
Where is this Relationship Going: Turning Points in Consumer-Brand Relationships

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Claudio Alvarez
Boston University

Motivation

- CRM strategies built without grounding in consumer experience of brand relationships (Fournier & Avery 2011)
Inspiration from economics vs. relationships
- Fixation on communal/exchange relationships
No management of portfolio of relationship types
- Limited knowledge about how relationships develop over time
Assumption of linear escalation toward loyalty, emotional attachment, and commitment for all

Research Objectives

1. Understand the processes that govern the enactment and evolution of relationship types (templates) over time
2. Provide a more concrete and comprehensive description of relationship templates fleshed out beyond the communal/exchange dichotomy



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Method

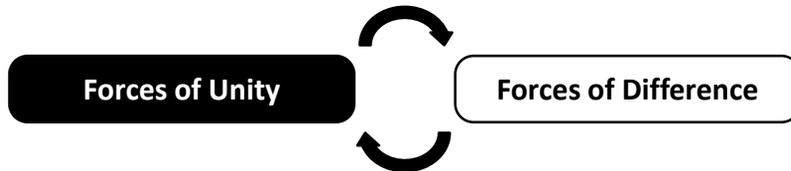
- In-depth, unstructured interviews with 18 **Peapod** customers
 - Informants randomly recruited from a list of subscribers
 - Each person interviewed four times in 3-month intervals
 - Phenomenological interviews to expose lived meaning of relationship with the brand (without explicit prompts)
- Data analyzed at the individual level (within each interview and across interviews) as well as across informants
- Sensitizing concepts drawn from *relational dialectics* (Altman, Vinsel, and Brown 1981; Baxter and Montgomery 1996) in an iterative process of data analysis and interpretation



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A Dialectical Perspective on Relationships

The dynamic interplay between unified oppositions is an inherent feature of personal relationships (Baxter and Montgomery 1996)



The tendencies to unite with and differentiate from the other negate one another at the same time that they are interdependent



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Relationship Oppositions

Oppositions between forces of unity and difference manifest themselves in the particular contexts of interpersonal interaction

*Friendship
(Rawlins 1992)*



*Parent-Grandparent
(Dun 2010)*



*Unrequited Love
(Baumeister et al. 1993;
Mumm & Cupach 2010)*



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Turning Points and Relationship Change

Turning points concern events during which the interplay between contradictory forces generates change in a relationship

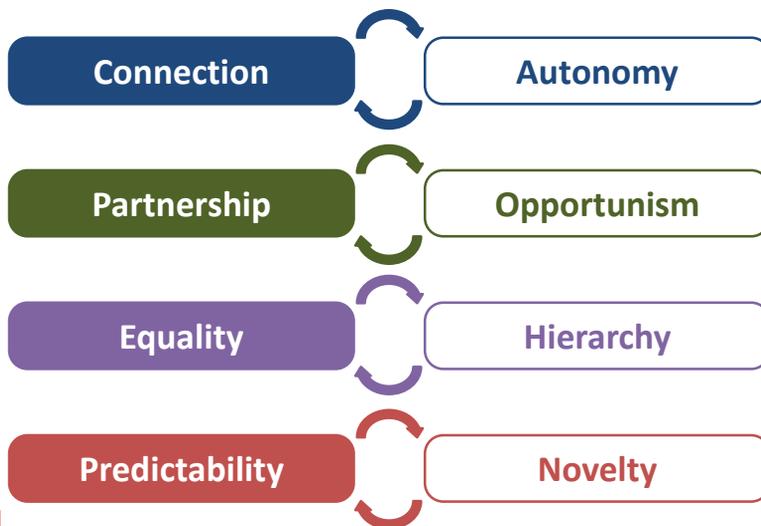
Acknowledging "couplehood" impacts individual conduct



