

The Journal of Undergraduate Research

Volume 11 *Journal of Undergraduate Research*,
Volume 11: 2013

Article 8

2013

Differences in Relational Maintenance Strategies: A Comparative Study

Ariana Smith

South Dakota State University

Kama Konda

South Dakota State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/jur>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Ariana and Konda, Kama (2013) "Differences in Relational Maintenance Strategies: A Comparative Study," *The Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 11, Article 8.

Available at: <http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/jur/vol11/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Undergraduate Research by an authorized administrator of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact michael.biondo@sdstate.edu.

Differences in Relational Maintenance Strategies: A Comparative Study

Authors: Ariana Smith and Kama Konda

Faculty Sponsor: Jennifer Anderson, Ph.D.

Department: Communication Studies and Theatre

ABSTRACT

Individuals in long-term relationships use relational maintenance strategies to sustain their relationships. This study investigates differences in the use of relational maintenance strategies by relational status (dating, engaged, and married) and by choice of communication channel. Findings from $N = 96$ individuals in long-term romantic relationships revealed that the most commonly used strategy was assurances, and that positivity and openness decreased as the length of relationship increased. Face-to-face was the most commonly used communication channel across all relational maintenance strategies, and social networking sites were the least used. In addition, married couples were less likely than either dating or engaged couples to use texting to maintain their relationships. Future studies can examine these theoretical relationships in more diverse samples that include greater cultural diversity and include long-distance relationships.

Keywords: Communication, Relational Maintenance Strategies, Communication Channels, Undergraduate Research, Communication Research.

INTRODUCTION

Relational maintenance strategies, or the strategies used to keep a relationship at a particular state (Dindia & Canary, 1993), are instrumental to understanding communication in marriage. Stafford and Canary (1991) have identified five relational maintenance strategies: assurance, positivity, sharing tasks, social networks, and openness. While previous studies have focused on relational maintenance strategies in marriage, fewer

studies have examined differences in relational maintenance strategies in other relational statuses (e.g., dating, engagement) and none have considered differences in use of relational maintenance strategies based on choice of communication channel. The focus of this study is to understand how use of relational maintenance strategies differs based on a) relational status and b) chosen communication channel.

The literature review focuses on relational maintenance strategies and communication channels. The first section describes and defines relational maintenance strategies and their importance within relationships. The second section describes and defines the use of communication channels within our study. Lastly, the research questions are presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relational Maintenance Strategies

Relational maintenance strategies are instrumental to understanding communication in marriage. Relational maintenance strategies are conceptually defined by Canary and Dindia (1993) as the “strategies used to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition” (p. 28). This form of communication focuses on the specific acts of communication people use to maintain the status quo in their relationships (Ragsdale, 1996).

Throughout time different relational maintenance strategies have been theorized. However, five relational maintenance strategies have been identified as specific forms of communication used to maintain relationships (Stafford & Canary, 1991). The first relational maintenance strategy is *assurance*, which can be defined as supporting, comforting, and making a commitment to one’s married partner (Canary et al., 2006). *Positivity* refers to being pleasant and making situations enjoyable for the other partner (Canary et al., 2006). *Sharing tasks* identifies how partners distribute responsibility (Canary et al., 2006). *Social networks* describe how married couples reach out to friends and family for additional support (Canary et al., 2006). Finally, *openness* describes the communication between partners that involves the direct discussion of the relationship (Canary et al., 2006). Together these strategies can be used to analyze communication in marriage.

Although a large amount of research has been done on relational maintenance strategies, most studies have been focused solely on married couples. This study focuses the use of relational maintenance strategies through different relationship statuses. Also, the study aims to compare the use of the strategies between the statuses. Previous researchers have also not included testing for the use of communication channels used to express relational maintenance strategies. This study includes five types of channels used to display each strategy.

Communication Channels

Communication channel is the term given to the way in which we communicate (Rhubarb, 2013). This study seeks to gain insight on the use of relational maintenance strategies through multiple channels. There are multiple communication channels available such as face-to-face conversations, telephone calls, text messages, email, the internet, radio, television, written letters, brochures and reports. The survey conducted in this study focuses primarily on five major forms of communication channels: face-to-face, social networking sites, texting, telephones and written communication. Face-to-face refers to being in the presence of another (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/face-to-face>). Social networking sites serve as social media forums where people can connect online to share information, discuss items of similar interest, or just keep in touch (Mercure, 2011). Texting refers to short text messages being sent and received on a mobile phone (<http://www.phonescoop.com/glossary/term.php?gid=387>). Telephone refers to an electronic device used for two-way talking with other people (<http://telephone.askdefine.com/>). Written communication is a message communicated in a written form (Mab, 2012).

