
A TRIBUTE TO CARYL RUSBULT: DISTINGUISHED SCHOLAR

Caryl Rusbult: The Epitome of the Michelangelo Phenomenon in Action

Scientists strive to pursue knowledge in a rigorous, systematic manner and to persuade others of the merits of their work. Caryl Rusbult raised the bar for scientific research not only by generating comprehensive, innovative, and imaginative theories but also through the beauty and eloquence of her writing. Over the last decade, I was fortunate to have had many opportunities to witness Caryl present scientific principles and empirical evidence as an art form.

A visionary, Caryl believed that the path toward establishing a truly social psychology was through empirical investigation of close relationships, at a time when research in this area was still in its infancy. Beginning with Caryl's seminal work on the investment model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983), her elegant and comprehensive psychological models greatly contributed to legitimizing and expanding the fledgling field. Inspired by interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), Caryl believed that besides the intrinsic appeal of the topic, close relationships are crucial because fundamental social psychological phenomena appear in the strongest form in the context of close relationships.

In the 1990s, this belief inspired Caryl to examine the importance of close relationship partners for shaping the self and for personal development. Caryl was fond of starting her talks with the following assumption from the traditional notion of the socially constructed self (e.g., Cooley, 1902/1964): "The 'self"

does not spring full-blown from a vacuum. A person's dispositions, values, and behavioral tendencies are fashioned at least in part by interpersonal experience" (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999, p. 293). Showcasing the touch of her artistic mastery, she applied the metaphor of the renowned sculptor Michelangelo to develop an interpersonal model of personal growth: the Michelangelo phenomenon (e.g., Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009). Just as Michelangelo envisioned the sculptor's role as that of helping to uncover the ideal form lying slumbering within the stone (Gombrich, 1995), close partners can also play a role in uncovering one's ideal self. When partner perceptions and behaviors are aligned with the self's ideals, a process known as *partner affirmation*, the self grows toward the ideal self. Partners can bring out the best or the worst in each other, which has been shown to have implications for both personal and relational well-being.

Since 1999, when I began my doctoral training under Caryl's supervision at the University of North Carolina, I have studied the Michelangelo phenomenon and other relationship processes with her. I have learned so much from her; she was a brilliant scholar who was also a nurturing and generous mentor, an inspiring role model, and a caring, fun friend. Her premature passing was a great loss not only to the field of close relationships but also to people in her immediate social circle—her friends, family, collaborators, and

students. Caryl exemplified the spirit of the Michelangelo phenomenon and brought out the best in others. Talking to Caryl, who was full of charm, charisma, optimism, and the ability to convey genuine interest in her interaction partners, you really understood why close relationships matter so much. Before I began working with Caryl, my research interests were much more concentrated on self and personality processes; now, I incorporate the role of close others on these research interests.

There are so many other ways that Caryl influenced my research. First, I strive to emulate her approach to generating exciting, innovative, and comprehensive psychological models founded on solid scientific principles. As she did in her work on the Michelangelo phenomenon, I learned that an artistic metaphor can complement a model that is based on diverse established scientific principles—in this case, behavioral confirmation (e.g., Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977), interdependence theory (e.g., Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), and self-discrepancy theory (e.g., Higgins, 1987). As she did in her work on the mutual cyclical model (e.g., Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), I learned to consider bidirectionality of influences between partners. Furthermore, as is clear from reading her work, I learned the importance of achieving scientific rigor not only through clear conceptualization but also by using diverse research methods and being meticulous about ruling out alternative explanations.

Second, I strive to emulate her nurturing ways and the autonomy support she provided to her students. Caryl not only examined the Michelangelo phenomenon but also personified how it can be applied to other types of close relationships. I was pleased to learn about the Caryl E. Rusbult Young Investigator Award that was set up to honor her lifelong dedication to training young scholars. As a direct beneficiary of her mentoring, I can say that she was a nurturing, generous, compassionate, and caring mentor, bringing out the best in her students and preparing them well for academic careers. Not only did she demand excellence in pursuing scientific knowledge but she also made it a

fun collaborative process; she also encouraged collaboration among students and with other leading scholars. She was positive, enthusiastic, passionate, insightful, and had an amazing knack for rephrasing her students' ideas in a more refined and eloquent manner, while keeping the core of the ideas intact. Even though she was initially skeptical of my interests in personality processes, she created an open atmosphere where I felt free to engage in spirited debates about it and to conduct many studies focusing on personality processes within relationships. She improved the quality of the resulting research immeasurably (e.g., Kumashiro, Finkel, & Rusbult, 2002; Kumashiro, Rusbult, Finkenauer, & Stocker, 2007).

Finally, I strive to emulate her attitudes toward balancing research with a good life. Caryl showed me that one can live a full, rich life while conducting exceptional, high-quality research. She had a great zest for life, lived life to the fullest, and had wide-ranging interests in history, politics, and both classic and popular culture. These qualities contributed to making reading her work a highly pleasurable experience. In somewhat of an unusual step, Caryl and her husband David sought adventure by moving to a different country and delighting in their new experiences in Amsterdam. Trusting Caryl's judgment, I overcame my apprehension about moving to a country where I did not speak the language and thoroughly enjoyed my experiences there. Some of my fondest memories of Caryl are those of sitting in her beautiful garden or enjoying her canal view, passionately discussing research and other interesting topics over good wine and food. I am convinced that these experiences also contribute to quality research: To gain keen insights into important relationship and self processes, one must also experience the joys in life.

As I told Caryl during our emotional farewell, I was awed by her grace, courage, and dignity. Even in her final battle with cancer, she was an exceptional role model. Having led a rewarding life filled with love and adventure, she was at peace; her major concern was about the people she would leave behind. On the day of her passing,

from my window seat of an early evening flight, I witnessed a magnificent skyline of magenta clouds resembling an ever-shifting sand dune. Watching this majestic sunset from high above, I had the feeling that Caryl had left this world, in a style reflecting the life she led. The sheer eloquence and beauty of her life and research will be something I will always strive to emulate.

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