consider praxical strategies or the “concrete ways by which people enact and respond to the contradictions” (Wilson & Sabee, 2003, p. 31). Dialectical scholars point out that some responses are more productive for the relationship than others.

One unproductive strategy noted by Wilson and Sabee (2003) is denial that a contradiction exists. For example, a faculty member might not contact a known community partner (i.e., no connection) when conducting a needs assessment, and instead gather information independently (i.e., choose autonomy) from the community. The faculty member’s choice could cause the relationship to lose vitality and also produce undesirable outcomes.

Another negative response to dialectical tensions is *disorientation*: one party sees relational contradictions as inevitable but negative, and feels trapped with little possibility of change. This partner does not respond to the contradiction and does not relate to the other party either. This approach can cause confusion and detachment between partners.

As an example, reconsider the student who did not complete his part of the group’s project. He might be experiencing the autonomy-connection tension. That is, he knows he needs to do his research work for the group to be successful in the class (i.e., connectedness). However, he could be overwhelmed with work, assignments in other courses, and family obligations (i.e., autonomy/individual demands). If he assumes that there is no way to resolve this tension (i.e., disorientation), he might choose to ignore it by not communicating with his partners and not attending class. This praxical response keeps him confused and could contribute to confusion in his group (and with the faculty member and the community partner). The outcome for the relationships between the various partners caused by this student’s praxical choice is negative and unproductive, though possibilities may still exist for the rest of the group to complete work and salvage the project.

These two negative response styles neglect collaborative ideals such as reciprocity, mutual respect, and regular sharing that are vital for community-campus partnerships. They also could produce negative consequences for individual partners and for the overall partnership.

More functional and collaborative possibilities for addressing dialectical tensions exist. In *spiraling inversion*, partners “sway back and forth between opposite poles of a dialectic over time” (Wilson & Sabee, 2003, p. 31). For example, autonomy-connection can

function differently across the course of a partnership. At an early stage, partners may agree to weekly face-to-face meetings to forge a connection and get to know one another. Regular meetings may help establish individual roles as they define their joint work. Later on in the partnership, autonomy may predominate so that a phone call or e-mail may suffice for the partners to collaborate effectively. However, if a difficulty occurs, more contact (i.e., more connection) may again be required.

In *segmentation*, partners prioritize one dialectic pole for some topics or activities but the opposite pole for others. For example, recall the scenario in which a community partner wants the faculty member to attend many community activities (i.e., connection), but the faculty member does not want to attend them all (i.e., autonomy). A segmentation response would involve the partners' sitting down with a calendar and list of events, and choosing a specific kind of events that the faculty member would attend.

Another response to dialectical tensions called *balance* occurs when partners meet in the middle or compromise between two opposing alternatives. For example, the innovative campus staff person mentioned previously might work with the community partner to select both old and new ways to stay in touch. Monthly phone calls (i.e., predictable pattern) might be paired with a new electronic newsletter (i.e., novel approach). This would create balance along the novelty-predictability dimension.

In *recalibration*, or *reframing*, parties temporarily recast the differences so they are no longer seen as opposites. For instance, a faculty member and community partner might redefine predictability and novelty as complementary. They determine that daily predictable routines they complete while doing research interviews are "spiced up" when they laugh or delight in a unique story that was shared.

Multiple response strategies available to community-campus partners experiencing dialectical tensions are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Dialectical Tensions—Response Styles and Outcomes

Response	Description	How It Works & Sample Thoughts (Autonomy/ Connection)	Potential Impact on the Relationship
Denial	Effort to obscure/deny contradiction by legitimizing one “pole” and excluding the other(s).	Don’t talk about it. Ignore the tensions or work around them without addressing them. “If I ignore this need to connect, maybe it will go away and I can do what is best for me.”	Negative if it’s the only response used; passive response; dominance of one “pole” can create exigence for the neglected ones.
Disorientation	Fatalistic attitude. Contradictions are viewed as negative and can’t be changed.	Belief that the relationship isn’t working well and cannot be changed or fixed. “I want to keep my independence, but I also want to stay involved in the partnership; I can’t do both . . . I’m trapped!”	Negative if it’s the only response used; passive response; likely produces lots of mixed messages and inconsistencies. Creates anxieties and uncertainties.
Spiraling Inversion	Focused on time. One “pole” is dominant at a given time, but there is a shift to privilege the other(s) later.	Making a choice between two possibilities at one time, then choosing another possibility later, creating an “ebb and flow” or a spiral motion over time. “Maybe we can work together throughout this semester, but go our separate ways during the next semester. Then we can come back and work together next year.”	Functional if both partners can agree on the choices made.
Segmentation	Focused on a topic or activity. Parties create activity or topic domains for one possibility rather than other(s).	Choosing one “pole” or possibility in one set of circumstances or on one topic, but another possibility for other(s). Agree that certain topics or activities are “off limits” but others can be used. “Let’s work together when it comes to the brochure and flyers, but you go ahead and plan the rest of the event without me.” “We can talk about what happens when you work with my students, but let’s not talk about your frustration with X department at the university.”	Functional if both partners can agree on the choices made.
Balance	All parts of the dialectical tension are legitimized at once, yet each one is only partly addressed.	Compromising or choosing a possibility “in the middle” of the seeming opposites. “Let’s agree that you will come and talk about your agency at one class meeting rather than attending every class.”	Functional if both partners can agree on the choices made.
Integration	Respond fully to all tensions at once.	Finding a way to look at both possibilities in a positive way. “I’ll change my mindset away from being the expert when you come to my classroom so we can share roles as expert teachers—one from a discipline and one representing community expertise.”	Functional if both partners can agree on the choices made.
Recalibration Or Reframing	Synthesize or transform so forces/poles are no longer seen as oppositional.	Reframing or recasting the possibilities so they aren’t seen as oppositional. “We can be together when we go to the annual conference—you can present the agency results related to our work and I’ll present a synopsis of my research with your organization.”	Functional if both partners can agree on the choices made.
Reaffirmation	Accepts that tensions can’t be reconciled, but celebrates the differences and tolerates the tension.	Celebrate the diversity of perspectives as representing “richness of relationships.” “Even though we differ substantially on how we see research, we can celebrate the successful completion of this project and anticipate working together in the future.”	Functional if both partners can agree on the choices made.