Communication Channels and Relational Maintenance

Understanding how various communication channels are used to express relational maintenance strategies is crucial. In particular, with the rise in the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC), it is important to understand how different forms of CMC are used to maintain relationships. Differential forms of CMC, and the choice and use of relational maintenance strategies, are important to scholars hoping to understand the complexity and preservation of relationships maintained via these channels (Houser, 2012).

Although research supports the notion that CMC is used to initiate and forge new relationships, it is important to understand how individuals within varying relational types might use different forms of mediated communication to enhance them (Houser, 2012).

Individuals use different modes of CMC for positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks (Houser, 2012). Different channels of communication play a large role in relational maintenance. It stands to reason that many forms of electronic communication might be used to forge many different relationships (Houser, 2012). Communication channels contribute to the use of relational maintenance strategies. Relational maintenance is an ongoing process where partners must respond and adapt to the needs and goals of both individuals (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005). It involves repairing and maintaining the relationship (Dindia & Canary, 1993).

As Dindia (1989) reported, wives use more romantic strategies to maintain a satisfying marriage, and Ramirez and Broneck (2009) found women use instant messaging (IM) as a relational maintenance tool at a higher rate than men in varying relationship types. A growing body of research indicates individuals are, indeed, using mediated communication channels to initiate and develop relationships that are proving to be just as satisfying and important as face-to-face interactions.

Since research has shown such differences amongst one particular channel, it becomes important to understand how other channels are used throughout relational maintenance.

Overview of Study Variables

This study identifies how relational maintenance strategies are used in relationships. Relational maintenance strategies are used in marriage to maintain the relationship (Stafford & Canary, 1991). The independent variable in this study is relationships. The dependent variable is the relational maintenance used. Relational maintenance strategies are conceptually defined as the use of assurance, positivity, sharing tasks, social networks, and openness to maintain a marriage.

Although there are numerous statuses of relationships this study focuses on the three most common: dating, engaged and married. Dating is conceptually defined as two people in an intimate relationship. The relationship may be sexual, but it does not have to be. It may be

serious or casual, monogamous or open, short-term or long-term (Canary et al., 1993). Engaged is conceptually defined as pledged to be married (Canary et al., 1993). Married is conceptually defined as the state of being united to a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law (Canary et al., 1993).

Relational maintenance strategies are an integral part of communication between couples whether they are dating, engaged, or married. Studying these strategies in various statuses of relationships will provide insight into how relationships of all statuses use relational maintenance strategies. Also, insight on communication channels used to express relational maintenance strategies will be gained. Hence, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: How often is each relational maintenance strategy used in relationships?

RQ2: How frequently is each relational maintenance strategy used within each relationship level?

RQ3: How frequently did partners use each communication channel for each relational maintenance strategy?

METHODS

Participants

Online surveys were completed by $N = 96$ adults. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants through social media (i.e., Facebook) or through distribution of the survey link in Communication courses at a large, Midwestern university. All materials were approved by the institutional review board prior to study commencement.

The mean age of the participants in this study was 25.4 years ($SD = 5.74$ years). Forty-eight percent of respondents were from South Dakota. The sample consisted of 93.8% White, 3.1% Asian, and 1% Latino participants; 2.1% of participants preferred not to specify their ethnicity. The average length of participants' romantic relationship was 4.99 years ($SD = 5.63$ years); 81.3% of relationships were over a year in length. The average length of relationship for dating couples was 1.76 years ($SD = 1.5$ years), engaged couples 3.75 years ($SD = 2.26$ years), and married couples 8.74 years ($SD = 6.73$ years).

Design

An online survey was built through QuestionPro.com. The survey began with a consent page. Then, participants responded to items measuring demographic information including gender, age, relational status, and length of relationship. In addition, participants completed measures of relational maintenance and frequency of communication channel use. Using an online survey with a Likert type scale provided a fast, efficient quantitative measure. As researchers, we were able to measure different variables and look across communication channels, type of relationship, and relational strategies. The quantitative data allows for explanation of relationships between the variables.

