Interpersonal Relationships in the Buffyverse:
The Connection with Everyday Life

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Abstract

The usefulness of *Buffy* as a vehicle to study interpersonal relationships is predicated on viewers' ability to empathize with and learn about relationships (including how to behave in them) from observing relationships and relationship development in *Buffy*. This article presents anecdotal evidence from short stories written for a college course that demonstrate students' ability to make the connection between two broad approaches to understanding interpersonal relationships and their own lives, and then, using the same perspectives, connect relationships in their own lives to relationships in *Buffy*.

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Christine Jarvis (2001), in her analysis of *Buffy* as a representation of the horror genre, comments that the show "tackles issues, such as male violence, sexual desire, loneliness and ostracisation in accessible ways that make it a potentially valuable tool for discussions with young people" (p. 3). What makes the show so accessible and able to serve as a valuable tool for discussions served as the rationale for a course I taught Spring 2004 semester at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "Interpersonal Relationships in the Buffyverse." The primary goal of the course was to provide the 23 students (18 women and 5 men, mostly juniors approximately 20 years old) with a grounding in several perspectives of interpersonal relationships that they could use to understand—to "make sense"—of relationships in *Buffy*. The course was successful insofar as the students were able to make the connection between the broad approaches to interpersonal relationships we looked at—including social support and dialectical tensions—and their own lives, and then, using the same perspectives, connect relationships in their own lives to relationships in *Buffy*. Fritz Heider's (1958) approach to diagramming relationships might present the situation like this:

course perspective

+ /\ +

Buffy   +   student
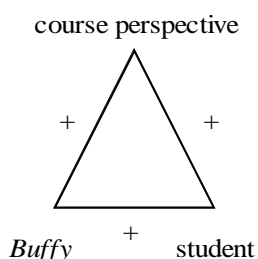
The + on the right of the triangle represents the students' finding personal relevance in each of the perspectives, that is, they could use each perspective to gain an understanding about something relevant to their own interpersonal relationships. The + on the left side represents the students' recognition of the relevance of each perspective for understanding one or more relationships in *Buffy*. The + at the bottom of the triangle is the most significant one: the students could use each perspective to connect their own relationships with relationships in *Buffy*.

The primary vehicle that students used to make the connections between course perspectives, self, and *Buffy* was writing short stories. Students wrote two short stories, read aloud in small groups in the class, in which they presented their best example of social support (the first short story) and dialectical tensions (the second short story) in their own lives, and then related or connected the example to a relationship, or scene, or moment in *Buffy*. The usefulness of *Buffy* as a vehicle to study interpersonal relationships is predicated on viewers' ability to empathize with and learn about relationships (including how to behave in them) from observing relationships and relationship development in *Buffy*.

Dimensions of Interpersonal Relationships

Before studying particular perspectives for understanding interpersonal relationships, the course looked at what makes a relationship an *interpersonal* one. "Using a qualitative definition, interpersonal communication occurs when people treat one another as unique

individuals, regardless of the context in which the interaction occurs or the number of people involved. When quality of interaction is the criterion, the opposite of interpersonal communication is impersonal interaction, not group, public, or mass communication" (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2004, p. 16). Interpersonal communication is characteristic of the kinds of relationships that enhance our well-being (Duck, 1998; Rubin, Perse, & Barbato, 1988; Sousa, 2002).

There are five characteristics that define interpersonal communication, distinguishing it from impersonal communication.

1.   Social rules and cultural or sociological information govern impersonal exchanges; unique rules and mainly psychological information govern interpersonal exchanges.

2.   Impersonal relationships can be replaced (i.e., they are very much alike); interpersonal relationships cannot be replaced (i.e., they are all different). Julia Wood (2002) coined the term "relational culture" to describe the unique ways of interacting people in an interpersonal relationship create for themselves.

3.   In impersonal relationships the communicators are not dependent on each other; in interpersonal relationships the communicators are connected—what happens to one affects the other.

4.   Impersonal exchanges are marked by low self-disclosure; interpersonal exchanges are marked by high self-disclosure, that is, relationship partners are willing to risk making themselves vulnerable to one another (Rosenfeld, 2000).

5.   Impersonal exchanges are rewarding to the extent they fulfill some goal outside the relationship (e.g., dating someone to gain your parents approval); interpersonal exchanges are rewarding merely by their being (i.e., the reward comes merely from being in the relationship, not because the relationship helps satisfy particular goals).

Applying these five criteria, it is evident that interpersonal relationships are rare, and that we have a large and complex set of strategies to maintain boundaries that keep ourselves separate from others (Petronio, 1991). Xander's humor, Dawn's anger, Cordelia's unwillingness to listen, Giles retreating to his library—all are strategies to keep others at arm's length, to avoid engagement in an interpersonal relationship.