Note. This reference chart builds upon the work presented by Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, pp. 60-66.

As partners select praxical strategies to respond to the dialectical tensions they are experiencing, the likely outcomes of those actions can help partners decide which response is best for them individually and as a team.

Implications

Relational dialectics provide a way to look inside the “black box” of collaboration to detail specific communication processes and strategies for addressing tensions common in community-campus relationships. Relational dialectics also provide new vocabulary to make sense of differences among partners. Unlike the term “conflict,” which refers to incompatible goals that must be managed or resolved, dialectics offer a way to think about having differences co-exist. Dialogue offers different insights into how to “do” conflict collaboratively (*Baxter, 2004a, p. 13*). Ultimately, dialectical thinking and related conversations set up conditions and processes necessary for partnerships to achieve the valued goals of trust, mutual respect, and reciprocity.

Indeed, relational dialectics theory and dialectical thinking more generally should encourage engagement practitioners and scholars to frame tensions between partners as natural, predictable, often observable, and changeable. This could involve a major shift in thinking for some. However, taking a win-win approach to partnerships means keeping the relationship in the forefront of one’s mind, a powerful first step in developing greater competencies for collaboration by all those involved in community engagement.

Relational dialectics also allow partners to think about how they are constructing meanings about their partnership. Wilson and Sabee (2003) say “respect for multivocality requires the abilities to identify and comprehend multiple points of view (personal, relational, cultural) including those that differ from one’s own lived experience” (*p. 34*). In addition, partners can choose a “learning stance” to gather information and to carry out the “difficult conversations” advocated by Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999). Also, “dialogue may be enhanced when participants use active-listening and negotiating skills” (*Wilson & Sabee, 2003, p. 34*).

Thinking about alternative ways to construct meaning in a partnership, holding learning conversations, and choosing praxical responses are important tasks for all community-campus partners: students, faculty, community partners, and staff members. Educational trainings in these areas build capacities for partners to work better together.

Educators can also use Kolb et al.'s (2002) conceptualization of conversational learning to structure learning modules for students, and help them make sense of community-based research or service experiences. Students could do structured reflections that target dialectical differences and management strategies, promoting higher levels of learning (e.g., evaluation). Students could also develop multiple conversational skills to work through differences as they go outside the classroom into their communities.

The questions offered in Table 2 and the strategies listed in Table 3 are good places to start in developing competency-building workshops for campus and community partners. Community-campus participants might learn supportive ways to elicit more information, strategies to discern multiple perspectives on the same situation, techniques for carrying out various kinds of conversations, and flexible styles of communication to use as responses to dilemmas.

In addition, the expertise of scholars in psychology or communication could help partners gain greater “comfort with relational dialectics” (Wood, 2007, p. 219) by exploring different ways to look at relationships or at flexible means to communicate. Experts in conflict management or relational therapies could be called upon to help partners transform predominantly negative styles of interaction toward more collaborative and supportive approaches.

Other Conceptual Frameworks for Dialectical Tensions

The relational dialectics theory developed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996) seems particularly salient for the scholarship of engagement; however, other frameworks exist. For instance, Brown et al. (1998) posit that all relationships involve three interdependent oppositional aspects that they label dialectical differences: engagement, affect, and regulation. These differences have to do with how the individual partners think about and act within the relationship.

Engagement, in this sense, refers to the degree of involvement, integration, and connection among people in a relationship. *Affect* involves positive and negative emotions/actions within a relationship. *Regulation* concerns making decisions or creating rules to guide a relationship. Scholars could use these dialectical tensions and the alternative framework to study community-campus partnerships and to determine what response strategies partners find work best.

