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An Analysis of College-aged Women's Personal Relations

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Current communication literature regarding personal relations is limited by its focus on romantic, friendship and friends with benefits relations. To better understand the types of relations college-aged women practice, this study sought to explore (a) the types of cross-sex relations college-aged women practice (b) the reasons they give for practicing the relations and (c) the identities they construct by practicing the relations. Results indicated a myriad of relational types. Types were categorized under three supra-categories and were explored in terms of their description, initiation, maintenance and communication rules, as well as their benefits and drawbacks. Identities associated with the relations were also examined, along with relational fluidity, commitment and intimacy.

Interpersonal communication research ascertains the significance of personal relations in our lives by demonstrating how personal relations influence our general sense of well-being (Voss, Markiewicz, & Doyle, 1999). Consequently, communication researchers spend a great deal of time researching various types of relationships. Indeed, relationships are one of the most investigated subject matters in the field of communication. In investigating relationships, communication researchers examine myriad relationship types including: marriage (and divorce) and romantic relationships (e.g., dating); friendship and family relationships (e.g., niece/nephew and aunt); various dyad relationships (e.g., teacher-student relationship); and relationships that may not fit strictly into one of the aforementioned categories.

For example, Voss, Markiewicz and Doyle (1999) examined the dynamics between friendship, marriage and self-esteem, while Canary and Stafford (1992) and Dindia and Baxter (1987) examined maintenance strategies within the marriage relationship. Conversely, post-divorce relationships were examined in the context of facework, co-parenting and dating relationships (Miller, 2009). In terms of romantic relationships, Mongeau, Jacobsen and Donnerstein (2007) and Cate, Koval, Lloyd and Wilson (1995) defined various romantic relations and described aspects of relational thinking, while Mongeau, Serewicz and Therrien (2004) along with Morr and Mongeau (2004) explored specific expectations and contextual factors that influence romantic relations. All of these studies investigated some aspect of marriage (or divorce) or romantic relationships, and some touched on friendship relationships.

Communication researchers also expend a great deal of energy examining elements of friendship relationships (Booth & Hess, 1974; Monsour, 1992). For example, Rawlins (1982) researched a host of friendship relational variables like communication

management and sex roles while Buunk and Prinns (1998) studied exchange orientation in friendship. Similarly, McEwan & Guerrero (2010) researched communication skills and friendship formation strategies amongst college freshmen. In addition, the concept of friendship as a relationship has been applied to various research questions. For instance, theory was examined in studying the communication amongst friends about sex and the influences of such communication in sexual initiation (Busse, Fishbein, Bleakley, & Hennessy, 2010). Friendship research has continued to expand within the field of communication, as has the study of family relationships.

To further our understanding of family relationships, researchers have explored the meanings of being an aunt as a way to expand our knowledge of family relationships (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006). Aunts were represented as teachers, confidantes and savvy peers. Other communication scholars examining family relationships sought to understand how young adult children's listening anxiety and intellectual inflexibility relates to family communication patterns. These researchers found an inverse relationship between listening anxiety, intellectual inflexibility and conversation orientations (Ledbetter & Schrod, 2008). Another study explored the relationship between feelings of being caught between parents, mental health and family satisfaction. Results indicated that feelings of being caught were associated with parents' demand and withdraw patterns, mental health and family satisfaction (Schrod & Afifi, 2007). The amount of research undertaken within family research, as well as all of the other relationship categories (e.g., romantic, marriage, friendship etc.), demonstrates the frequency with which communication researchers examine relationships.

Yet, it is only recently that researchers transitioned into examining communication and non-romantic relations like "friends with benefits" and "hookups." In this developing area of research, Messman, Canary and Hause (2002) and Afifi and Faulkner (2002) as well as Hughes, Morrison and Asada (2005) looked at the friends with benefit relationship. Hughes, Morrison and Asada (2005) defined the friends with benefits relation as "an opposite sex friend that you have, who you also have sexual activity with (this can include sexual intercourse, but can also include other types of sexual activity)" (p. 54). Likewise, Paul and Hayes (2002) and Glenn and Marquardt (2001) enhanced our communicative understanding of hookups, defining a hookup as "a sexual encounter between two people who are brief acquaintances or strangers, usually lasting one night without the expectation of developing a relationship" (Paul and Hayes, 2002 p. 640).

Their exploration into this realm of relationships has initiated a new interest in relationship research. This new interest is also reflected in the popular culture. Recent popular literature on college-aged relationships argues that hookups have replaced dating (Bogle, 2007; Stepp, 2007; Straus, 2006).

