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Interdependent With Caryl Rusbult

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We Are Interdependent With Caryl Rusbult

Caryl Rusbult was deeply committed to the advancement of relationship science. Her many major contributions to close relationships, social psychology, organizational psychology, have at their core what she aspired scientists to have in their career: “a few really good ideas.” The investment model and commitment processes of relationship maintenance, partner affirmation and dyadic processes by which partners influence each other, and communicating the virtues of interdependence theory all, indeed, were saturated with good Rusbult ideas. Caryl deeply enjoyed engaging, generating, and testing ideas; it is what she did from the moment she awoke only to be interrupted by sleep (which she occasionally put off by a day because she was too involved with ideas). Every so often during our meetings, she would stop what we were doing and say, “Wow. They *pay* me to do this??” Caryl loved science.

From the moment we met in 1990 when I was a prospective graduate student visiting UNC- Chapel Hill, to the moment she passed away on January 27th, 2010, Caryl had a profound effect on me. We quickly fell into a wonderful pattern of interdependence whereby I managed her research with newlywed couples (a NIMH-funded study in the early 1990s) and she mentored me on the science of relationship maintenance processes. As we became more interdependent, I became deeply committed to the concept of commitment.

High commitment initially comes about from wanting a relationship with a particular partner and/or feeling compelled to pursue a relationship with a particular partner. High commitment is synonymous with continuing in a relationship and is maintained through a variety of pro-relationship acts (e.g., accommodation, sacrifice, forgiveness), positive beliefs about the partner relative to others (e.g., superiority, idealization, derogation of alternatives), a sense of “we-ness” (e.g., cognitive interdependence, including the other in the self), and inferences about the partner’s high motivation to maintain the relationship (e.g., trust). Couple members who do these things become dependent in several senses. They become dependent in that the own and the partner’s outcomes become closely intertwined (Kelley et al., 1983), even if those ties

binding their outcomes are not acknowledged or noticed on a daily basis (Berscheid, 1983); they become dependent in that they are less likely to attach a high value to attractive others (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959); they become dependent in that, even when relationship threats arise – for example when satisfaction wanes, or when one couple member becomes interested in, or drawn to, someone other than the partner – the couple members remain together because too much would be lost if the relationship were to end (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1998).

I shared Caryl's deep conviction that interdependence (each couple member being dependent on the other) was among the most (if not *the most*) important property of ongoing relationships. This theoretical framework guided my own research on partner aggression and abuse. Partner situations that elicit investment and that feed perceptions of lacking alternatives cause people to be committed; this occurs with abusive partners as much as it does with non-abusive ones. Victims may remain dependent on an abusive partner, not because they are masochistic or crazy, but because they experienced the same investments and shift in perceptions of alternatives (or actual decline in alternatives) that non-victims experience (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Similarly, just as committed individuals engage in relationship maintenance acts, so do committed victims of partner abuse (e.g., Arriaga, 2002). This is not to say that commitment is bad because it makes victims do or think crazy things; the perpetrators are the ones doing the bad and crazy things (e.g., being harmful to a loved one, destroying a relationship). Instead, my work on commitment and victim responses to partner abuse reveals the strength and pervasiveness of commitment as an explanatory construct and empirical variable. Responses of committed victims are not aberrant responses or responses of “those on the fringe” – indeed, many partners become aggressive (especially with respect to non-physical acts of aggression) and many individuals remain committed. The responses of committed victims are a testament to the broad generalizability of basic commitment processes.

Caryl's work on commitment also influenced my thinking on the absence of commitment: doubt. Whereas commitment involves conviction and remaining steadfast in continuing a

relationship, doubt gives way to thoughts and actions that stray from the steady course. My goal in studying fluctuations in one's own feelings about a relationship (satisfaction; Arriaga, 2001) and perceptions of where the partner stands (perceptions of the partner's commitment; Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Angew, 2006) was to develop what it means to experience uncertainty and doubt in a relationship. It stands to reason that those things that undermine commitment (e.g., a selfish partner, an attractive and very accessible alternative partner) give rise to doubt; doubt in many ways is the converse of commitment. My assumption, however, was and continues to be that there are unique processes characterizing doubt, processes that may not necessarily be the same as those characterizing low commitment. Were it not for Caryl (or for John Holmes and for Hal Kelley; Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Kelley, 1983), I would not have embarked on this line of reasoning.

Others have also benefitted, and will continue to benefit, from Caryl's efforts to underscore how interdependence characterizes and sustains ongoing relationships. Her work and that of others (e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1988) has emphasized that it is not positive affect that makes relationship lasts, but rather acting and thinking in ways that make the *relationship unit* undeniable. At the core of Caryl's work are interdependence theory ideas – dependence, transformation of motivation, attribution of interpersonal dispositions – that were originally discussed by Hal Kelley and John Thibaut. These ideas thrived because Caryl revised them (e.g., investment model), made them accessible (see any of her many publications on interdependence theory), and, most importantly, made them relevant to explaining what transpires in relationships. (Hal Kelley wrote a marvelous book in 1979 about applying interdependence concepts to relationships, but it was Caryl who extended and disseminated the ideas, and empirically tested their truth-value. John Holmes and Paul Van Lange are others who have “translated” interdependence concepts and made them relevant to understanding relationship processes, along with the other authors of the recent publication on an interdependence analysis of interpersonal situations, Kelley et al., 2003.)

Caryl also had a deeply positive personal effect on those who knew her well. As a mentor, she modeled “good behavior.” Even in given situations with markedly noncorrespondent and unfavorable outcomes, Caryl would transform the situation and “take the high road.” I observed her consistently treating others with respect, even when she vehemently disagreed with those others. Her generosity and ability to act truly social in every respect were unparalleled. She valued fairness, cooperation, and the good of the collective over the individual. Her characteristic charm, elegance, and kindness prompted one prominent relationships scholar to comment, “She is one classy lady!” Her efforts to share all of her newlywed data with others is one of the most compelling examples of collaboration I have come across, even for relationships researchers. And even, when we mourned her declining health and imminent passing, she refused to be angry; her gift to us during that time was to embrace the positive moments and memories in life, and face death with unimaginable grace and dignity. Thus, on so many levels, she influenced others in the best of ways. We can honor her by influencing each other in the best of ways – interdependence at its finest.

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