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Publication date

2007

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Dissensus and the search for common ground: OSSA 2007

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Plug, H. J. (2007). Commentary on Rich Friemann: 'Dialectical Obligations of Serial Arguers'. In H. V. Hansen, C. W. Tindale, J. A. Blair, R. H. Johnson, & D. M. Godden (Eds.), *Dissensus and the search for common ground: OSSA 2007* Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation. <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA7/papersandcommentaries/48/>

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Commentary on Rich Friemann: “Dialectical Obligations of Serial Arguers”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many people will be professionally or personally interested in the general subject of Friemann’s paper: argumentation in the context of relational difficulties. If it is not yourself who is involved in marital discussions, then at least a number of your acquaintances may be. Friemann’s approach to the subject could be characterised as multi-disciplinary, since he combines insights from different fields, such as communication, argumentation and psychology. These insights are not only derived from theoretical publications, but from a practical handbook on lessons in life as well.

From the author of the practical handbook, Gottman, we learn that in order to decide if there are sufficient grounds to remain married to your present partner there need to be at least five times as many good moments as bad moments. Friemann warns us that the application of the criterion is problematic. It is not immediately clear what is meant by ‘good’ and ‘bad’, neither what should be counted as a ‘moment’, nor how these moments should be scored. Nevertheless Friemann uses Gottman’s criterion as one of the starting points for his research that focuses on ‘heated argument episodes in intractable serial arguments.

Friemann’s paper could be divided into two parts in which, in my view, two different argumentative activities are discussed. In the first part he discusses the argumentative efforts that might lead to saving a relationship. In the second part he discusses the argumentative obligations when finishing a relationship. With regard to both parts I have some questions and comments regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of Friemann’s findings.

2. DECIDING ON STAYING MARRIED OR NOT

In order to illustrate how ineffective communication among partners could become more effective, Friemann introduces us to Mark and Julie, a couple who are having and have had many relationship negotiation dialogues (RND).

The fact that the communication between Mark and Julie is not working out smoothly, but rather could be characterized as ‘intractable serial arguments with many instances of emotional flooding’ is, in my view, not at all surprising. It is as if the starting points for Mark and Julie in this argumentative discourse are completely different.

Plug, R.E. (2007). Commentary on Rich Friemann: “Dialectical obligations of serial arguers.” In H.V. Hansen, *et. al.* (Eds.), *Dissensus and the Search for Common Ground*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-4). Windsor, ON: OSSA.

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Friemann informs us that ‘Mark understands that when he is arguing with his partner Julie over a relationship issue, that they are having an RND’, whereas it seems to me that Julie is not aware of the fact that she is participating in RNDs at all, and Mark apparently is not going to tell her. Moreover, Mark is thinking about ending the relationship and he wonders ‘do I have sufficient grounds for remaining in this relationship’. However, ‘Mark does not feel up to sharing this [question] with Julie’. This whole situation makes it unlikely that Mark really sympathises with what is, according to Weger, the goal of an RND, namely ‘to create a mutually acceptable definition of the relation’. It is, however, not clear what preconditions should be fulfilled to achieve the goal of an RND. Given the different starting points of Mark and Julie, it is also difficult to imagine what future argumentative obligations they have in respect of each other.

Nevertheless, now that Mark is facing the question whether or not he should end the relationship, he should, according to Friemann, not take chances with that. In his view, decisions such as these should be taken deliberately and should not be solely based on current feelings about the relationship. One of the ways to reach such a well-considered decision is taking into account the results of a representative number of RNDs. Since the memory of how these RNDs have been developed may be unreliable, it would be advisable to keep a physical record of thoughts and feelings at the end of an RND. All these records together should provide a realistic picture of the relationship. In view of the reliability of the evaluation of an RND, it is not clear, however, why Friemann chooses to be vague as to the construction of these records. He says that a record ‘can be full of detail or an overall judgement of good or bad’. But if the considerations that have led to the judgment are made explicit, it will be easier to compare RNDs, and their results will be more informative as well as convincing.

The fact that the evaluation of the RNDs requires quite an effort brings us to yet another difficulty concerning the feasibility of the intended approach. Supposedly, not all participants who are having RNDs will pose the question whether there is sufficient ground for remaining in a relationship. Therefore, it is unclear when partners should start making records of the RNDs: should they anticipate the question about the continuation of the relationship and start making records right from the beginning or does anticipating the question in itself influence the course of RNDs?

