William K. Rawlins’

DIALECTICAL THEORY OF FRIENDSHIP

An exploration of friendship in contemporary USA
and a look at the television Sitcom, Friends

by

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Introduction

This essay seeks to review and evaluate William K. Rawlins’ (1992) dialectical theory of friendship (DTF). The essay consists of four parts, of which the first will give an overview of the theory’s major features and attempt to identify which paradigm it reflects in its approach to the subject matter. Part two offers a review of existing literature on the theory. In part three, the theory will be assessed using tools for theory analysis, and part four applies it to an episode of the popular television sitcom, *Friends*.

As the name suggests, the dialectical theory of friendship refers to tensions between contradictory elements in relationships between friends. Rawlins (1992) argues that friendships, at any stage in life, represent a complex set of challenges arising from dialectical contradictions innate in the very concept of being friends. The theory attempts to identify these contradictions in order to appreciate and understand the complex nature of friendships.

Overview of the Dialectical Theory of Friendships

Rawlins (1992) argues that friendship occupies a marginal position in American society because it is different from all other socially and formally established types of relationships. It is not a certifiable blood relationship such as kin, nor is it defined by economic contracts as are work and professional relationships. It lacks the legal and religious rights of marriage, and is regarded as different from the more possessive and sexual nature of romantic love. In essence, friendship has no clear, formalized public status in society, although in reality it may often compete with, complement, or merge
with all the other types of social bonds. Consequently, Rawlins (1992) argues that friendship is an “institutionalized non-institution” (p. 9).

In contrast to friendship’s vagrant position in society is its moral character as a social bond. The rights and obligations of friendship can transcend all formally institutionalized roles, and it pervades the larger social order by fulfilling both individual and social functions.

Rawlins (1992) identifies two general classes of dialectics that occur in friendships: (1) contextual and (2) interactional. Contextual dialectics describe the place of friendship in the wider context of society, and interactional dialectics deal with the ambiguities of everyday communication in any friendship.

**Contextual dialectics**

Contextual dialectics identify cultural and societal conceptions that frame and pervade interaction within specific friendships. Rawlins (1992) argues that any definition of friendship must mediate two contextual dialectics: (1) the dialectic of the private and the public, and (2) the dialectic of the ideal and the real.

Friendship is by definition private. It is something that is worked out between two people and cannot be forced upon anyone. However, there are strong societal and cultural expectations as to what a friendship is and means, and the theory argues there is a dialectic between what society says a friendship should be (the public) and how two friends actually view their friendship (the private). The dialectic of the private and the public involves representing one’s friendship to the society at large in a socially acceptable manner; Every person plays a number of different roles depending on
situations and contexts, and what may be appropriate in a private context may be frowned upon in public, and vice versa.

The dialectic of the ideal and the real addresses how friends deal with the tension between the cultural ideals and expectations associated with friendship, and the actual nature of their relationship. Rawlins (1992) argues that idealized images of friendship develop in the public domain and thus shape a clear notion of what constitutes an ideal friendship. He argues that an ideal friendship in American culture is a voluntary, personal, equal, and mutual relationship that includes affective ties, however distinguished from the sexual and possessive overtones of a romantic relationship. The extent to which the above combination of qualities is possible, encouraged or actually practiced by friends in reality depends on their social circumstances.

With parallels to Plato’s allegory of the cave, Rawlins (1992) argues that although friendship persists as an enduring cultural ideal, its ideal form is frequently experienced as an elusive personal reality. Because the ideals of friendship are perceived as realizable, but not institutionally protected, aspiring to an ideal friendship comprises an ongoing challenge for individuals across constantly changing personal and social circumstances. To complicate matters further, measures taken to preserve certain prized aspects of a friendship may subvert other cherished values. For example, a person may deliberately and strategically breach the code of honesty between friends to protect the other’s sensitivity about an issue. Naturally, the mere fact that such protection is necessary suggests that the ideals are fictitious measures in the first place.