This assumption implies serious communicative implications. For, though the term *date* has a fairly obvious meaning for those coming of age in the dating era, to today's college-aged women, *dating* is a more ambiguous term. In essence, the expression *dating* is now interchangeable with other phrases such as *seeing each other*, *hanging out* (Bogle, 2008), and *hooking up* (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). These glances into the current college

relational environment are troubling. Given the complexity and interchangeability of relationships, how do college-aged women understand their relationships? What do they get from them or worse what do they lose from them?

It is these questions that highlight the need to continue researching relationships within the college-aged environment. Researchers need to gain an understanding of *all* the different types of relationships that are being practiced and their implications. Examining this subject within the college environment is appropriate and revealing. College-aged students are experiencing a unique stage in life fraught with change and exploration (Arnett, 2000). Moreover, women in particular should be examined when studying relational engagement, as women seem to be affected in a unique way (Bogle, 2007) by the relationships they practice—too frequently to their disadvantage. In continuing the research on personal relations, the present study asked three questions:

Research Question 1: In what types of cross-sex relations do college-aged women engage?

Research Question 2: What reasons, if any, do college-aged women give for engaging in these various types of relations?

Research Question 3: What identities, if any, do college-aged women attempt to construct by engaging in these various types of relations?

Asking these questions allowed the researcher to examine college-aged women's personal relations as they take place in the college environment. This study is exploratory in nature. Thus, the researcher chose not to ground this paper in a particular theory. Rather, the researcher chose to relay the information gathered from interviews using a qualitative thematic analysis so that the richness of the data would be put forth for future researchers to examine in more depth and with appropriate application of theory.

By exploring *all* of the relational types in which college-aged women engage, the purpose of this study is to add to the literature, by (1) focusing on a unique sector of the population (i.e. college-aged women) and (2) uncovering new relational types and adding to our understanding of previously investigated relational types through examination, within each relation, of: (a) how participants define and describe the relation (b) how participants initiate and maintain the relation (c) the benefits and costs associated with participation and (d) the identities connected to relational engagement. Through this examination, rich data can be examined for implications and additional research.

Method

Participant Recruitment and Criteria

In the present study, the researcher conducted and transcribed eight interviews. Participants were sought through purposive sampling (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) on the campus of a mid-sized Northeastern university. The purpose of recruiting from the

university-environment was to target participants who would have experiences relevant to this study's area of interest (i.e. college-aged women's cross-sex relations). Written and verbal announcements were made within the communication department and classes. The researcher also sought participants through network sampling by contacting potential participants through Facebook and e-mail.

In targeting college-aged women, the researcher restricted the age range of participants. Participants were required to be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Restricting the age range helped ensure that participants would not have considerable amounts of relational experiences outside of the college environment that might affect how they discuss (or view) their college relational experiences.

Participants were also required to identify as heterosexual women who engage in cross-sex relations by choice as opposed to arrangement (Xiaohe, & White, 1990). This criterion was chosen to limit the scope of the present study. Although researching college-aged women's same-sex and arrangement-based relational experiences is important, the researcher anticipated that the number of questions in this study's protocol (about cross-sex and choice-based relations) would generate a great deal of data. Consequently, the researcher decided that a separate study would be needed to properly examine college-aged women's same-sex and arrangement-based relational experiences.

Participant Demographics

Participants interviewed covered all four academic years, and as a result their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years with a mean age of 20.38 years. Participants were mainly Caucasian, though they reported Islamic, Christian, secular, nonreligious, agnostic or atheistic religious affiliations. Furthermore, participants indicated a variety of political views. For example, participants were either conservative or moderate or liberal. All participants indicated a relatively high level of involvement in campus activities (e.g., campus clubs, Greek life and athletics), and all noted that their studies were important to them.

Interview Procedures

When interviewing participants, the researcher built and maintained rapport (Spradley, 1979). In the first step of the interview, the researcher described the interview process to participants and explained the purpose of the present study in order to alleviate participant anxiety. The researcher also gave each interviewee a detailed account of their rights as research participants when explaining aspects of the informed consent form. (Two informed consent forms were administered per participant. One form was given to the participant for their records. The other was kept by the researcher in the manner required by the Institutional Review Board.) In addition, demographic forms were administered and the purpose of these forms was explained to participants by the researcher before each interview began. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Questions asked in the interview focused on participant's relational experiences and identities. Participants were first asked to list all the cross-sex relations in which they engaged or are currently engaging (excluding family and platonic

relationship). Once relations were identified, participants were asked the same set of questions for each relational type.

