Committed to Relationship Science: Lessons From Rusbult

When I first crossed paths with Caryl Rusbult, it was my first day as a graduate student in the social psychology program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) in August of 1990. I had been assigned to serve as her research assistant for her National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)-funded “Newlywed Study.” At the time, I am not sure I knew what NIMH stood for or that it might be considered unusual for a brand new graduate student to work on funded research. Having never crossed paths previously, I was eager to meet her and to begin work on whatever she wanted me to do. I found her in her immaculately maintained office, watering plants and listening to Vivaldi. After brief introductions and small talk, I asked what I should be doing in my role as her new research assistant. “Good science!” was her immediate response. “But before you can do that, I want you to absorb being around the department. Don’t worry about doing anything. Just absorb.” And with those unforgettable words (and smile), I began my relationship with Caryl, a relationship that has helped define my own career. The absorption began immediately and, in many ways, continued until her dying day. In the wake of her passing, I have thought quite a bit about what I learned from her about being a relationship scientist over the years since our initial meeting. Here are some of those lessons.

Necessity of Theory

Caryl taught me about the necessity and incredible value of theory. Lost amidst a sea of significant correlations, she taught me early (and often) that you need a theoretical framework in which to situate your thinking. It would be accurate to state that she actively lived Kurt Lewin’s mantra regarding the practical value of theory. Without theory, where does your thinking start? Or end? As a student of John Thibaut (himself a Lewin student), Caryl was immersed in theory throughout her own graduate training at UNC. She brought that same orientation to her research and it helped craft her approach to graduate training. Caryl’s theories, simple and elegant, emphasized processes both within and between people. The investment model (Rusbult, 1980), the EVLN model (exit, voice, loyalty, neglect; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982), the trust model (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), the Michelangelo model (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999)—each of these was created to help understand a particular interpersonal process. Each of these provides a conceptual road map to help scholars arrive at an intended destination: knowledge about relational phenomena. If the goal is accurate knowledge about how relationships work, your theory is your map. Without it, you risk becoming lost. Caryl was never lost and she worked to help ensure that those of us who worked with her were not either. She was the consummate mapmaker.

Getting It Right

Caryl taught me to take the time to do “good science,” particularly with respect to the study
of close relationships. I think she felt that relationship scientists had a special obligation to ensure that our methodological and statistical approaches to answering research questions were of the highest caliber given our focus on “relationships.” Like it or not, studying relationships has been considered by some to be far from a scientific endeavor. I suppose we can thank decades of Cosmo quizzes and racks of non-evidence-based self-help relationship books for that. Even within social psychology, suspicions about the appropriateness of studying relationships were commonplace. Caryl helped to end such suspicions. No one could question the sophistication of her theorizing or of her approaches to theory testing. In approaching the creation of a new manuscript, Caryl would say Start with the tables. Your findings are the crown jewels! Of course, many researchers would not craft dozens of tables for a given paper, only to see no more than a handful make it into the submitted manuscript. But exacting thoroughness was a Rusbult hallmark and it flowed from a desire to ensure that we were “getting it right.” Relationships are too critical a component of life to mess around with half-steps, incomplete analyses, or unsubstantiated conjectures. She wanted to make sure she got it right and implored those who worked with her to take the time to do the same.

Valuing People

Caryl also taught me to place great value on the input of other people, particularly students and junior colleagues. I can recall instances when Caryl, surrounded by academic luminaries, would reach out to the sheepish student in the group and ask for his or her thoughts. She did not have to do so (certainly others in the group had plenty to say), but she wanted to make sure that opportunities for input were available to all. Part of being a relationship scientist involves not only enjoying the company of others but also taking advantage of the opportunities for learning afforded by such company. Learning about others’ viewpoints, others’ experiences, and others’ relationships does nothing but help further illuminate relational phenomena of interest. Caryl loved people and learned from people, ideal traits for a relationship scientist.

Giving Back

Caryl taught me the critical importance of giving back. She was a continuous source of support. Although geographic realities and our schedules allowed for less contact in recent years, I always felt that she was there when or if I needed her. Communicating such unwavering support is a rare skill. It is also an underappreciated virtue among academics. But that was Caryl, constantly giving back to others (students, colleagues, friends) and, implicitly, communicating the importance of doing so. Caryl cared enormously about her students. Part of that care involved connecting her students with leaders in the field and with their students. In so doing, she helped nurture the field and ensure its continued vibrancy.

Caryl Rusbult left an indelible imprint on relationship science. We know much more now about how personal relationships work than we would have without her. We can honor her memory in a meaningful way and help further relationship science by continuing to learn from her lessons.

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References


