

*the* Positive Side  
of Interpersonal  
Communication



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# So Let It Be with Caesar . . . ?

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The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.

—Shakespeare

A part from a lifelong interest in the study of personal relationships, one of my abiding passions is history, particularly Roman history and Medieval/English Tudor history. This is mostly for amusement and mental development, but also because of awareness of the risks of ignoring history and repeating its mistakes.

In the course of this dedicated leisure activity, I have learned that it was not until the late 1890s that any city—in this case, New York—was able to provide its inhabitants with such an efficient, reliable and voluminous on- tap water supply as was available in ancient Rome at the time of Julius Caesar. Likewise I have learned that the medieval invention of the mantled chimney, replacing the previous hole in the communal roof towards which smoke was optimistically directed, created the possibility of heating separate rooms.

Each of these changes in physical capacity had relational consequences that we all too often overlook in the search for the interestingly unique psychological or communicative activity while ignoring the commonplaces and ordinary activities of life (Duck, 2011). When people do not need to meet at wells in order to draw their daily rations of water, social community is affected; the private running water tap isolates members of the community who had previously gathered to draw water but also to share stories, news and relational updates. The heating of private room encourages separation of the wealthy from the rest of the group that had previously lived and performed all daily functions in one common hall. Social division is figuratively and literally represented in spatial separation (Duck, 2011).

On top of the relational consequences of technological growth, represented these days as if it were something new when that is by no means true

(Andrejevic, 2007), it is equally untrue to represent the study of relationships as a new science. It is often surprising to note that what the Romans took for granted disappeared with the fall of the Western Roman Empire and was not rediscovered or taken for granted again until relatively recent times. Many comforts of life and ingenious solutions to life's problems were nevertheless ready at hand, including, obviously, personal relationships about which Romans and Greeks both wrote quite a lot. Evidently an interest in relationships by thinkers and scholars has been long-lasting, though just as today there are some good and bad elements to relationships, so too for the Romans. Julius Caesar was, after all, murdered by some of his closest former friends and other people whom he had graciously forgiven for their past defaults. His dying words were not "Et tu Brute" but Greek, *καὶ σὺ τέκνον* ["kai su teknon"], which translate as "you too, my son?" leading to long and unresolved debate about Brutus' paternity, given Caesar's lifelong notoriety as a seducer of his friends' wives.

Chapters in this volume represent such activities as forgiveness as positive influences on relationships, emphasize the clarity and the value of good listening and excellent communication, discuss the many sided nature of affectionate communication, indicate the importance of recognition and celebration of other people's performance, and stress the importance of nurturing, comfort, and support. Clearly, these are important and it is time that someone focused in a single volume on these positive aspects of relationships. One is nevertheless forced to recognize, even from the brief historical references above, that forgiveness can have negative consequences, nurturance can lead to betrayal, friendship can sometimes be a path way to adultery, and that support can end at the point of a dagger.

It is therefore necessary to praise the attempt of the editors to bring together such a variety of smart people to write chapters for this volume, but to contextualize their efforts which must be planted amidst the range of other circling activities in relationships. Only rarely do we experience friendship and nothing else, with no disturbances, no arguments, no disputes, no conflicts of opinion, no ongoing tedium of normality. Positive though friendship, forgiveness, intimacy, and other relational elements may be in themselves, they always have other accompaniments in the swirling, blooming, buzzing, boring confusion of everyday life. In order to elaborate on this point, made by Duck and Wood (1995), it is valuable to take another look at history of a more recent kind.

## Resurgam

In an excavation in London in the late 1600s, workers preparing the site for the new St. Paul's Cathedral came upon a Roman burial ground and in particular a votive offering containing the word "Resurgam," I will rise again. It is something of a delight to learn repeatedly, as above, about the state of things so long ago, their disappearance, and their resurgence. It is also worth reflecting in the context of the current volume that similar patterns of existence, disappearance and resurgence besiege modern academic research. Although we like to think of research as driven by theory and strictly academic concerns, there is necessarily a pattern of fashion and it influences the topics that we consider worth studying. Against this pattern of fashion, it is commendable that the editors have chosen a relatively unpopular topic—or at least have managed to recognize a latent pattern in the work of many different scholars which can be brought together in this volume. Of course, work on positive aspects of relationships has been done before, but it has not been collected previously into a single important volume. Topics come and go, but their resurgence depends on the vision of those who recognize patterns.

Indeed, I must confess to an ironic repetition of a point that I first made in 1980 (Duck, 1980) that there is a cyclicity in research, as people become bored with some topics and wish to establish a reputation for inventing something new. In the 1980 chapter, I drew attention to the loss of the taken-for-granted as PhD advisors steer their students towards the *criticism* of current research and they, in their turn, did the same until we reached the point where those things that the original PhD advisor knew for certain were either crumbling under the assault of sharper minds or had been entirely discarded and forgotten. Thus, some certainties of research become lost, decline and decay, and all too often it is the case that someone will claim a new topic of research (e.g., "context" Karney et al., 2005), which is new only to those who have not sufficiently reviewed existing research that has already discussed the topic in detail (Duck, 1993).