Participants were asked various questions and were probed to elaborate when necessary. Examples of interview questions include: "What would you call this relation?" "How would you describe this relation?" "How do you communicate with this partner?" "How would you describe the rules for engaging in this type of relation?" "What are the benefits/drawbacks to engaging in this type of relation?" "What identities do you attempt to construct by engaging in these types of relations?" "What identities do you think others attempt to construct by engaging in this type of relation?" At the end of the interview, the researcher answered any questions or concerns that participants presented, if they presented any. The researcher transcribed interviews verbatim. This allowed the researcher to capture participants' experiences in their exact words. The process of transcription yielded 110 pages of qualitative data.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

The results of this study were obtained using Smith's (1995) method for qualitative thematic analysis. Smith's (1995) method has been successfully used to understand communicative research in general (Ellington, 2006; & Miller, 2009), and, more specifically, the concept of relationships within communication research (Aleman, 2005). Given the success of researchers using qualitative thematic analysis, and the fact that this type of analysis allows for flexibility in research while still providing rich accounts of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the researcher utilized thematic analysis to understand the phenomenon under current investigation.

Using Smith's (1995) method to develop a thorough understanding of the relational experiences of college-aged women, the researcher engaged in a thorough review of each transcript, inductively analyzed significant points, categorized and organized significant information and implemented exemplars. Exemplars were applied as a way to build trustworthiness (Fitch, 1994) by depicting the link between the researcher's interpretation and the data. The results indicated a myriad of personal relations. These relations are described in detail in the results section of this paper.

Results

The research yielded a total of fifteen relational types organized within three supra-categories. Each relation is examined in terms of its definition, description, initiation, maintenance, benefits, drawbacks and identity. The relations are discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

Relations Perceived as Having Commitment and Intimacy

Boyfriend-Girlfriend Types

Labeled boyfriend-girlfriend. In this relation, partners are in a serious and committed relationship. They enjoy their commonalities as well as a sense of security, intimacy and

friendship. Because this relation is serious, ongoing and emotionally secure, some college-aged women believe this relational type is the “ideal relationship” (6: 48). In general, partners initiate this relation by hanging out with one another, developing a meaningful friendship and engaging in a conversation about formally recognizing their relationship. To sustain this relationship, partners must maintain healthy communication, trustworthiness, and fidelity, despite the fact that some women engaging in this relation may only see their partner occasionally when college is in session.

Nevertheless, women engage in this relation because they perceive that the relation makes them happy and because they receive support, intimacy and emotional connection from their partner. However, college-aged women indicate that there is perceived vulnerability in this relationship which increases their likelihood of being hurt. They also indicate that, in some instances, their partner may become overly attached to them. In those situations, the male partner is referred to as a “clinger” (5: 387). Perceived identities that women engaging in this relation construct are “fun” (8: 325), “easy going” (8: 325) and “open” (3: 529). Women also strive to look like “a good friend” (5: 372) and they attempt to incorporate their labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation into their identity, because they view the relation as “central” (6: 529) to their identity.

Dynamic non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend. The dynamic non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation is used to define partners who have not formally discussed becoming a boyfriend or girlfriend, and are thus not publicly recognized as a boyfriend or girlfriend. However, they are moving toward public recognition. In fact, it is anticipated that these partners will enter the labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation at some point in the near future.

To initiate this relation, then, women perceive that they should spend time together with their partner doing couple-oriented activities or acting like a couple. For instance, they perceive that they should hold hands, show affection or communicate like they are boyfriend and girlfriend. However, this relation is not meant to be sustained because partners want to transition into the labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation. Consequently, women engage in this relation because the relation is enjoyable. In general, women do not see many perceivable drawbacks or risks to engaging in this relation. However, perceived identities that are associated with this relation are constructed by women to help them appear “serious” (1: 836), as if they are ready for a labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation.

Static non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend. This relation involves partners who are not formally recognized as boyfriend and girlfriend and who, for various reasons, have no desire to become boyfriend and girlfriend. Nonetheless, college-aged women perceive that these partners act like a couple, participate in couple-oriented activities and enjoy most of the benefits of a labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation (e.g., some sense of security, commitment and intimacy).

To initiate this relation, college-aged women usually develop a friendship with their partner. After this perceived friendship develops, partners generally incorporate some sort of sexual activity. From there, a labeled boyfriend-girlfriend-like relation is perceived to

fall into place. To sustain this relation, then, college-aged women perceive that they must engage in a great deal of gaming. Because of this gaming, partners tend to “tiptoe” (3: 364) around subjects that may alter the course or status of their relation. Thus, although women implicate intimacy as a benefit to engaging in this relation, their feelings and efforts to sustain the relation may not be mutually reciprocated by their partner. Nonetheless, perceived identities associated with this relation are “reliable,” “unconstrained” and “not bogged down by labels” (3: 524-525).