Instrumentation

Relational Maintenance Strategies. Stafford and Canary's (2006) twenty-nine item relational maintenance scale was used to measure the five relational maintenance strategies (Stafford & Canary, 2006). These strategies include assurance, positivity, sharing tasks, social networks, and openness. This scale has been demonstrated to be reliable and accurate. For instance, the research on relational maintenance strategies repeatedly uses this scale and the results are consistent (Stafford & Canary, 1991; 2006) Also, this scale has evolved with research to ensure that only one strategy is identified by the item on the scale related to it (Stafford & Canary, 2006).

Each of the strategies was broken into a set of items, or a sub-scale. Each participant then responded to each item using a Likert-type scale that measured the frequency with which each strategy was used. The scale used the following anchors: 1-never, 2-almost never, 3-sometimes, 4-almost always, and 5-always. Each sub-scale had adequate reliability; see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha measure of reliability.

Scale	Mean	SD	Reliability
Positivity	4.09	0.45	0.86
Openness	3.77	0.76	0.88
Assurances	4.59	0.48	0.72
Social Network	3.79	0.70	0.82
Shared Tasks	4.35	0.64	0.91
Use of F2F COM	4.52	0.53	0.83
Use of SNS	2.37	1.00	0.88
Use of Texting	3.13	0.94	0.87
Use of Phones	3.28	0.94	0.89
Use of Written COM	2.59	1.01	0.88

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities for Study Scales

Frequency of Communication Channel Use. Since there has been no previous research on use of communication channels for relational maintenance strategies, we developed scales for this study to measure this variable. Participants responded to items measuring the frequency of communication channel use for each of the relational maintenance strategies. Specifically, after responding to each relational maintenance strategy subscale, the participant responded to items concerning the frequency with which each communication channel was used for that particular strategy.

Five communication channels, representing the most common communication channels used between romantic relational partners, were included in the measure of communication channel use frequency. The channels included face to face, social networking sites (like Facebook or Twitter), text messaging, phone (not texting), and written format (like notes, cards, etc.). Before responding to items regarding the frequency of communication channel use, participants read the following instructions: “Think about the strategies listed in the questions above. Now, indicate how often you use these strategies in these different communication contexts.” Then, 5 items assessed frequency of communication channel use. Each item began with this stem: “I use these strategies...” and then included each of the five relational maintenance strategies. For example, to measure use of face-to-face

communication for a particular relational maintenance strategy, the item read, “I use these strategies face-to-face.”

Scales were created by combining all of the items measuring the frequency with which a certain communication channel was used. For example, all of the items measuring frequency of use of social networking sites were combined across relational maintenance strategies to create a scale measuring overall use of social networking sites for the purpose of maintaining a relationship. Each of the five scales (face-to-face, social networking sites, texting, phone, and written) was reliable.

RESULTS

Research question one asked how often each relational maintenance strategy was used in relationships. Descriptive statistics were used to answer this question. Across all relationship types, assurances were the most used relational maintenance strategy, $M = 4.59$ ($SD = .48$), and openness was the least used strategy, $M = 3.77$ ($SD = 0.77$). We also used inferential statistics to see if any demographic variables were related to relational maintenance strategies. One variable, age, was statistically significantly related to use of two relational maintenance strategies. Using a correlation, we discovered that as age increased, the use of positivity, $r(94) = -0.33, p < 0.001$, and openness, $r(95) = -0.25, p < 0.05$, decreased. Using a series of t-tests, with gender as the independent variable and each relational maintenance strategy as the dependent variable, we observed that there were no gender differences with respect to use of relational maintenance strategies.

Research question two asked how frequently each relational maintenance strategy was used within each relational status. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for frequency of use of each relational maintenance strategy and communication channel across relational status. To answer the research question, we used inferential statistics. We used a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with relational status as the independent variable and relational maintenance strategies as the dependent variables. With this statistical test, we observed that there were statistically significant differences by relational status for positivity and openness. Married couples were significantly less likely than either dating or engaged couples to use the positivity strategy, $F(2, 92) = 6.47, p < 0.01$, or the openness strategy, $F(2, 93) = 6.19, p < 0.01$. In addition, a correlational

analysis revealed that as the length of relationship (in years) increased, the use of positivity decreased, $r(95) = -0.24, p < 0.01$.