The terminology of friendships can pivot between moral and tactical meanings. Because of the idealistic connotations of friendship in American culture, speaking of
someone as a friend draws on cherished categorical notions. Thus, the term friendship may also be used deliberately in the interest of manipulating social situations. As such, the varying practices of, and references to, friendship both manage and regenerate the tensions between its ideal and real forms.

In summary, friends may attempt to communicate in ways that conform to what society sees as acceptable public behavior, as well as to the ideals of friendship in their era or social circumstances, but in doing so they create, and are forced to manage, contradictions between the public and the private, and the ideal and the real.

1.1 Interactional dialectics

Interactional dialectics address the ambiguities of everyday communication in any friendship. Rawlins (1992) argues that friendships are potentially fraught with ambiguity, both in the friends’ attempts to interpret each other’s words and actions, and the significance assigned to their behavior by third parties and/or society at large. Therefore, friends are constantly faced with the challenge of behaving and interpreting behaviors in a manner that preserves an assumption of good intentions. As such, interactional dialectics includes all the conflicts that friends endure and manage to sustain their friendship. Identifying communication as the means by which interactional dialectics are handled, the theory outlines four principles: (1) the dialectic of the freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent, (2) the dialectic of affection and instrumentality, (3) the dialectic of judgment and acceptance, and (4) the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness.
In forming a friendship, each person grants the other a pair of contradictory prerogatives. The freedom to be independent is the liberty to pursue one’s life and interests without interference from the friend. Conversely, the freedom to be dependent is the privilege to rely on a friend for support or help in times of need. Sometimes these interests may be conflicting. For example, if one friend has made plans at a time when the other is in need of help the options collide. Also, any general unbalance between the independency/dependency needs of friends is likely to create conflict, such as one friend’s tendency to interfere or ask for support more than the other friend can appreciate.

The dialectic of affection and instrumentality describes the tension between seeing a friend as an end in itself or as a means to another end. With clear links to Aristotle’s friendships of virtue, the theory argues that affection is associated with ‘true’ friendship, whereas instrumentality tends to connote ‘false’ ones. As such, this dialectic may cause people to think twice about asking a friend for a favor, because they do not want to be perceived as ‘using’ the friend. However, an array of contradictions operates in this continuum between affection and instrumentality. Affection may be communicated both purposefully and unintentionally to receive displays of caring or instrumental aid. Conversely, friends may help friends unselfishly to receive affection or obtain instrumental gains. As such, displays of generosity versus reciprocity and spontaneity versus obligations may be differently interpreted and shape the characteristics of a friendship.

The dialectic of judgment and acceptance explains how friends evaluate each other and how this is expressed. The dialectical relationship between judgment and acceptance is mediated by how much friends are perceived to care about one another. The
theory argues that friends will generally not criticize each other’s flaws because they care enough to disregard or even accept them. In other instances, friends may criticize each other’s actions, ideas or feelings, however equivocating between being judgmental and accepting each other as they are. Conflicts occur when there is a lack of clarity or disagreement about the source of evaluative standards for criticizing friends, and how or whether any forms of criticism, positive or negative, should be communicated.

The dialectics between expressiveness and protectiveness is in many ways a conflict between spontaneity and strategy, and honesty and rhetorical adaptation, in that it addresses the conflict between being honest and avoiding hurting a friend’s feelings. Rawlins (1992) argues that while friends embrace honesty as a virtue, they also develop protective strategies to avoid hurting each other. He argues that trust develops within friendships to the extent that the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness is appropriately managed. Friends want to trust in the honesty of each other’s remarks, while at the same time trust each other not to be hurtful with sensitive comments about something that only they, as close friends, would know.

In summary, the nature of friendship represents a complex relationship in which contextual and interactional dialectics interweave in numerous and often ambiguous ways. The public view of friendship is laden with ideals, whereas the private actualities are governed by real relations negotiated by the friends themselves. As such, friends create and manage contradictions and conflicts rooted in roles, notions of ideality, dependencies, affections, acceptance, and expressiveness. The dialectical theory of friendship aims to analyze and explain the nature of friendship by exaggerating the clarity of the dialectics facing friends.
Because the dialectical theory of friendship explains how friendships are created and maintained by how friends perceive themselves and each other throughout the life course, it represents an interpretive approach to analyzing communication in relationships. It argues that the societal notion of friendship is a social construct of the subjective experiences of its members, and rather than attempting to establish an objective definition of what is a friendship, the theory looks at how meaning is created among friends. As such, the theory is not concerned with how to measure friendship phenomena, but rather with what these phenomena mean. Consequently, the realities and characteristics of friendship is not a tangible entity external to individuals, but rather what the individuals make of it, i.e. their interpretation (Putnam, 1982).