Romanticized Types

Fling. A fling, which can last up to a few months, is a romanticized, passionate and intense relation that involves aspects of a labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation. Partners in this relation are required to be located in the same geographic region. They are also intimate and relatively emotionally expressive. Their perceived expressiveness and excitement is attributed to the inevitable end of this relation, which occurs when partner(s) enter, return or move to separate geographic regions. As one interviewee described, “it is fun and exciting and it might be fun and exciting because you know it is going to be short-lived” (1: 448-449).

Despite its short-term nature, partners initiate this relation by dating. Thus, after a few dates, partners enter a fling. Entering the fling relation is perceived to be a natural transition from dating because partners understand that the end of their relation is in sight and inevitable; “You are trying to live your life in the moment” (1: 790-791). As a result, a fling is not meant to be sustained for long periods of time.

However, while engaging in a fling, partners work to sustain their relation by perceiving that their fling is short-term, and that they will need to move on when their relation ends. In terms of communication, partners are not overly hesitant about expressing their feelings. As one interviewee described, “You actually become emotionally involved with each other” (1: 443). Consequently, while women perceive that this relation offers some benefits (e.g., fun and excitement); it does present various perceived drawbacks. For example, emotional hurt when the relation ends. Participants described this emotional hurt by saying, “it [the fling] ends and it is not fun” (1: 444). Furthermore, women engaging in this relation construct an identity that is perceived to be “fun” (1: 790). They want to appear as if they are living “life in the moment” (1: 791).

Relations Perceived as Having Some Commitment and Intimacy

Friends with Benefits Types

Non-exclusive friends with benefits. This relation develops between a woman and her cross-sex friends. Thus, partners in this relation are friends who engage in sexual activity. However, the relation is not romantic, regardless of whether partners see each other on a perceived consistent basis. In fact, one interviewee said, “I would probably define it [non-exclusive friends with benefits] as something more than a hookup like a continuous sort of thing” (5: 182), while another mentioned that you “see this person [partner] on a

regular basis” (3: 240). Thus, to initiate this relation, partners must already be friends—in some sense.

To sustain this relation, partners maintain their friendship and sexual activity while limiting their emotional involvement, as partners are expected to remain emotionally detached in this relation. One participant described this perception by saying that “you would just not get emotional” (5: 203). Similarly, even though partners are friends, college-aged women do not perceive that friends with benefits partners should be emotionally supportive or committed to one another in the boyfriend-girlfriend sense. Consequently, conversations between partners resemble conversations that occur between friends; it is perceived that partners are not to deviate from friendly conversation, become emotionally expressive or articulate a need for emotional support. For example, “you wouldn’t necessarily go to them if you were having a bad day because then it might make them feel like they are committed to you” (11: 393-395).

Nonetheless, benefits to engaging in this relation were perceived by college-aged women to include: a gratification of sexual needs accompanied by trust but not commitment, security coupled with freedom as women consistently have a relational partner that they are not obligated to in more than a friendly way, and the possibility that this relation will lead to more (i.e. any boyfriend-girlfriend relation). Perceived drawbacks were indicated by college-aged women as well. Drawbacks were: difficulty remaining emotionally detached, feelings are not mutually reciprocated and jealousy convolutes the friendship. Perceived identities in this relation are “fun” (11: 546), “attractive” (11: 546), easy-going and, in some instances, persuasive.

Exclusive friends with benefits. Partners in this relation are in the friends with benefits relation described above, however, these partners only engage in sexual activity with each other. As a result, college-aged women perceive this relation to incorporate more displays of affection, emotional involvement and commitment. Conceptually, this relation falls between the static non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend and the non-exclusive friends with benefits relation as this relation is perceived to involve more emotional interaction and commitment than the non-exclusive friends with benefits relation, but not more than the static non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation.

Because this relation is similar, in ways, to the non-exclusive friends with benefits relation, college-aged women observe that partners initiate this relation in the same ways that they initiate the non-exclusive friends with benefits relation. Though, at some point, these partners reach an understanding, generally through verbal agreement, that they are exclusive. Thus, sustaining this relation requires partners to remain sexually faithful to each other. Furthermore, women engage in this relation because they perceive that benefits resulting from this relation are similar to the benefits resulting from the non-exclusive friends with benefits relation. However, they indicate that the exclusivity of this relation is an additional benefit as it adds another perceived layer of security. Perceived drawbacks and identities were similar to those mentioned in the non-exclusive friends with benefits relation.

Exploratory Types

Consistent-exclusive individual exploration. Women in the consistent-exclusive individual exploration relation regularly spend one-on-one time with their partner to enjoy his company, learn about him as a person and consider establishing a more resolute relationship (i.e., typically boyfriend-girlfriend relations or a fling) with him. As a result, it is perceived that women develop some sense of intimacy and connection with their partner by consistently hanging out, going on dates or participating in activities that both partners enjoy. However, partners in this relation are not particularly serious about the relation or about each other. As one interviewee noted, "you are not committed to him. It is not random, but it's also not serious and committed. You could take it [consistent-exclusive individual exploration] or leave it at any given point" (6: 174-178).