	Relational Status			
	Dating	Engaged	Married	Overall
	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)
RMS				
Positivity	4.22 (0.43)	4.24 (0.36)	3.91 (0.44)	4.09 (0.45)
Openness	4.03 (0.76)	3.86 (0.73)	3.77 (0.77)	3.77 (0.76)
Assurances	4.56 (0.51)	4.75 (0.44)	4.59 (0.48)	4.59 (0.48)
Social Network	3.85 (0.82)	3.79 (0.59)	3.79 (0.70)	3.79 (0.70)
Sharing Tasks	4.25 (0.74)	4.44 (0.34)	4.34 (0.64)	4.35 (0.64)
COM Channel				
Face-to-Face	4.55 (0.64)	4.24 (0.36)	4.52 (0.53)	4.52 (0.53)
SNS	2.36 (1.05)	4.58 (0.43)	2.37 (1.00)	2.37 (1.00)
Texting	3.45 (0.78)	2.82 (1.05)	3.13 (0.94)	3.13 (0.94)
Phone	3.52 (0.97)	3.47 (0.88)	3.28 (0.94)	3.28 (0.94)
Written	2.69 (1.06)	2.83 (0.99)	2.59 (1.01)	2.59 (1.01)

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Use of Relational Maintenance Strategies (RMS) and Communication Channels by Relational Status

Research question three asked how frequently partners used each communication channel for each relational maintenance strategy. We used descriptive statistics to answer this question. Face-to-face was the most frequently used channel of communication, $M = 4.52$ ($SD = 0.53$), for all relational maintenance strategies, across relationship types. Social networking sites were the least used communication channel for positivity openness, assurances, and sharing tasks; written communication was the least used communication channel for the social network strategy. See Table 3 for means and standard deviations of frequency of communication channel use across all relational maintenance strategies.

Relational Maintenance Strategy	Communication Channel					Overall
	F2F	SNS	Text	Phone	Written	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Positivity	4.51 * (0.62)	2.73 (1.17)	3.58 § (0.95)	3.66 § (0.95)	3.01 (1.09)	4.09 (0.45)
Openness	4.44 * (0.75)	1.88 (1.15)	2.80 (1.25)	3.07 (1.11)	2.30 (1.22)	3.77 (0.76)
Assurances	4.66 §* (0.65)	2.59 (1.36)	3.41 (1.23)	3.63 (1.17)	3.06 § (1.30)	4.59 § (0.48)
Social Network	4.41 * (0.75)	2.74 § (1.21)	3.17 (1.06)	3.21 (1.10)	2.40 (1.27)	3.79 (0.70)
Sharing	4.61 * (0.67)	1.91 (1.21)	2.69 (1.29)	2.81 (1.31)	2.18 (2.23)	4.35 (0.64)
Tasks						
Overall	4.52 * (0.53)	2.37 (1.00)	3.13 (0.94)	3.28 (0.94)	2.59 (1.01)	

§Highest mean in the column

*Highest mean in the row

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Use of Relational Maintenance Strategies and Communication Channels

Ad Hoc Comparisons

In addition to statistical tests used to answer our research questions, we also examined the data to determine how frequency of communication channel use may differ based on relational status, gender, length of relationship, or age. In order to do this, we used a series of 10 ANOVAs with either relational status or gender as the independent variable and frequency of each communication channel use as the dependent variables. We then calculated correlations between length of relationship or age and frequency of use for each communication channel.

We found that, across all maintenance strategies, married couples were significantly less likely than either dating or engaged couples to use texting, $F(2, 93) = 8.59, p < 0.001$, or to use their phones to maintain their relationship, $F(2, 93) = 4.00, p < 0.05$. In addition, across relationship statuses, women were more likely than men to use texting to convey positivity to their partners, $F(1, 93) = 4.34, p < 0.04$. As length of relationship (in years) increased, the use texting, $r(96) = -0.21, p < 0.05$, for relational maintenance decreased. As

age increased, the use of texting, $r(95) = -0.33, p < 0.001$, and the phone, $r(95) = -0.22, p < 0.05$, for relational maintenance decreased.