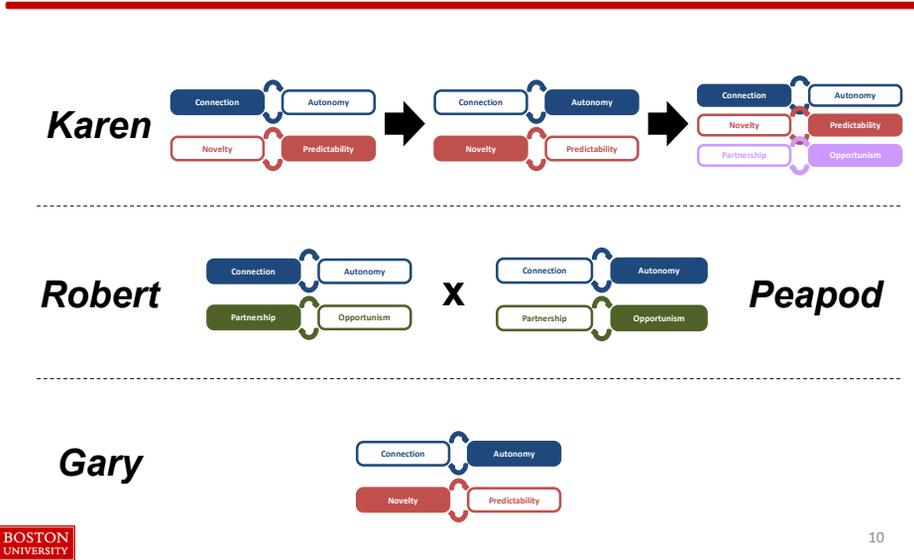
Each partner's actions affects the couple



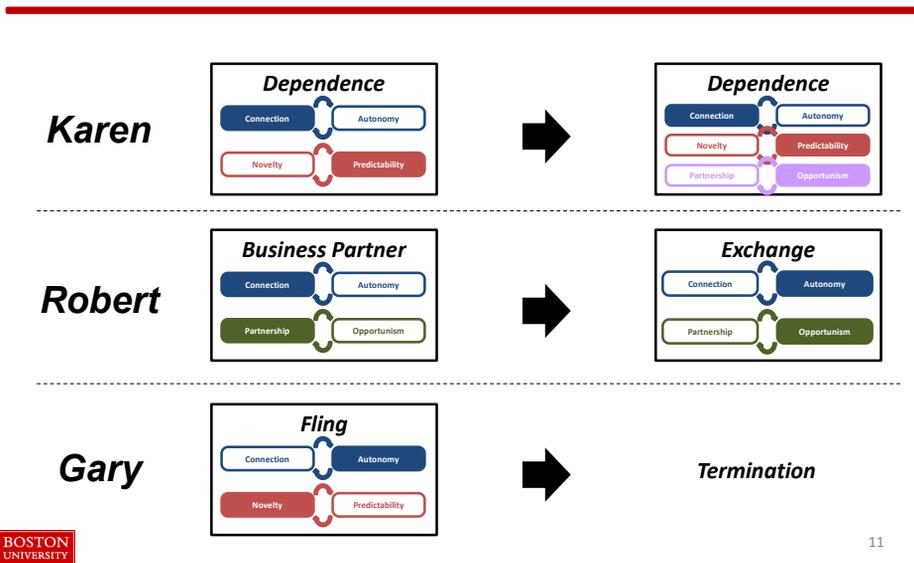
Brand Relationship Oppositions



Patterns of Relationship Change



Relationship Process Meets Content



Karen

Novelty versus Predictability Tension

Novelty as Positive Surprise

"I'm amazed, I've been buying salmon filets and I think, 'Okay, it's going to be the salmon from Stop and Shop' it's been incredibly good."

"I was impressed because I gave them a bunch of coupons last time with the thought of, 'Oh I'll never get credited for these but it's worth it just to try' and they did, they credited me on my next order."

"Surpassed my expectations."



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Karen

Novelty versus Predictability Tension

Predictability as Learning to Navigate the System

"I am learning."

"I've learned that whenever I do order chicken now I always say, 'Please put it in a separate bag.'"

"I've learned that when I order fish, sometimes I will order a pound of fish and I will ask them to put it in two half pound pieces wrapped separately so I can freeze one and cook the other."

Problems with Delivery



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Karen

Novelty versus Predictability Tension

Predictability as Dependability

“Having faith with the company that you are doing business with and knowing that they will fix the problem whatever it is, is a better overall feeling than if there's a perfect order all the time.”

“Well, if they make a mistake, I'll call them back, they will come and fix it, no big deal.”