To initiate this relation, partners should "screen" (11: 257) one another. Women want to "make sure that this is a person they want to keep seeing by finding out as much about them as they can" (11: 257-258). To sustain this relation, on the other hand, it is perceived that women should remain faithful to their partners and maintain healthy communication along with awareness about the boundaries of their relation.

In terms of the perceived benefits associated with this relation, college-aged women indicate an ability to satisfy their sexual needs and gain a source of company and friendship. Conversely, a perceived drawback is time commitment. One participant noted this by saying that "you have to put in a lot of time" (2: 386). Nonetheless, perceived identities in this relationship are constructed to help the woman appear smart.

Occasional-non-exclusive individual exploration. Women in the occasional-non-exclusive individual exploration relation occasionally spend time together with different partners to enjoy their company, learn about them as people, and see if one of the partners sparks a desire for a more resolute relationship (i.e. a boyfriend-girlfriend relation). In other words, a woman will "just every once in awhile go out, like for a meal or something with different boys, nothing beyond that" (4: 121). Conceptually, this relation falls between the consistent-exclusive individual exploration relation and a hookup. It is perceived that partners are not very committed to one another, and thus do not see each other on a consistent basis. In fact, partners may see each other only once for a meal or a movie. Yet, seeing each other for a meal or a movie does engender some sense of commitment and intimacy, even if that sense is not extensively perceived by college-aged women.

Nevertheless, this relation is initiated in the same way as the consistent-exclusive individual exploration relation; partners screen each other for future potential. To sustain this relation, college-aged women perceived that partners spend additional time together. However, this relation, in general, is not meant to be sustained. As a result, communication between partners remains at the surface level; "you might talk about school, things you don't like, you know the usual, you find things in common and you can laugh at that" (11: 247-250). Perceived benefits, drawbacks and identities associated

with this relation, then, are similar to what was found in the consistent-exclusive individual exploration relation.

Occasional-group-facilitated exploration. Women in the occasional-group-facilitated exploration relation occasionally spend time together with a guy *and* his or her friends to enjoy his company, learn about him as a person and look for a potential relationship (i.e. a boyfriend-girlfriend type). The friends are meant to facilitate the partners' exploration process by providing support. Thus, partners in this relation see each other in groups. To initiate this relation partners first realize that they have commonality. They then act on this recognition by initiating conversation and going out in a group of friends. As one participant described this process:

I guess you have something in common so you just kind of expand on that like if you have a class together you start by maybe studying together and you start by getting in conversation about things you are interested in and then from there you develop something you are both interested in and then you go out and you go out in groups of friends. (4: 57-61)

Consequently, these partners are perceived to be acquaintances, and the relation is used to screen for future potential, like the other exploratory relations.

To maintain this relation though, college-aged women perceive that partners should keep in contact with each other, ensure that they have time to spend together and develop expectancy that they will hangout. As a result, perceived communication in this relation is similar to communication between a woman and her platonic cross-sex friends.

Observed benefits of this relation include gaining a sense of security. For example, one college-aged woman said, "I think that this relationship can help in being able to feel a little bit more like you can depend on the person so like it gives you that little cushioning for if anything ever happens" (4: 84-86). However, in some college-aged women's experiences, the relation is perceived to fill an emotional void. As this interviewee said:

I think [occasional- group-facilitated exploration] fills a mental void that a lot of women have. Women who are single look for that person that they want to be able to call before they go to bed or if they are bored and they feel that this person would fill that void. (4: 76-80)

Conversely, a perceived drawback is differing expectations. One interviewee noted this by saying that "this is where the stage becomes a little shaky, like where you start expecting things and the other person doesn't" (4: 90-91). Identities connected to this relation are "classy" and "trustworthy" (4: 446).

Open Types

Open relationship. In an open relationship, a woman has one main relational partner with whom she engages in this relation, although, both the woman and her main partner are able to have extra-relational partners. Consequently, this relation involves a woman, her main partner and extra-relational partners. With this dynamic, it is perceived that when the woman and her main relational partner are together geographically they act like a couple. But, when they are separated geographically, they engage in a range of relational activity with extra-relational partners.