We also continued to examine the data to examine how frequency of communication channel use for each relational maintenance strategy differed based on relational status. We used inferential statistics for these comparisons. We used a series of ANOVAs with either relational status or gender as the independent variable, and then use of communication channel—within a given relational maintenance strategy—as the dependent variable. This resulted in 50 separate ANOVA tests. The significant results are now presented.

Differences in frequency of communication channel use by relational status were found for each of the five relational maintenance strategies. First, we found that to convey positivity, dating couples reported more frequent use of texting than did engaged or married couples, $F(2, 92) = 3.48, p < 0.05$. Second, we found that to convey openness, social networking sites were used most by engaged couples, followed by dating couples, and then married couples, $F(2, 93) = 3.38, p < 0.05$. This same trend held true for texting to convey openness, $F(2, 93) = 10.93, p < 0.001$; and for using a phone to convey openness, $F(2, 92) = 5.14, p < 0.05$. Third, we found that to convey assurances, married couples were significantly less likely than either dating or engaged couples to use texting, $F(2, 92) = 5.62, p < 0.05$, or to use the phone, $F(2, 93) = 3.49, p < 0.05$. Fourth, we found that social network strategies were conveyed via text significantly less by married couples than either dating or engaged couples, $F(2, 93) = 3.25, p < 0.05$. Fifth, we found that to share tasks, phones were used most by dating couples, followed by engaged couples, and then married couples, $F(2, 91) = 3.39, p < 0.05$. In addition, for sharing tasks, married couples were significantly less likely than either dating or engaged couples to use texting, $F(2, 92) = 5.39, p < 0.05$.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined the use of relational maintenance strategies, and differences in the use of relational maintenance strategies based on relational status and choice of communication channel to convey the relational maintenance strategy. The findings of this study extend our understanding of relational maintenance strategies by incorporating two

variables that were not included in previous research: relational status and communication channel preference.

The first research question dealt with how frequently each relational maintenance strategy was used. Results showed that across all relationship types, assurances were the most used relational maintenance strategy and openness was the least used strategy. This may be because assurances are more applicable to all relationship statuses such as showing love and faithfulness. Openness is a deeper type of strategy which requires more action and effort to fulfill. Thus, openness may be more common at the beginning of a relationship and would thus be less common in relationships that have been in existence for more than one year. Recall that 81% of participants reported that their relationship was over a year long; thus, the sample was primarily made up of those in long-term relationships where such effects may be seen.

The second research question dealt with how the use of relational maintenance strategies differed based on relational status. Table 2 presents means and standard deviations for frequency of use of relational maintenance strategies and communication channels by relational status. The results of our analyses showed that positivity and openness were used most frequently in dating relationships, then among those who were engaged, and then used least among married participants. Positivity also decreased as age and length of relationship increased. We will first consider the finding regarding positivity, and then turn to a discussion of the finding regarding openness.

The frequency with which a couple uses positivity as a relational maintenance strategy may be affected by not only relational status, but also length of time in the relationship, and the amount of time partners spend around each other day-to-day. Our findings showed that, in addition to married couples using positivity the least frequently compared to other relational statuses, use of the positivity strategy also decreased as the length of the relationship increased. Positivity is likely a more important strategy for dating couples than those in later relationship stages, because they want to keep the relationship moving forward. Thus, each time the dating couple meets, they are driven to be positive around each other. Conversely, a married couple most often lives together and their behavior cannot always be positive in a relationship with close quarters. Finances and work play a significant part of married life, a factor less apparent in dating or engaged relationships.

The relationships for dating couples are filled with possibility, which would keep the positivity high, whereas a married couple would feel more secure and feel less need to maintain a high level of positivity.

The fact that married couples used the openness strategy the least frequently, compared to either dating or engaged couples, can be viewed in different ways. First, openness is a very important strategy for those in newer relationships, because they are attempting to reduce uncertainty through self-disclosure (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Once a relationship moves through the three stages of commitment used in this study (i.e., dating, engagement, marriage), the level of uncertainty about one's partner should decrease. This would require less use of the openness strategy. Marriage is the utmost commitment and couples may feel less inclined to share feelings, relationship hopes, etc. because of the secure relationship and prior knowledge of one another. Another factor contributing to decreased openness could be that in a marriage the day to day actions become routine. The need for openness becomes less of a factor during a routine. This may be related to the amount of time couples spend with one another, when compared across relational statuses. Third, the maturity level of married couples (who are often older than dating or engaged couples) may expose truer personalities. These couples may not feel the need to express positivity or openness in their relationships.