It is interesting to note how the theory identifies dialectics between social realities on a macro level (society) versus on a micro level (individual friendships). While establishing that the notion of an ideal friendship on a societal level is a construct of the subjective experiences of its members, it is intriguing, and arguably hypocritical, that this collective notion of reality may not be reflected by the actualities of real friendships, and may even be source of conflict.

In summary, Rawlins’ (1992) theory is is interpretive because it focuses on the subjective contextual and interactional meanings assigned by friends as means to understanding the nature of friendship as a product of two friends within the context of society.
2 Literature review

The dialectical theory of friendship was published by Rawlins in 1992 in *Friendship matters: Communication, dialectics, and the life course*. However, he discussed and utilized the theory’s concepts in numerous articles and chapters in edited books before this. Therefore, this review includes literature that predates the publication in which the complete theory was conceptually framed.

Relevant literature produced by others beside the author is very limited. The theory is mentioned briefly in some educational communication literature, where it is recognized for representing a sophisticated and intriguing approach to the subject of dialectics in friendships (Burleson & Samter, 1996; Littlejohn, 2002). However, it has yet to receive widespread attention in the fields to which it is applicable, including, but not limited to, communication, sociology, social anthropology and psychology. Therefore, this review will predominantly address literature published by Rawlins himself in which he applies his theory, or parts of it, to various subjects within the realms of friendship.

Existing literature is predominantly concerned with three major applications of the theory: (1) friendships during adolescence, (2) friendships during adulthood, and (3) cross-sex friendships.

Rawlins and Holl (1987) investigate the varieties, tensions and functions of friendship as described by 32 high school juniors in open-ended interviews. Students expressed considerable tension between popularity as public comportment and friendship as private communication and were overly concerned with the preservation or violation of trust in their friendships when faced with contrasting public or private pressure. Based on the same interviews Rawlins and Holl (1988) touch on a related topic. Searching for
dialectical principles informing adolescents’ decisions to talk with parents and/or friends, they identify the dialectic of judgment and acceptance on the basis of caring, but also a dialectic that is not specifically addressed in the later theory, namely the dialectic of historical perspective and contemporary experience. The latter addresses temporal orientations by parents and friends toward adolescent activities.

Addressing a category between adolescence and adulthood, Legge and Rawlins (1992) investigate how young adult friends communicatively manage personal disputes. Through videotaped interaction of six pairs of disputing friends and their subsequent personal comments, the authors identify three relationally constituted modes of dispute management which they named accordingly. These modes were based on the friends’ discursive practices and patterns of interpersonal perception, and the study uses the dialectical theory of friendship for analyses and comparison.

Rawlins (1983b) studies the practical management of interactions sustaining close friendships among adults. Based on interviews, he identifies a dialectical principle governing the communicative organization of friendship, namely what is to become the dialectic of freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent as further elaborated in his later publication (Rawlins, 1992). As the study focuses exclusively on this one dialectic, it provides a thorough insight into the rationale behind the full theory, but may also be read as an in-depth study on one of its dialectics. In similar studies, Rawlins (1986, 1994, 1998a, 1998b, 2000a) examines predicaments and practices of sustaining friendships during adulthood. Dealing with one or more of the dialectics identified in the theory, these studies address general and specific aspects of the theory and how they are used in understanding the complexities of communicating in friendships.
Analyzing cross-sex friendships, Rawlins (1982, 1996) argues that the concept of a man and a woman being ‘just friends’ connotes ambiguous associations. Because society tends to reserve this kind of relationship for romance, love, and sex, a platonic relationship between a man and a woman often has to be explained, and there is a cultural tendency to interpret this kind of relationship as something more intimate. Rawlins (2001) addresses comparisons of friendship and romantic love, differences in same-sex friendships (man-man vs. woman-woman), and cross-sex friendship as a rhetorical challenge.