Nevertheless, this relation is initiated through involvement in a previous relation (i.e. labeled boyfriend-girlfriend, dynamic non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend, static non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend or a fling) that became unsustainable. For example, one participant described her open relation as a being preceded by a fling:

I actually met the person on vacation so at the end of a month of ‘I can’t [continue in an exclusive relation with you], I really like you, I would like to be with you, but I can’t, I don’t think I would be fulfilled in anyway. And we were actually boyfriend and girlfriend for a while too. We decided it [an exclusive relation] wouldn’t work between the two of us. And I mean we did talk about it and we said it was ok if there were other people involved as long as they weren’t serious [to main partners], and if it became serious the open relation would stop. (1: 551-556)

In this example, the participant liked her main partner, engaged in a fling and a labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation with him, but decided that those relationships (i.e. the fling and labeled boyfriend-girlfriend) would not be sustainable over long distances; “we knew that it wouldn’t be sustainable between the both of us with such distance” (1: 532-533).

To maintain an open relationship, then, it is perceived that main partners should agree on an acceptable level of sexual activity that can occur between extra- and main relational partners. For example, this participant described her level of acceptable activity, “you are not going to date another person, but I think you can hook up with other people, I wouldn’t sleep with another person though” (2: 593-598). Furthermore, extra-relational partners are not perceived to be or become serious in the eyes of the engaging woman or her main partner. If an extra-relational partner becomes serious, college-aged women perceive that main partners will generally end or re-negotiate their open relationship. Consequently, it is understood that main partners talk about their extra-relational partners, in some sense, with one another.

A perceived benefit associated with this relation is that an open relationship provides a woman with a “fall back” (1: 584) in case an extra-relational partner relation does not live up to her expectations. Perceived drawbacks, on the other hand, are that open relationships are not designed for success in the long run and women experience emotional hurt when the relation ends. The identities perceived to coincide with this

relation are all encompassing. Participants indicated that identities are “slutty” (1: 800), “single, bold and crazy” (2: 788) and “happy” because you have the “boyfriend idea” (2: 786).

Relations Perceived as Having Little Commitment and Intimacy

Hookup Types

Hookup. A hookup is a relation in which a woman engages in sexual activity (though not necessarily intercourse) with a man. However, she has no desire to further her relation with the man. Thus, hookups are perceived to last about one night. Nonetheless, partners initiate hookups in several ways. In fact, there is no perceived rule for who initiates the hookup (i.e. men or women), though college-aged women observe that partners are generally attracted to one another physically and willing to engage in the hookup. However, while this description is perceived to suit the hookup relation in general, there are several types of hookup relations in which college-aged women engage. For example, college-aged women engage in the repeated, drunken, one-night stand and makeout hookup.

Repeated hookup. A repeated hookup is said to occur when a woman engages in sexual activity, on more than one occasion, with the same partner. In this relation, there is an expectation that a type of relationship will evolve, even if that relationship lacks romantic elements. This relation is also called “fuck buddies,” according to interviewees because “there are hookups that last for awhile” (6: 350)

Drunken hookup. This relation described a situation where alcohol intoxicated partners engage in sexual activity. In this situation, it is perceived that alcohol acts as a facilitator in the hookup. According to participants, this hookup can look “sloppy” (2: 87).

One-night stand hookup. This hookup involves sexual intercourse. In fact, the one-night stand hookup is perceived by college-aged women as a hookup that is taken to the ultimate step.

Makeout hookup. This hookup type is used to describe a relation in which partners are perceived to be minimally attracted to one another. As a result, partners in this relation only makeout (i.e. deep and intense kissing). Furthermore, it is perceived that these partners develop more of a friendship than partners engaging in the other types of hookups. However, this hookup, like the other types of hookups, is typically perceived as a type of relation that is not meant to be sustained.

Regardless of the hookup type, college-aged women perceive similar relational elements. Thus, for the duration of any hookup, partners are to remain emotionally detached. As a result, it is observed that partners do not communicate meaningfully in hookup relations. In fact, the communication that they do engage in is thought to be arrangement-based and sexual. For example, partners communicate to arrange where and when they are going to meet and what they want their partner to do during their sexual interactions. Perceived

benefits that women associate with hookups include satisfying sexual desires and feeling wanted.

Conversely, perceived drawbacks to engaging in hookups include the development of disallowed emotional attachment and an inability to communicate feelings because conversation is not supposed to be meaningful. Identities perceived to be associated with this relation are "spontaneous" (1: 771), "cool" (8: 336), slutty (1: 785) and non-associated (6: 569-570) because college-aged women feel uncomfortable when people insinuate that the hookup is a significant part of their identity. However, it is hookups and friends with benefits that communication researchers have focused on, despite the fact that women do not always want to focus on or be associated with these hookup-like relations.

Discussion

Because there has been a developing interest in friends with benefits and hookup relations, and the implications of such relations, in both academic literature and popular press, this study was conducted to further the discipline's understanding of *all* of the types of personal relations in which college-aged women engage. By doing so, the researcher hoped to both investigate whether or not all of the relationships practiced in college are actually being researched, and to learn about the unique relational environment of college-aged women, as well as the implications of their relational engagement.