These findings present opportunities for at least two areas of future research. First, if the amount of time that couples spend together on a day-to-day basis does affect the use of relational maintenance strategies, it would be useful to consider the differences between long-distance and geographically close relationships. A survey study could expand upon this study to include a measure of whether the relationship is long-distance, geographically close, or if the couple lives together. Knowing the geographical locations of the couples could potentially provide further insight as to how closeness affects use of relational maintenance strategies. Perhaps couples with greater physical proximity use less positivity and openness than those separated physically. A study that measures geographic closeness could consider this possibility.

The second area of research could address the somewhat disappointing picture of long-term relationships maintenance observed in this study. Perhaps future studies can probe the *why* behind these data to determine what factors cause partners in long-term relationships to use

the strategies of positivity and openness less than those in newer relationships. A study concerned with answering a why question would need to collect qualitative data, perhaps through interviews or focus groups, and then analyze those data to understand and interpret their meaning. If future studies continue to observe trend toward decreased openness and positivity in long-term relationships, researchers could then turn their attention to interventions or persuasive messaging that could increase the use of strategies like positivity and openness in long-term relationships.

The final research question dealt with which communication channel was most frequently used for each relational maintenance strategy. We found that face-to-face was the most common channel of communication for all relational maintenance strategies, across relationship types. This was not surprising to us since we had exempted the thought of long distance relationships participating in this study. Assuming each partner of the individual relationships were located geographically close to one another, the couples are most likely to communicate face-to-face rather than the other channels.

Another finding was that social networking sites were the least used communication channel for positivity, openness, assurances, and sharing tasks. We found this rather surprising since many people rely on social networking sites to communicate. Although it would be difficult to share tasks via social networking, we assumed positivity, openness and assurances would be expressed via this channel more than they showed to be. It may be that the perceived publicness of communication on social networking sites inhibits their use for relational maintenance. Or, it might be that different relational maintenance strategies, beyond those identified by Stafford and Canary (1991) are being communicated through social networking sites. Again, qualitative research would be the best approach to use in pursuing this idea. Future qualitative studies could ask participants about all the ways they use social networking sites to communicate with their relational partner. Then, those data could be coded for the relational maintenance strategies already used by Stafford and Canary (1991), but also be open to new strategies that may only show up on social networking sites. In addition, the issue of geographic closeness—discussed above—may again come into play when considering how social networking sites are used to maintain relationships. For example, a long-distance relationship may utilize all channels except face to face more than relationships where couples live together or are geographically close.

Lastly, written communication was the least used communication channel for the social network strategy. This result is not unexpected due to the fact that this channel would not be most appropriate for reaching out to friends and family for additional support. We believe face-to-face, social networking sites, or communication via telephone would be more fitting for this strategy.

LIMITATIONS

Like any study, this study was not without limitations. First, the study lacked ethnic and cultural diversity. Second, the study lacked a measure of geographic closeness in the relationships. Third, the study lacked a measure of relational satisfaction. Each of these limitations will be considered in turn.

First, over 90% of the sample was Caucasian; this limits the generalizability of these findings to other ethnic groups. In addition, it does not allow for comparisons across ethnicities. In addition, all of the respondents were U.S. citizens, which again limits the generalizability of the study. It also does not allow for cross-cultural comparisons. Cultural norms about romantic relationships, especially marriage, play an important role in determining how relational partners maintain the relationship. Future studies should include multiple cultures for a comparison, so that one will be able to understand how relationships vary culturally. This will allow a deeper understanding of relationship strategies in cultures that are understudied. Looking at cultures where people marry at a young age, have arranged marriages, or several married partners all add to the research on relational maintenance strategies.

Second, as discussed above, the geographic closeness of relational partners could very well affect both the use of relational maintenance strategies and the choice of communication channel to convey those strategies. By not including a measure of geographic closeness, we were not able to test this idea in the current study. In future studies, a measure of geographic closeness, as well as a measure of how often partners see one another face-to-face, would be useful in determining how physical proximity affects the variables from this study.