A study of the dialectical theory of friendship would not be complete without reading Rawlins’ (1998c) ‘meta text’ about his theory where he explains the process of composing the theory, and addresses important aspects of sustaining dialectical and dialogical questioning in his approach. A valuable insight into his reasoning, this article also ties the theory to other theorists’ views on relationships, which puts the dialectical theory of friendship in context.

A less researched area, friendship in relation to teaching is the focus of two studies (Rawlins, 1996, 2000b). Merging the dialectical theory of friendship and learning theory, these studies argue that teaching can be practiced as a mode of friendship through developing a caring relationship with students, searching for means and moments of speaking as equals, and encouraging shared responsibility for learning together.

While reviewing how the dialectical theory of friendship has been applied to various situations may provide some insight into its applicability, it is important to recognize that any evaluation or assessment should include a more thorough and systematic analysis, which is provided in the following section.
Evaluation

Littlejohn (2002) describes several criteria for evaluating theory, the first of which he calls “the principle of generality,” which means that a theory’s explanation must be sufficiently general to cover a range of events beyond a single observation (p. 30). This refers to the scope of a theory, which may be broad if it covers many phenomena, or narrow if it applies to few phenomena but in a large number of situations. Seen from a general communication perspective, the study of how one communicates in friendships deals with a narrow range of events, but the explanations of these events apply to an infinite number of instances. Thus, the theory has a narrow theoretical scope but significant depth. What may narrow the scope even further is the fact that the theory does not take into account how group dynamics affect dyadic relationships within a group.

Furthermore, and critical in this context, is the fact that Rawlins’ (1992) research was carried out on white middle-class U.S. citizens, which significantly narrows the theory’s scope. As demonstrated in the previous literature review, the scope of the theory may be dramatically broadened when including other, traditionally unrelated, topics, such as teaching. Consequently, as one may choose to pair the theory with an endless number of other topics, its scope becomes increasingly broadened. This, on the other hand, may raise serious questions about its validity.

Validity refers to a theory’s truth value, and points to issues of relevance, such as whether the theory helps make the observations or obtain the information needed, and its applicability across situations. In the case of broadening the scope to include an endless number of unrelated topics, it is unclear whether the theory helps make the observations
that are needed. When limited to the narrow scope of analyzing the nature of friendship, the theory may seem to be valid, but because of the strictly segmented research, it is highly doubtful whether the theory is valid beyond analyzing dyadic friendship among white middle-class U.S. citizens. (Furthermore, the author consequently refers to the U.S. as ‘America,’ making the common, but potentially serious, mistake of confusing the country with the continent.) Although Rawlins (1992) briefly mentions the limited basis of his research at the very beginning his publication, reading the theory gives the impression that it is valid for all people in America, i.e. from Canada to Argentina, whereas the actual truth is far more limited.

It is also noteworthy that Rawlins (1982, 1996, 2001) applies his theory to cross-sex and same-sex friendships without acknowledging the differences between sex and gender. As such, his work excludes the possibilities of same-sex, but cross-gender - or cross-sex, but same-gender friendships.

Lastly, Rawlins (1992) argues that friendship is pervaded with what he calls “the spirit of equality” (p. 9), in which friends emphasize attributes that make them appear more or less equal to each other, but fails to recognize and address the differences between complementary and symmetrical relationships. Interestingly, neither the author nor other critics seem to acknowledge these fairly obvious, but critical, observations on the theory’s validity.

The theory’s appropriateness may be judged by its epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions. One way of evaluating the dialectical theory of friendship is thus whether its claims are consistent with its assumptions. This form of evaluation is usually more applicable from a scientific perspective, where a theory should be verified
judged by its ability to produce consistent results and prove unambiguous connections between cause and effect. Because of the interpretive nature of the theory, it makes no sense to look for consistent results as such. On the other hand, it would be accurate to say that Rawlins’ (1992) assumptions are consistent with his claims. For example, he argues that friends need to manage each other’s freedoms to be independent versus dependent in order to avoid conflicts. However, this goes back to the highly limited validity of the theory, so any assessment on its appropriateness must be carried out in light of those limitations.