Social Support

Social support was the first perspective studied in the course and applied, first, to each student's own relationships and, second, to relationships in *Buffy*. Social support is a communication behavior: support providers enact behaviors perceived by support recipients as enhancing the recipients' well-being (cf. Shumaker & Brownell, 1984).

There are three broad types of social support—tangible, informational, and emotional (Cobb, 1976; House, 1981)—that take eight distinguishable forms (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Hardy, 1993): (1) listening support: the perception that an other is listening without giving advice or being judgmental; (2) emotional support: the perception that an other is providing comfort and caring and indicating that she or he is on the support recipient's side; (3) emotional challenge support: the perception that an other is challenging the support recipient to evaluate his or her attitudes, values, and feelings; (4) reality confirmation support: the perception that an other, who is similar to and who see things the same way the support recipient does, is helping to confirm the support recipient's perspective of the world; (5) task appreciation support: the perception that an other is acknowledging the support recipient's

efforts and is expressing appreciation for the work she or he does; (6) task challenge support: the perception that an other is challenging the support recipient's way of thinking about a task or an activity in order to stretch, motivate and lead the support recipient to greater creativity, excitement, and involvement; (7) tangible assistance support: the perception that an other is providing the support recipient with either financial assistance, products, and/or gifts; and (8) personal assistance support: the perception that an other is providing services or help, such as running an errand or driving the support recipient somewhere.

The first set of short stories written by members of the class required them to apply the readings on social support—including the eight types of social support. The story needed to connect a "social support perspective for understanding relationships," a relationship of their own, and a relationship in *Buffy*. The following segment from one of the short stories (presented here with the permission of the author) concerns the provision of social support to a sorority sister the day after a group of them got together to watch "Becoming" (2021).

Normally loquacious, she sat there sullen staring into space. After an awkward silence, she squeaked out,

"He raped me."

"Oh shit. I knew he was going to do it. I knew! I'm sorry, I should've…"

Then, she burst into a confession. Bob had waited until she was asleep [after getting drunk] so that she couldn't refuse his advances and so that she wouldn't recall what he'd done. After the incident, he sent her an e-mail proclaiming how deeply *he* was hurt by her mistrust. She, face scarlet from sobbing, looked at me and demanded to know what was wrong with her. Was she crazy? Was he really trying to make this her fault? Was he right? Hugging her tightly, I assured her that she'd done nothing wrong. If anything, I was wrong for leaving her. No, this man was a narcissistic cretin for trying to blame her for his "anguish."

My life is a series of phases. I can identify a memory by the pop culture event with which I associate it, especially *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episodes. There are maxims from the show that still constitute the bulk of my "personal" advice. As I sat there with her, shivering and seeking solace, I remembered several scenes from the show. This incident reminded me of Parker. Bob's cavalier attitude toward sex mirrored Buffy's ex-beau's. Willow once lectured Parker, criticizing, "you men. It's all about the sex…[you] do whatever's necessary just as long as you get the sex" ("Beer Bad," 4005). Bob didn't care whom he hurt, as long as he got what he craved. It was all about him, his desires and needs.

There can be no discussion of rape and the Buffyverse without mentioning the incident in "Seeing Red." Recently, James asked me why the girls in class still defend Spike as an ideal boyfriend even after what he'd done [to Buffy]. Until this, I'd also wanted to defend him, though, cognitively, I knew that rape is undeniably, no gray areas, wrong. Nobody "asks for it." Buffy didn't and neither did my [sorority] sister. Women can put themselves in dangerous situations, but no one deserves this degradation. Until my [sorority] sister's humiliation, I couldn't understand why the Scoobies, especially Dawn, couldn't forgive Spike. Not only had she not pardoned him, Dawn had threatened him, "If you hurt my sister…you're going to wake up on fire" ("Beneath You," 7002). I understand that hatred and protectiveness now; I've felt it. That night, I comforted my sister by helping her plan Bob's castration, not by stressing the Christian mantra of "turn the other cheek."

> In the midst of such horror, when the person you love feels weak, there isn't much you can offer. You can only support [her] by coddling and holding, discussing and reassuring. I tried to help [her] gain a sense of control . . . . My emotional, listening, and, above all, reality confirmation support helped her feel certain and strong again. It allowed her to put her misplaced blame where it belonged—on [him].

Dialectical Tensions

Dialectical tensions was the second perspective studied in the course and applied both to each student's own relationships and relationships in *Buffy*. A dialectical perspective on human relationships argues that whether a relationship is brand new or decades old, communicators grapple with the struggle to seek important but apparently incompatible goals—two opposing or incompatible forces that exist simultaneously, such as the goal to be independent and the goal to be dependent (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Rawlins, 1992; Spitzberg, 1994). Broadly conceived, there are three dialectical tensions, each with internal (between the couple) and external (the couple in their social context) dimensions:

1.   integration versus separation—the conflicting desires for connection and independence: the need to get close to another to have a sense of community and to overcome the feeling of being alone in the world, versus the need to be sure that others neither impose on nor engulf us. We are individual and social creatures; we need other people to survive, but we want to survive as individuals.