Third, previous research has established a link between use of relational maintenance strategies and relational satisfaction (Ballard et al., 1999; Ragsdale, 1996; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2001). Since this study was more concerned with the choice of communication channels for conveying relational maintenance, and how maintenance varied based on relational status, relational satisfaction was not included. However, it may be that there is an interaction between the use of a relational maintenance strategy and the chosen communication channel and this interaction affects relational satisfaction. For example, maybe positivity has a stronger relationship to relational satisfaction when partners communicate positivity through written communication than through face-to-face, or through text. In addition, testing for relational satisfaction could help us figure out whether the decrease in use of positivity and openness seen in long-term relationships in this study is actually related to decreased levels of relational satisfaction. If it is, then interventions such as those described above, should be created. If there is no statistical relationship, then it calls into question how it is that relational maintenance strategies actually affect relationships.

CONCLUSION

Relational maintenance strategies are instrumental to understanding communication in relationships. This specific study focuses on answering three research questions. How often is each relational maintenance strategy used in relationships? How frequently is each relational maintenance strategy used within each relationship level? How frequently did partners use each communication channel for each relational maintenance strategy? These questions were answered by analyzing the results from the online survey, which used the twenty-nine-item relational maintenance scale by Stafford and Canary (2002) on a Likert scale. Future researchers could study additional variables to provide more specific results.

REFERENCES

- Ballard-Reisch, D. S., Weigel, D. J., and Zaguidouline, M. G. (1999). Relational maintenance behaviors, marital satisfaction, and commitment in Tatar, Russian, and mixed Russian Tatar marriages: An exploratory analysis. *Journal of family*

issues, 20(5), 677-697. doi:10.1177/019251399020005006.

Berger, C. R., Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some exploration in initial interaction and beyond:

Toward a developmental theory of communication. *Human Communication Research*, 1, 99-112. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.

Canary, D. J., Stafford, L., Hause, K. S., and Wallace, L. A. (1993). An inductive analysis of relational maintenance strategies: Comparisons among lovers, relatives, friends, and others. *Communication Research Reports*, 10(1), 5-14. doi:10.1080/08824099309359913.

Dindia, K. (1989, May-June). *Toward the development of a measure of marital maintenance strategies*. Paper presented at annual meeting of the International Communication Association conference, San Francisco, CA.

Dindia, K. D., and Canary, D. J. (1993). Definitions and theoretical perspectives maintaining relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10(2), 163-173. doi:10.1177/026540759301000201.

Guerrero, L. K., and Chavez, A. M. (2005). Relational maintenance in cross-sex friendships characterized by different types of romantic intent: An exploratory study. *Western Journal of Communication*, 69, 339-358.

Houser, M. L., Fleuriet, C., and Estrada, D. (2012). The cyber factor: An analysis of relational maintenance through the use of computer-mediated communication. *Communication Research Reports*, 29(1), 34-43. doi:10.1080/08824096.2011.639911.

Mab, C. (2012, Feb 21). *Written communication*. Retrieved from <http://www.icmab.net/definition-of-written-communication/>.

Mercure, T. (2011, March 07). *Getting your message across using texting and social media*. Retrieved from http://www.fpwa.org/binary-data/FPWA_BINARY/file/000/000/426-1.pdf.

- Ragsdale, J. (1996). Gender, satisfaction level, and the use of relational maintenance strategies in marriage. *Communication Monographs*, 63(4), 354-369. doi:10.1080/03637759609376399.
- Ramirez, A., and Broneck, K. (2009). “IM me”: Instant messaging as relational maintenance and everyday communication. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 26, 291–314. doi:10.1177=0265407509106719.
- Rhubarb, J. (2013). *What is communication?* Retrieved from <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/general/what-is-communication.html>.
- Stafford, L., and Canary, D. J. (1991). Maintenance strategies and romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 8(2), 217-242. doi:10.1177/0265407591082004.
- Stafford, L., and Canary, D. J. (2006). Equity and interdependence as predictors of relational maintenance strategies. *Journal of Family Communication*, 6(4), 227-254. doi:10.1207/s15327698jfc0604_1.
- Weigel, D. J., and Ballard-Reisch, D. S. (2001). The impact of relational maintenance behaviors on marital satisfaction: a longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Family Communication*, 1(4), 265-279. doi:10.1207/S15327698JFC0104_03.