“I think it's been consistent, even to the mistakes.”



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Karen

Connection versus Autonomy Tension

Connection as Avoidance of the Grocery Store

Buying every week from the start.

“I was in a rush to get started using the service because it's a pain in the neck to go into the store with one child, never mind two and I knew my grocery shopping days were coming to an end so and I wasn't unhappy about that.”



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Karen

The Meaning of Connection

Connection as Interdependence

Purchase of new types of products



"I just ordered some Brussel sprouts and I got some beautiful Brussel sprouts. That's one of those things that you have to pick yourself and look at them and see how they look."

"I used to spend \$60 a week and now it's gone up to \$90 to \$100 a week."

"About 90 percent" [of her groceries she was getting with Peapod].

"I hadn't been in a grocery store in like three months. Longer maybe."

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Karen

Deeply Connected, Claiming Autonomy

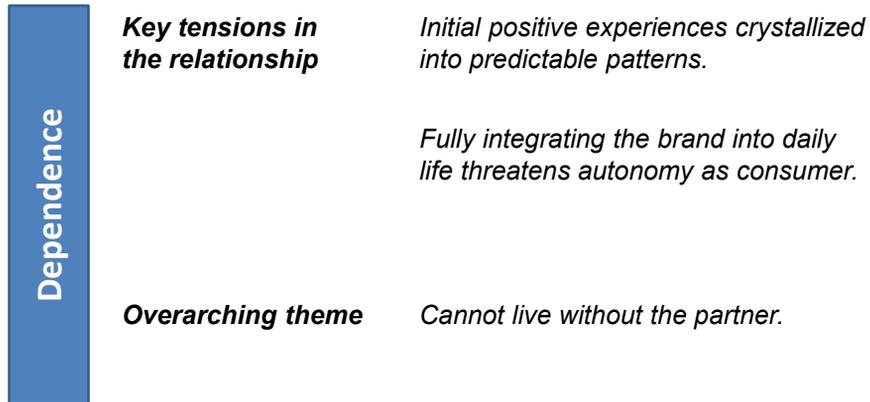
Autonomy as Lack of Long-Term Commitment

"Right now I am in too deep, I'm signed up with Peapod, I think for six months so I am in contract with them. But if it was presented to me both services were equal, which one would you pick? I would go with him [Groceries to Go] just because he's young, he's small, he's trying and I want to give him my business rather than this big company that really doesn't need me, as much."

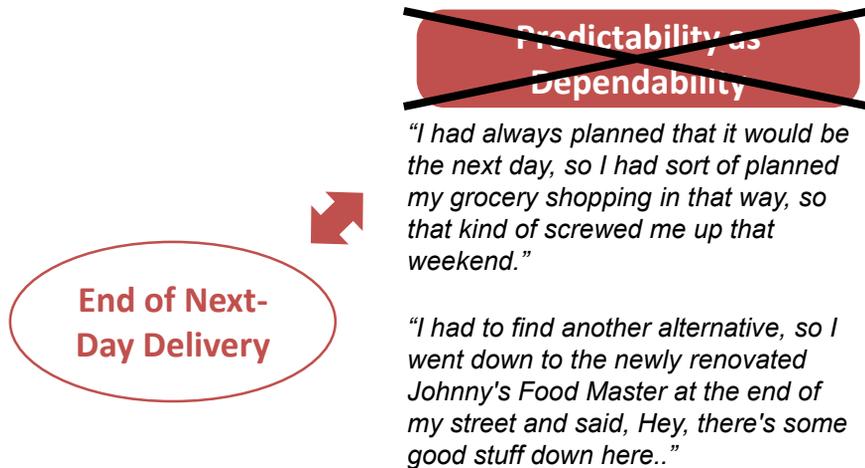


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Karen Dependence Template



Karen Six Months Later, a Major Turning Point



Karen

Another Turning Point

~~Connection as Avoidance
of the Grocery Store~~

"It wasn't as long a process as I thought it would be. And I said, 'Well this isn't so bad.'"

"I found a lot of nice products (...) So it made my dieting easier because now I have more variety in what I eat."