For example, scholars could look at the level of involvement or depth of connection that each partner invests in the community engagement work (i.e., Brown et al.'s engagement concept). The overall level of involvement between partners might serve as an indicator of their willingness to work together over time. Scholars could also look at the levels of affect experienced in a long-term community-campus partnership. Is the overall affect positive or negative? At various phases of the partnership, do partners experience different emotions? Scholars might use this kind of information to determine what conditions are most likely to promote an emotionally healthy partnership and a good interpersonal climate. Finally, researchers or practitioners could consider regulation. At various times in their partnerships, they could set up guidelines or principles that would guide different aspects of their collaborative work.

Evidence in the Literature for Dialectical Tensions

Regardless of which dialectical framework is used, some dialectical tensions between community-campus partners are similar to those in other kinds of relationships, such as the three dialectical tensions we have explained in depth. However, other relational dialectics are context or situation specific. Scholars have identified unique sets of dialectical tensions for family members dealing with stroke (Palowski, 2006) or the death of a child (Toller, 2005), in organizational team development (Erbert, Mearns, & Dena, 2005), and even within a biotechnology-based alliance (de Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004). Thus, dialectical tensions unique to partnerships focused on service-learning or community-engaged scholarship seem likely. Some evidence for such tensions can be found in the literature.

For instance, Stoecker and Tryon (2009) suggest viewing service-learning “as a dialectical organizational process” in which goals and outcomes for students may contradict those of the community partner (pp. 7–8). Pinpointing those specific “dialectical organizational processes” could yield a set of contextual dialectical tensions consistently present in service-learning. Interestingly, recurring issues between service-learning students and community partners documented by Dumlao (2009) include community partner availability, length of student commitment, and depth of student work. These issues could reflect underlying dialectical tensions of autonomy-connection: long-term commitment to a project (community partner’s perspective) versus short, semester-long commitment (student’s perspective), and detailed work versus

superficial work (i.e., just get the assignment done) in service-learning partnerships. Dialectical tensions between mutually exclusive perspectives can provide challenges for partners both on campus and in the community.

As an alternate kind of example, consider a complex community engagement project with multiple universities and community organizations. The Boston area project reported conflict and tensions between the universities and their community organization partners as they addressed health disparities related to asthma. There was

tension between the research mission and the delivery of service to the affected community. In its early development, HPHI [Healthy Public Housing Initiative] partners were vague about whether the project was primarily about research or primarily about service. When the tension between research and service manifested itself, the project leadership generally dealt with conflicting interests by allowing partners to advocate for preserving the pieces they valued. This created a relatively democratic debate in the project with little explicit clarity, negotiation or deep agreement. (*Freeman, et al., 2006, pp. 1018-1019*)

The Boston partnership experienced a contextual dialectical tension, research focus versus service focus, due to the divergent priorities of the universities and the community organizations. As Prins (2005) notes, “tensions may arise about partner roles, decision making, grant management, reward structures, diverging agendas, modes of work, mismatched timelines, forms of knowledge and status differences” (p. 59). Thus, a variety of dialectical tensions exist in community-campus partnerships.

Areas for Future Research

Community-campus partnerships and the communities they serve could benefit from research that explores dialectical tensions between partners in much greater detail. Considering relational dialectics in a general way is useful; however, additional scholarship could build engagement theory and add to our knowledge about ways to promote sustainable, collaborative partnerships.

Scholars could, for example, identify sets of dialectical tensions that warrant further attention in their engagement research or partnership practice. The examples detailed in this article are just

a beginning. Community and campus representatives experience different daily contextual and interactional factors. Their “different worlds” produce contextual dialectical tensions that can significantly affect the partners. Inherent differences between people also can contribute interactional dialectical tensions that influence the partnership.

Additionally, scholars could develop scales to measure different types of tensions, the severity or frequency of tensions, or partners’ responses to tensions. Research could identify variations to shed light on how each partner experiences the dialectical tension in the same situation. Such measures would help describe, explain, or predict partnerships that have (or have not) developed partnership identities (Janke, 2009), long-lasting commitments, or successful initiatives. They could also identify relationships that would benefit from professional intervention or additional training.

Potentially, dialectical thinking and research could help map patterns in partnerships that are better (or worse) for responding to change while maintaining a strong relationship bond. Existing engagement scholarship tells us that through communication, community-campus partners develop relationships that are transformational, transactional (Enos & Morton, 2003), or even exploitative; relationships may shift between these types over time (Bringle et al., 2009; Clayton et al., 2010). Future research could examine potential relationships among the types and ranges of dialectical tensions, response strategies, and the overall course of the partnership.

Conclusion

Because relational dialectics allow for the interplay between stability and change processes in partnerships, they reflect reality in relational life and do not force scholars to choose between observing patterns and observing predictability (West & Turner, 2010) when they do research. Relational dialectics also shed light on ways to create partnerships intentionally so that they meet the needs and goals of both campus and community partners, focus on the relationship, and use collaborative communication processes. Most important, relational dialectics and dialectical thinking foster engagement initiatives that promote dynamic and positive changes in communities and encourage people to work together effectively.

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