In exploring the types of personal relations, the present study examined several types of relations and relational factors, specifically: commitment, intimacy, rules, communication and identity. The research yielded fifteen relational types organized within three supra-categories according to perceived commitment and intimacy. Many of the relational types that emerged (e.g., labeled boyfriend-girlfriend, dynamic non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend, static non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend, friends with benefits, exploratory types, hookups) have been examined by previous communication researchers (e.g., Tolhuizen, 1989; Ayers, 1983; Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Philpotts, 1982; Baxter & Wilmot, 1984; Afifi & Faulkner, 2002; Hughes, Morrison & Asada, 2005; Messman, Canary & Hause, 2002; Paul and Hayes, 2002). Although these types may not have been discussed with the terminology used in the present study, many of the relationships uncovered in these findings are touched upon within communication research in various forms. When the present findings have been previously examined in communication literature, they are generally consistent with the findings in earlier research investigating the same relational type; particularly where friends with benefits and hookups are concerned.

Consequently, this discussion will focus on, relational fluidity and perceived frequency of relational engagement, as well as the implications engendered by participation within the various relational types. By examining these three aspects, broader meanings, questions and possibilities are generated for future research.

Fluidity

The fluidity present within college-aged women's relations is best described by the *complicated relation*. The *complicated relation* was a relational type mentioned by college-aged women, though the *complicated relation* was perceived to be a transitional stage rather than a relational type. Thus, the *complicated relation* describes relational confusion as well as relational negotiating, particularly initiation negotiation, termination negotiation and termination to new initiation negotiation.

For example, partners engaging in the dynamic non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation who are confused about the methodology by which they will label themselves are described by the *complicated relation*. Similarly, the *complicated relation* describes partners who are negotiating the end of their friends with benefits or hookup relation. The *complicated relation* is also used to describe partners in a labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation or a fling who are in the process of terminating their relation in order to negotiate the process of initiating an open relationship.

However, this fluidity can be applied to other sets of relations using the *complicated relation*; the examples listed here are used to demonstrate the concept of fluidity as it applies to the relations in the present study. Thus, fluidity can exist within individual supra-categories. For example, partners could move between friends with benefits, exploratory relations and open relationships in any particular order, because fluidity is not perceived to be directional in this study (regardless of whether or not fluidity is within one supra-category or across several supra-categories.)

Supra-Categories

Regarding the supra-categories, participants perceived that college-aged women engage most frequently in relations perceived as having some or little commitment and intimacy. According to the results of the present study, this means that college-aged women are perceived to engage in friends with benefits, exploratory relations, open relationships and hookup relations more often than the boyfriend-girlfriend relations or the fling. Because of this perception, maintenance rules, communication rules, emotions and relational identities within in the aforementioned supra-categories are important in forming a basic understanding of what college-aged women's frequency of engagement might mean; specifically what they may mean in a broader sense.

In general, the aforementioned supra-categories consist of relations in which partners remain relatively emotionally detached and expectation-less. These relations are typically not meant to be furthered or made into a more meaningful relationship. Thus, communication is often unclear, confusing and restrictive. Nonetheless, women engage in these relations because these relations are perceived to satisfy them sexually and in general, allow them to feel wanted or secure—at least in some sense. However, the overarching theme for why college-aged women engage in these relations is: these relations do not require a great deal of maintenance or time commitment, and they allow college-aged women to fulfill their desires while feeling desired. Thus, women construct

identities that are fun, easy-going and attractive. These relational elements serve to reinforce the fact that while participants have the fluidity to engage in any relation, they willingly choose to spend a great deal of their time engaging in the less committed and less intimate relations. This constructs broader questions and concerns.

Broader Questions, Meaning and Implications

Because women are perceived to frequently utilize fluidity within less committed and intimate relations (women can and do move from relation to relation within supra-categories that are relatively low in commitment and intimacy), it is possible that women are struggling in their attempts to balance their priorities—schoolwork, athletics, campus activities and their personal relationships. It is also conceivable that women are forsaking the perceived “ideal relationship” (6:48) for a relationship that is less time consuming and easier to maintain (or not maintain). If this possibility rings true for college-aged women, the lack of balance, or lack of ability to balance, could be affecting college-aged women's relational involvement.

Furthermore, with relatively unrestrictive fluidity, it is possible that college-aged women possess values that are spread across a value spectrum. In other words, some college-aged women may value committed and intimate relations, while other women may value relations that offer excitement, sexual gratification and freedom. And these differences in values are reflected in the various relations in which different college-aged engage.