"This is kind of a silly thing, but it meant a lot to me. I went with Rachel, and she loved it. She loves going grocery shopping. And she was looking at me and saying, 'Mommy, I love you.'" 20

Back to the
Grocery
Store



Karen

Autonomy Reconstructed

Autonomy as Freedom to
Experiment with Options

"The next time I go online, I'm going to try Home Runs so I can compare and see."

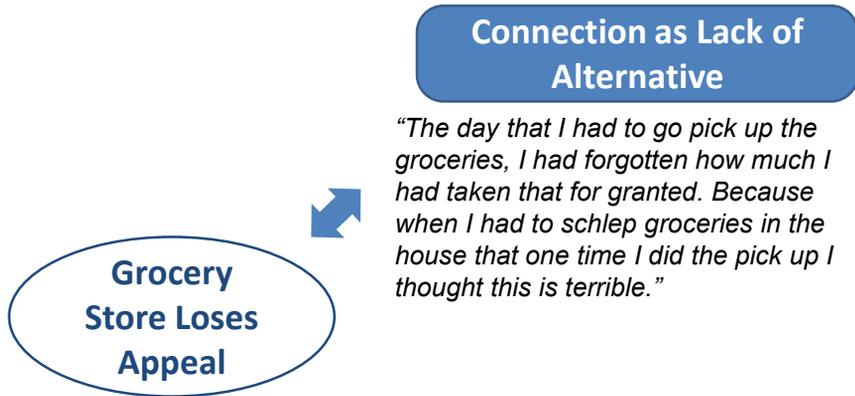
"I'm going to do it once and see what my feelings are."

"The more options you have, the more of a consumer you can be (...) And it's good because it's keeping the market competitive."

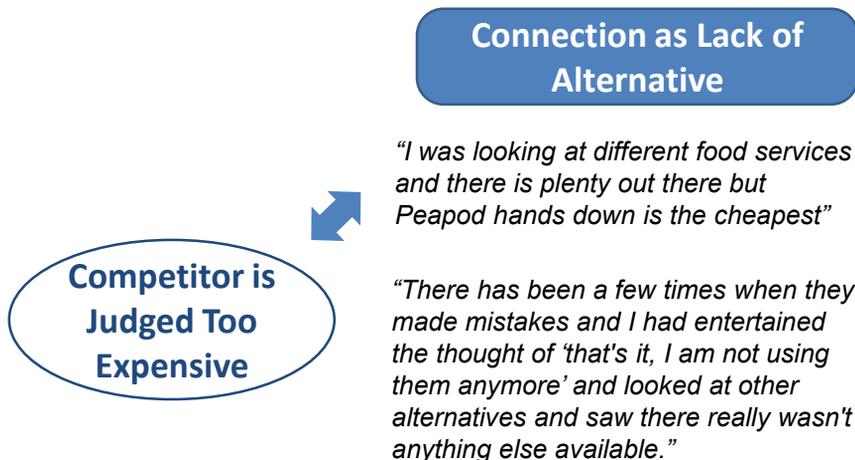


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Karen is Back



Karen is Back



Karen is Back

Dependence is Reinforced

Connection as Dependence

"I wonder how I ever got along without it. I think to myself I hope they are making money at this because if this ever goes away what am I going to do. I mean I can't go back to grocery shopping now."



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Karen is Back

Unequal Relationship is Recognized

Hierarchy as Peapod's Increased Power

"In the beginning they were so small, they were very customer service oriented. If they made a mistake they used to bend over backwards to correct it."

"That day they forgot about me, I expected them to say well here's a coupon for \$25 off or do something customer service oriented they did nothing. (...) I tempted to say no forget it, I will just get my groceries somewhere else, but I was so dependent on them because of the way I planned my week that I almost had no choice."



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Karen Dependence Template

Dependence	Key tensions in the relationship	<p><i>Fully integrating the brand into daily life threatens autonomy as consumer.</i></p> <p><i>Initial positive experiences crystallized into predictable patterns.</i></p> <p>Acceptance of power imbalance may lead to loss of consumer rights.</p>
	Overarching theme	<p><i>Cannot live without the partner.</i></p>



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Meet Robert

Partnership as Long-Term Problem Solving

"I look in long term problem solving. They have an email set-up and I've let them know certain problems that they have. Not to complain but to hope they can train their shoppers better."