Heuristic value, i.e., the extent to which a theory generates new theories, is seen as an important criterion for evaluating theory. Although the dialectical theory of friendship has yet to be recognized as the source of new theories, it seems clear that its limited validity presents an opportunity to investigate the role dialectics may play in friendships in other cultures, including, but not limited to, nationality, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, the theory may encourage new research on the nature of friendship from a different perspective than dialectics. Consequently, the theory seems to have a high heuristic value.

Another criterion of evaluation is what Neuliep (1996) and Littlejohn (2002) refer to as the test of parsimony and addresses the theory’s logical simplicity. Although the dialectical theory of friendship has no direct competing theory to which its parsimony may be assessed, it does represent a highly parsimonious addition to general dialectical theories of relationships in that it specifically addresses friendship. Consequently, anyone interested in analyzing friendship will find this theory parsimonious because, as opposed to general dialectical theory, it is designed to specifically analyze this subject.
Finally, the theory may be evaluated based on its openness, which refers to its ability to be open to other possibilities. For the theory to be open, Rawlins (1992) must recognize that his approach is a way of looking, rather than an accurate description of reality. Because of the interpretive nature of the theory, it is reasonable to say that the theory is open, because it admits diversity and makes no attempt to argue its completeness. Indeed, the theory argues that although its identified dialectics may or may not consciously inform the actual behavior of friends, they are useful as interpretive tools for understanding the communicative predicaments of friendships.

**Applying the DTF theory to the TV sitcom Friends**

The highly popular television sitcom, *Friends*, focuses on the close-knit friendship of three men and three women in New York City, who frequently gather at each other’s apartments and share a sofa space at a Greenwich Village coffeehouse. As with Rawlins’ (1992) focus of research, they are all white, middle-class U.S. citizens, and while the series has been criticized for portraying unrealistically ‘perfect’ friends, it is intriguing to analyze their interactions using the dialectical theory of friendship. Of course, any episode of *Friends* is fiction and as such one may argue how appropriate this is to analyze. However, the goal is not to argue whether the series represents a realistic view of friendship, but to show how the dialectics are used and often exaggerated to produce the funny situations, interpersonal conflicts, and touching moments for which this sitcom is known.

In the following episode, “The one where Ross finds out” (Kauffman & Crane, 1995), Chandler is under the impression that he has gained weight, and Monica
volunteers to exercise with him in order to lose it. Although the episode consists of several intertwining and interrelated stories, this paper will focus exclusively on the interaction that takes place in relation to Chandler’s weight issue because a broader analysis would not be possible within the scope of this essay.

Dialectics are evident already from the outset, when Chandler comes bursting into Monica’s apartment where the friends are gathered. He has been to a party at which he received no female attention, and rhetorically asks his friends whether he is “hideously unattractive.” Phoebe, the spontaneous one that tends to talk before she thinks, responds by saying “No, you are not… you are very attractive. You know what, I go through the exact same thing - every time I put on a little weight, I start questioning everything.” Startled by this blatant tactlessness, Chandler interprets this comment as a badly disguised hint that he has gained weight and turns to the others to have the claim confirmed or rejected. This is where two interactional dialectics come into play.

The dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness presents a dilemma here in which the friends are torn between being honest (by telling Chandler he has put on weight) and dishonest (by saying he has not). Honesty is indeed a virtue in their friendship, but at the same time they want to avoid hurting Chandler’s feelings. The friends’ response is to avoid having to deal with the dialectic whatsoever, by suddenly, and rather awkwardly, invent excuses that prompt them to leave the room or pretend to be having an important, and completely unrelated, discussion. Here, the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness produces an amusing situation in which Phoebe, speaking before thinking, says something insensitive in a situation where societal and
cultural expectations would favor protectiveness through rhetorical adaptation. As such, one may also identify the dialectic of the ideal and the real in this context.