2.   stability versus change—stability is an important need in relationships, but too much of it can lead to feelings of staleness and boredom; on the other hand, a completely unpredictable relational partner results in a relationship too stressful to manage.

3.   expression versus privacy—the drive for intimacy motivates us to self-disclose, and the equally important need to maintain some space between ourselves and others motivates us to erect boundaries and to avoid disclosure.

There are at least eight ways these challenges can be managed (Griffin, 2003): (1) *denial*, responding to one end of the dialectical spectrum and ignoring the other; (2) *disorientation*, feeling so overwhelmed and helpless that it is impossible to confront the problems associated with the dialectical tension, resulting in fighting and, perhaps, ending the relationship; (3) *alternation*, choosing one end of the dialectical spectrum at some times, and the other end on different occasions; (4) *segmentation*, compartmentalizing different areas of the relationship and managing the openness-closedness dialectic by engaging in high disclosure in some areas and low disclosure in others; (5) *balance*, recognizing that both forces are legitimate and trying to manage them through compromise; (6) *integration*, simultaneously accepting opposing forces without trying to diminish either of them; (7) *recalibration*, reframing the dialectical tensions so that their apparent contradiction disappears (e.g., secrets may be redefined as "creating an attractive aura of mystery" instead of as a problem to be solved); and (8) *reaffirmation*, acknowledging that dialectical tensions will never disappear and accepting the challenges they present.

The second set of short stories written by members of the class required them to apply the readings on dialectical tensions. The story needed to connect a "dialectical perspective for understanding relationships," a relationship of their own, and a relationship in *Buffy*. The following segment from one of the papers (presented here with the permission of the author) describes a particular dialectical tension and the way in which this communicator responded to it.

> During my depressive period, 1995-2003, I had few people to talk to. Aside from my confiding in Sandy, which I later regretted, I've had one other person I've mired in my misery—my friend Alan. Of course, the occasion in which I told Alan about

my particular disposition [toward suicide] was rife with the dialectical tension of openness vs. closedness. Hence, [this] paper.

Buffy's ordeal after being brought back from Heaven also dealt with the tension between these two opposites. Buffy's friends had wound her back onto the mortal coil after a dramatic, graceful, and fatal swan dive off a tall, tall tower. The result was a frumpy, sad-sack excuse of a slayer who suffered every minute of every day. Much like myself. Except I slayed vampires much less.

Buffy couldn't tell her friends of what had befallen her over the course of her experience as worm food. They thought they had helped pull her out of a hell dimension when they had really pulled her into one. Telling her friends what they did to her would have hurt their feelings to no end. And it did. Buffy's consternation at the idea of revealing this huge secret was due to the conflict of the need for revelation and the need for concealment to the outside world in order to preserve the Scoobies' feelings, especially in the episode "Once More With Feeling" (6007).

To begin again, Alan is a headcase. . . . As it so happens, Alan's history involves a little something about suicide as well. When he went to high school, one of his friends hung himself, which Alan never really got over. One night my freshman year we were discussing in earnest this fact. Being the self-involved friend that I am, I immediately related the whole thing to my situation, and since we were pulling so few punches, I decided to let Alan have it right in his glass jaw. . . . The need to be open won out over the need for Alan's feelings to be protected. So, following my usual modus operandi, I hurt the person closest to me by pushing the one button I knew I shouldn't push. I figured he was asking for it though, seeing as how he was discussing suicide earnestly with me. He had probably figured it out already and was just trying to feel out what I thought about the issue.

Alan eventually got over his problem in talking about suicide. After my well-intentioned stab at what I thought vulnerable in him, he grew a little less uncomfortable. He still doesn't treat the subject as cavalierly as I do, but that's how I handle serious things. I make them silly. Buffy played her self-destructive behavior to its melodramatic hilt. I play mine as cavalierly as possible. Hence, [this] paper.

Connecting with *Buffy*

Buffy the Vampire Slayer was and is successful because viewers (perhaps those particularly of high school and college age) are able to make the connection between ways of looking at and understanding interpersonal relationships (in our case social support and dialectical tensions) and (1) what happens in their own lives and (2) what happens in the lives of characters in *Buffy*. And, then, they can go that intellectually important next step and connect the two: use the relationships in *Buffy* to help make sense of the social support and dialectical tensions in their own lives. *Buffy* is useful as a vehicle to study interpersonal relationships because viewers have the ability to empathize with and learn about relationships (including how to behave in them) from observing relationships and relationship development on the show. It is the ability to make these connections—which look so easy but require a complex set of intellectual and emotional steps—that explains Jarvis' (2001) argument that *Buffy* is a useful vehicle for discussing important issues with "young" people.

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