"I want my customer communications to come back to me. So I am going the other way saying hopefully they would like to know so they can improve it too."

Opportunism as Profiting from Favorable Terms

"I would never work for the amount of money that I pay them."

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Meet Robert

Autonomy as Lack of Emotional Bond

"I don't care about Peapod personally, but I don't want to lose the service."

Connection as Loyalty and Investment in Relationship

"They've got me, I'm here, I'll stay."

Invest in the system: *"I've been trying to come up with a list of everything that I normally would buy."*

Against wife's will: *"I guess she's anti-Peapod, because she used to help shop but since Peapod is involved she heads out the door and doesn't even get involved."*

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Robert Business Partner

Business Partner

Key tensions in the relationship

Long-term problem solving partnership justified by favorable exchange terms.

Commitment and empathy based on impersonal connection.

Overarching theme

We will work together to benefit both of us in the long run.



Robert Peapod Pushing in a Different Direction

Partnership Limited to Short-Term Problem Solving

*"I looked all over Peapod, and there was no sign of egnog (...) their email came back and said 'what you need to do is a search on the egnog, but don't worry, we put it in anyway,' which is not true. **They didn't make any effort to see why don't we have it; what's wrong with our system.** That does not seem to be taking place."*



Issues with
Ordering
Products



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Robert Peapod Pushing in a Different Direction

Opportunism as Short-Term Gains

Survey



*"They just sent a questionnaire to all who use them and **it wasn't some of the questions that I would have expected** but - it seemed to me more leaning toward **if we gave you little stamps, would you come in?**"*



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Robert Peapod Pushing in a Different Direction

Autonomy as Indifference

*"I made recommendations, figuring that if it was my business I'd be interested. I basically got **no response**, so I didn't know if they were sort of saying, '**we don't care, don't bother me**' or what."*



Feedback
from
consumer



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Robert Reconstructing Relationship as Exchange

[Lack of Partnership]

"(You mentioned you had given them recommendations; which of those changes would be the most important?)

Actually, at this point, I'm not sure what they even were."

"You like to think of yourself as offering valuable advice, and reality is you're just one of thousands of people telling them how to run it."

Opportunism as Short-Term Gains

"It's just not giving me as much as I'd like to get out of it."

"Well free, you can't argue with that."

"If I can't get big items, it doesn't help me."



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Robert

Reconstructing Relationship as Exchange

Autonomy as Creation of Viable Alternatives

"I'd rather take an order every two or three weeks [instead of weekly], and then I try to get my fresh vegetables locally now."

Connection on Transactional Basis

"Places like Home Runs had a smaller selection, and so that's why I hadn't switched over before"

"I don't know how long I'm going to use this because it's not working. But I do want it to work, and I think that's the way it's been almost from square one"



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Gary

Novelty versus Predictability Tension

Novelty as Excitement

"I'm actually pretty excited about it."

*"[Stop buying 'indulgences'?]
I don't know, I will be interested to find out. That will be one of the questions that I have to figure out."*

"[A friend told me that] in the next 2 to 3 years you will see an ad on TV, just click on the ad and you will be at the web page, say oh I like that add it to my shopping list at Peapod. So when I saw this I said, 'Wow, you know, don't come to the supermarket anymore just go online, do whatever you need to do.'"



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Gary

Autonomy versus Connection

Autonomy as Lack of Investment in Relationship

[So the total time since your friend told you about it to your decision was how long?]

"Within 60 days and I probably would have done it then if I didn't have to call. Like the 800 number calling up, I'm too busy to do that but if you give it to me like they did I'll load it up."

"It was completely irrelevant it was more like, 'Oh, check this out. Should I order this?' 'Yeah, order me chips, too' type of thing."



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Gary

Fling template

Fling	Key tensions in the relationship	<i>The excitement of discovery may quickly fade away.</i>
		<i>Unwillingness to invest in relationship hinders strengthening of bonds.</i>
	Overarching theme	<i>Experiment and have fun while it lasts.</i>



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Gary

No All Significant Events are Turning Points

**Issues with
the Order**

"They didn't have something, they took it right off the bill, no problem."

"I didn't know brands but I did actually order a couple of things that weren't what I thought. And I know I could call the 800 number, but two boxes I don't care you know. It's probably still in my cabinet. I'll donate it when they come by."