It is also characteristic that scientists and scholars overlook research in disciplines other than their own, so that there is a continual rediscovery of piles and piles of discarded wheels. Likewise, it is the case that scholars are concerned with being up-to-date or connected to the famous, and therefore neglect other work as they follow the recognized leaders of a field treading a well-established path, preferably one with simple but exciting names, such as the Pygmalion effect, SPEAKING, or the Michelangelo effect (Innes, 1980).

## One History of the Study of Relationships

The belief that relationships were an important positive and satisfying part of life was one of the earliest claims made on their behalf, and dates back to Aristotle and Cicero, both of whom, rather interestingly, wrote not only about rhetoric and persuasion, but also about friendship. It was however a 20th century trend for books to be written about the way in which relationships could be improved, with many trade books earning their authors satisfying retirements (Carnegie, 1936 for example). Early researchers on marital satisfaction such as Hamilton (1924) were more energetic but less well cushioned against the evening of life. Physical attractiveness, explored in detail by Perlin (1921), did not become fashionable again until the mid-1970s (Dion & Berscheid, 1974). After a brief, beautiful, flurry it declined and fell until a resurgence accompanied the development of third wave feminist theory and in particular an interest in transgendered identities (Norwood, 2010) and the role that physical attractiveness played in rejection of women by other women (Norwood, 2007). Attachment theory, developed in the 1940s by Bowlby (1951) was seen to have no obvious connection to the general theory of personal relationships until Hazan and Shaver (1987) reconceptualized romantic love as an attachment process, after which even a dying Gaul could not avoid encountering some research paper attaching attachment to all known forms of relational life.

One broad history of relationships therefore is a history of the discovery and resurgence of ideas that have previously declined and fallen. One is tempted to answer the question of whether it is a matter of human nature that this cycle of discovery is embedded in our psychological makeup, and that generation after generation is necessarily rediscovering the beliefs of our forebears. After all, one thing that is simply not transmissible from one person to another is “experience”. To some degree, we must all stand on the shoulders of giants, and yet are required to relearn what they knew.

The ability to comprehend a broader picture that represents the contributions of previous researchers necessarily requires that we stop and think. The fact that this volume requires us to do just that, and to place our recent efforts in some larger framework, is all to the good. That is, it is all to the good as long as researchers actually take account of it and do not start their “historical contextualization” only with research dating from the 1990s.

## Research as an Influence on Research

The nature of research itself encourages researchers to focus on specific issues, particularly in experimental paradigms, and to isolate them from the

greater flow of life so that they may be studied more effectively. Despite the fact that physical and prevailing social characteristics are imported by everybody into their interactions with one another, the isolation of the influence of physical attraction from other factors is a necessary requirement of its study in the laboratory, for example. Almost every other topic which has been studied in the field provides a further example. Hence, many researchers happily plow their own furrows—or in Levinger's (1972) arresting analogy, play in their own sandboxes—while overlooking the broader picture that relationships present for analysis. This of course is one reason why isolated pockets of positive relationships have remained unconnected until the editors of this volume thought to pull it all together.

I'm not sure if this isolationism is a feature of research which is avoidable or simply one that is embedded in the academic structures in which we all earn our daily bread and circuses. Nevertheless, as the pace of research on relationships picked up in the 1980s and '90s, there was a tendency first to notice the importance of the positive influence of relationships on mental health before the pattern switched to concern with the negativity that relationships also brought—and then a resurgence of the important recognition that specific and isolated elements of positive relationships must be a major part of life. Individual researchers and teams of researchers pursue their own specific topical influences and interests. For example, Brant Burleson's energetic and consistent studies of comforting represent a programmatic approach to one specific element of positivity in relationships. A general overview of positivity, however, has had to wait for this particular volume.

Interestingly, one of the first places that an emphasis on positive relationships was developed was in the area of management theory, where many distinguished researchers were as unaware of the 25 years of research carried out by their colleagues in what is now the field of personal relationships as we were of their own efforts. Dutton and Ragins' (2006) volume on positive relationships at work was the first that I know of to have the words "positive relationships" in the title, but it is, somewhat predictably, not cited outside the field of business management. Nevertheless, the authors in that edited volume have done significant work about the way in which positive relationships influence productivity and satisfaction in the workplace as well as management styles and leadership techniques. Their definition of "positive relationships" may not be one that we recognize fully, and yet it is an important resource where opportunities for interaction between the two separate fields of business management and personal relationships are legion.