It is also plausible that college-aged women are still negotiating their values, perhaps through experimentation in different types of personal relations. Since it is perceived that college-aged women engage in less committed and intimate relations more often, a shift in values, such that college students may now place more value on freedom and personal control (as opposed to partner commitment) is also plausible.

Another possibility is that college-aged women lack relational skills. If the “ideal relationship” (6: 48) is perceived to be the labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relation, why aren't more women engaging in that relation? Why do women seem to be settling for relations that do not fulfill their emotional needs? If a committed boyfriend-girlfriend relation is the “ideal” (6: 48) relation among these women, wouldn't the time commitment and relational maintenance be part of what makes the very committed and intimate relations “ideal” (6: 48)?

When discussing relational transitions, women use the term *complicated*. However, it required a great deal of probing to develop an understanding of what that term means. Indeed, participants seemed quick to say “it's complicated” when asked about a confusing and often emotionally involved aspect of their life. Although the transition may indeed be complicated, in that it most likely involved inter- and intrapersonal negotiation, participants seem reluctant to discuss the process behind what makes their relational life “complicated.” It is still to be seen whether this is because women do not have the skills to process such a transition with the necessary maturity, insight or awareness, if it is because this requires managing facework or if it is because of something entirely

different. Indeed, future exploration is needed to understand what “it’s complicated” represents and means. Given the importance of this life stage (18-25), and its heavy influence on later life and later quality of life (Arnett, 2000), future research should consider examining the implications of relational engagement for college women in future research. However, they should also take into consideration the limitations of the current study.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

The strengths of this study were the richness of data that was collected, the numerous types of relational types that were uncovered, and the development of implications for future research that arose from the interviews. These strengths will be useful for future communication scholars.

Perhaps the greatest limitation to the present study was its inability to decipher, in a reliable manner, the extent to which both participants (man *and* woman) in the relations under focus need to agree that their relationship is in fact a particular type. Because this study only examined women, it was difficult to decipher, without making assumptions, the degree to which it is necessary for men to agree with the women that they are engaging in a certain relational type. However, the current findings did provide a basis upon which future research could address this point. For example, with the labeled boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, the labeling of the relationship implies that both parties have undergone a negotiation and, in agreeing to publicly acknowledge their partner as their boyfriend/girlfriend, have implicated that they are indeed in the same relational type. Through negotiation they have reached an understanding of the relation they are in and how they will portray that relation to the public. However, because of the more ambiguous nature of many of the other relational types under study (dynamic, static-non-labeled-boyfriend-girlfriend, exploratory types etc.), it was difficult to determine the extent to which both parties agree that they are in a particular relationship, particularly because men were not included in the study, and because relational partners were not interviewed together to confirm that they were engaging in the same relation.

In conducting future research on the topic of personal relations, communication scholars should consider including men in their sample. This would help to answer the aforementioned question about partners agreeing they are both in a particular type of relation. It would also contribute a male perspective to the relational types investigated, and would perhaps generate separate implications specific to males. Researchers might also consider interviewing relational partners together to answer some of the implications and questions that arose as part of this investigation, and because interviewing partners together would shed light on the process, discourse and negotiation that occurs “behind the scenes.” In addition, researchers should consider using a larger sample size. Although eight participants yielded a significant amount of data, a larger sample size could paint a more detailed picture of the personal relation scene on college campuses.

However, researchers should also consider the distinctiveness of women in the college relational environment, and thus continue to examine relational aspects that are unique to

women. In seeking out a larger, more diverse sample, researchers should consider studying college-aged relations across a variety of campuses, particularly those that differ in wealth, size and ethnic diversity. If future researchers make use of these alterations in their studies, a more encompassing picture of college-aged personal relations will evolve, and that picture will help to shed light on some of the implications that were raised in this discussion.

Conclusion

Eight interviews were conducted in this study. The data yielded 15 relational types organized within three supra-categories according to perceived amounts of commitment and intimacy. Relations perceived to be intimate and committed include: labeled boyfriend-girlfriend, dynamic non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend, static non-labeled boyfriend-girlfriend and fling. Relations perceived to be somewhat intimate and committed include: non-exclusive friends with benefits, exclusive friends with benefits, consistent-exclusive individual exploration, occasional-non-exclusive individual exploration, occasional-group-facilitated exploration and open relationship. Types thought to have little intimacy and commitment include: hookup, repeated hookup, drunken hookup, one-night stand hookup and makeout hookup. Each relation was examined in terms of definition, description, initiation and maintenance, benefits and drawbacks to engagement and identity. Several implications and directions for future research resulted. Future research should continue to explore these relational types, given their possible impact on the college-aged woman, and the fact that the years of emerging adulthood greatly influence later quality of life (Arnett, 2000).

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