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Gary

Same for Positive Experiences

Coupon

"Almost every week I get coupons from them, like for March every week you get \$10 off the grocery order. Hey 10 bucks is 10 bucks."



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Gary

Request for Commitment is Rejected

~~Connection as
Commitment to Peaped~~

"I was charged one monthly fee and I went to call them to tell them because I got a thing in the mail saying that I didn't have to pay monthly fees. It was like \$8 or \$7.50."

"I was pretty against it, they waived the monthly fee and I just felt that if I didn't use it one month I was going to be penalized."

Monthly Fee
Charge



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Gary

Need for Investment is Denied

~~Connection as Investment
in Learning the System~~

"It's definitely difficult. Not in the ease of the software or anything, but deciding what you want. You have to order \$60 to get free delivery so that's my goal. And when I go to the supermarket I don't even know what I want half the time. So I do an order and I order chicken or a steak and then get three more things and I'm at \$38 and I go, "What do I want now?" And then I looked in the circular and the three things in the circular weren't even there. So it's been frustrating"

Problems
Ordering
Products



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Gary Novelty Wears Off

Novelty Limited to Initial Interactions

"I was with a friend when I ordered it to so it was kind of more like experimental type of thing. The second time I was like, 'Okay, let me really use this.'"



Repeated Interactions



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Gary Predictability Constructed Negatively

Predictability of Negative Outcomes

"This thing sucks."

"I tried three or two different ways to come up with a \$60 order of what I want. I tried the aisle way or going by section, frozen food section, and it didn't work. So then I tried the 'What's New.' I tried typing in my name; I tried typing just like the letter A in. It was just too cumbersome: it just wasn't working. So I felt lost and hopeless."



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Gary Disengaged from Peapod

Autonomy as Separation

"I started to order once, and I couldn't find three-quarters of the stuff, and I just said, 'Forget it.'"

"The reality is at this stage in my life I don't need a lot of stuff."

"For some people, elderly people, if someone had a baby, or a single mother or something, this makes the most sense in the world for them, it really does."

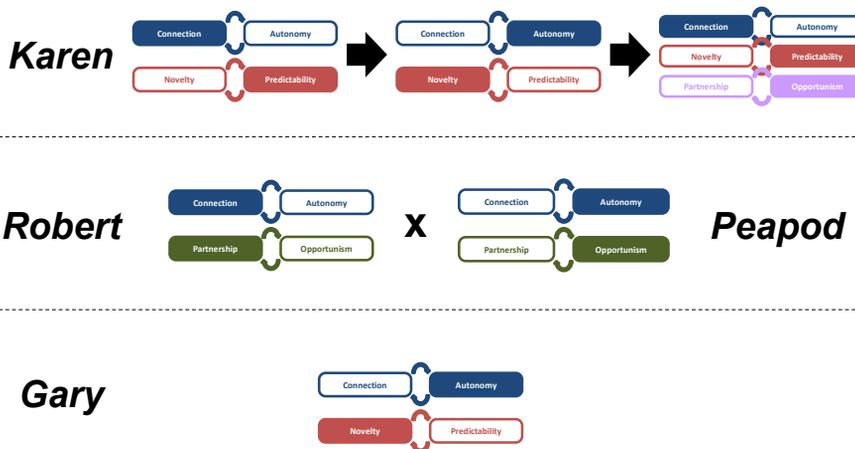


Connection as Future Possibility

"It just doesn't make sense for my lifestyle at present. Not to say in six months that couldn't change, but as of this time..."

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Patterns of Relationship Change



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Areas for Further Analysis

Refinement of Tensions

- Potentially reorganizing or adding new oppositions
 - Ideal / real
 - Support / conflict

How Consumers Deal with Oppositions

- Dysfunctional Patterns (e.g., denial)
- More functional patterns (e.g., segmentation, compromise)



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Theoretical Implications

- Beyond norm- or role-based models of change (Aggarwal 2004; Heide & Wathne 2006)
- Beyond fixation on commitment/loyalty
- Flexible model that allows for the multi-faceted, non-linear reality of relationship change
- Integration of content (types) and process
- Parsimonious description of relationship types



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Thank You