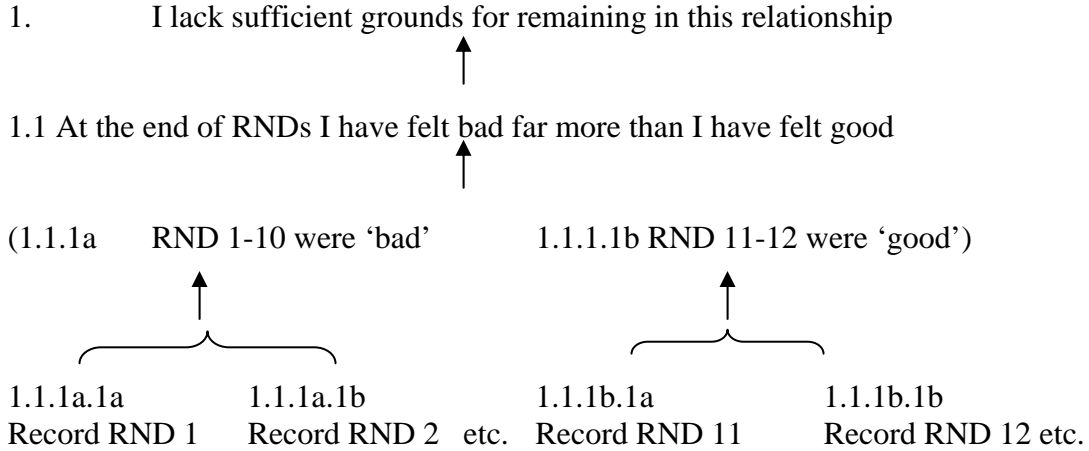
So far Friemann has been discussing what is advisable in the process of deciding on a positive or a negative standpoint concerning the continuation of a relation (the heuristics phase). In the second part of his contribution, Friemann goes into how the result of the decision making process should be justified (the legitimization phase).

3. JUSTIFYING THE END OF A MARRIAGE

When the decision-making process has been completed and Mark has decided that he wants to end his relationship with Julie, it is desirable, according to Friemann, that Mark makes an attempt to justify his decision. In doing so, Mark assumes that Julie at least doubts his standpoint which, in pragma-dialectical terms, means that the dispute is non-mixed (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992). Friemann then poses the question which dialectical obligations Mark has. Part of these obligations involve, if I understand Friemann well, references to the records (or a diary) that were originally made of the RNDs in the decision-making process. These references may serve as important

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arguments in the justification of the decision. The dialectical obligation Mark has, according to Friemann, to justify his standpoint could be reconstructed as follows:



The decision for a divorce is thus based on physical evidence of good and bad RNDs (1.1.1a.1a etc.). This evidence in its turn justifies that the relation does comply with the Gottman norm which in this case has been formulated as ‘I have felt bad far more than I have felt good’ (1.1).

Before Friemann puts forward what he considers to be the dialectical obligation of serial arguers such as Mark, he argues that these dialectical obligations cannot be characterized as dealing with Standard Objections as proposed by Johnson. But if Mark indeed has dialectical obligations, I fail to see why they could not consist of certain Standard Objections Mark should deal with. On an earlier OSSA conference (Plug, 2000), I argued that critical questions that are inherent in a particular argumentation scheme, can be employed to anticipate objections that might be put forward. In this case, for example, the standpoint (1.) that there are no sufficient grounds for remaining the relationship is supported by the argument (1.1.) that Mark’s feelings about many RNDs (more than 20 %) were bad. This symptomatic argumentation is reflected in the argumentation scheme: many bad RNDs (Z) are indicative for a bad relationship (Y). The critical questions that provide possible objections are the following

1. Is (Z) really characteristic of (Y)?
2. Is it possible for (Z) to be characteristic of something other than (Y)?
3. Are there more characteristics (Z) necessary for X to attribute characteristic Y to X?

These ‘standard’ critical questions may thus generate Standard Objections that in the case of Mark and Julie will lead to objections towards the theory of Gottman that contains the (quantitative) norm that if there are not five times as many good moments as bad moments there are no sufficient grounds to stay in a relationship. The critical questions may also generate a possible objection with respect to the idea that the result of RNDs are indicative for the assessment of the good and the bad moments in a relationship. Although these critical questions may provide some relevant objections, it is by no means clear to me why they should be conceived as part of a dialectical obligation on Mark’s

part or of other serial arguers. The same holds true for what Friemann considers as the dialectical obligation of serial arguers, namely that they should make ‘some account of past feelings’. If these accounts are used in the justification of the decision, it is not entirely clear on what grounds these arguments should be conceived as obligatory arguments.

[link to paper](#)

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