When Phoebe realizes her ‘mistake,’ she says what Rawlins (1992) argues as typical for the expressiveness/protectiveness dialectic, namely trying to be honest while being careful in how this honesty is expressed: “Erm… not weight… more like… insulation!” Whereas this comment in a real-life situation may not be very successful as a means of portraying gentle honesty, it presents an amusing situation by exaggerating the dialectic and thus the friends’ responses to each other.

Also, the dialectic of judgment versus acceptance is represented here, again by Phoebe, whose inattentiveness prompts her to pass judgmental comments in situations where others would say nothing. Because Chandler’s weight gain is unimportant to their friendship, the friends accept this without much thought because they care enough for him to ignore it.

The dialectic of affection and instrumentality comes into play as Monica offers to help him exercise: “Chandler, I’m unemployed and in dire need of a project. You wanna work out, I can remake you!” By presenting the argument is such a manner, she creates the impression that Chandler would actually be doing her a favor by letting her help him. Rawlins (1992) argues that affection connotes ‘true’ friendship, while instrumentality is regarded as exploitation and thus seen as negative. This situation may thus be interpreted in the following manner: Monica assumes that Chandler will feel he would be ‘using’ her if he lets her train him. Therefore, chances are he would refuse. However, by framing the offer the way she does, she appeals to Chandler’s affection for her, which makes Chandler feel good about it because he would actually be doing Monica a favor by
accepting. Consequently, they would both feel good about themselves for helping each other. On the other hand, it may of course be the case that Monica really does need this ‘project’ to keep her busy, which confirms Rawlins’ arguments on the complexity of this dialectic.

Later in the episode, Monica’s obsessive diligence to train Chandler creates a situation in which the dialectic of the freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent causes an argument that eventually ends the training relationship. In the scenes leading up to this conflict, Chandler airs his frustration with Monica’s eagerness to Joey: “She’s insane! The woman is insane! It’s before work, it during work, it’s after work - she’s got me doing butt clenches at my desk!” Joey tells Chandler that he should just ask her to stop, to which Chandler replies: “I can’t! Ok? While she’s out of work I’m all she’s got!” Here, three dialectics come into play. The dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness dictates that Chandler will not tell Monica that he has had enough, because he assumes this will hurt her feelings. As such, he refrains from doing so because of his affection for her, as described in the dialectic of affection and instrumentality. And finally, because Monica is interfering with his life more than he can appreciate, the situation presents the dialectic of the freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent. The conflict peaks when Monica tries to drag him out for a run early Sunday morning, and Chandler can no longer put up with it.

In conclusion, it seems clear that the friendships portrayed in Friends accentuate the dialectics identified by Rawlins (1992). By doing so, situations become proportionally exaggerated and present an ideal framework for dramatization. Because the audience recognizes the dialectics from their own lives, they can easily relate to the
people and the situations. Consequently, the friendships in the series are far from ‘perfect’ in the sense that a ‘perfect’ friendship is devoid of tensions, conflicts and ambiguities. On the contrary, it is these dialectics that make the series entertaining.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this essay was to review and evaluate Rawlins’ (1992) dialectical theory of friendship. The theory argues that any relationship between friends represents a complex set of challenges arising from contextual and interactional dialectics which the friends both create and manage. Although the theory is useful to understand and appreciate the complexity of friendship, serious doubts may be raised regarding its validity and appropriateness. Rawlins’ research was limited to white, middle-class U.S. citizens, which severely limits its applicability.

Existing literature on the theory is predominantly limited to articles written by Rawlins himself and is mainly concerned with friendship in adolescence, adulthood, and between people of different sexes. However, literature on the latter topic fails to recognize differences in gender, which excludes cross-sex, but same gender, and same-sex, but cross-gender friendships.

Ultimately, when applied to situations that reflect the limitations of the research, the theory may be very useful to understand the nature of friendship. Applying the theory to the television sitcom, *Friends*, revealed how the comedy relies heavily on exaggerating dialectics to produce the funny situations, conflicts, and touching moments for which the series is so well known.
References


