Manifestations of Relationship Conceptualizations in Conversation

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A question fundamental to the study of interpersonal communication in close relationships is how the characteristics people associate with their relationships are evident in their conversation. We begin by explicating 3 key aspects of relationship conceptualizations: reliance on relational knowledge, interdependence, and mutual commitment. Then we advance hypotheses linking those relationship conceptualizations with features of people's content and relational messages. We report the results of a study in which 120 dating couples engaged in videotaped conversations. Findings offered modest support for our predictions regarding reliance on relational knowledge; results were less consistent with our hypotheses involving interdependence and mutual commitment. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for understanding how perceptions of relationships are apparent in conversation.

Interpersonal communication in the context of close relationships is inextricably linked with the ways people understand their dyadic associations. Relationship conceptualizations, or the characteristics that individuals associate with their relationships (e.g., Fletcher & Thomas, 1996; Surra & Bohman, 1991), constitute an important component of relating. For example, the meanings people derive from messages help them to define their relationships (Duck, 1995; Wish, Deutsch, & Kaplan, 1976). Individuals use this information, in turn, to interpret a partner's actions

(Dillard, Solomon, & Samp, 1996), to bring continuity to discrete interaction episodes (Sigman, 1991), and to enact behaviors that are appropriate within the relationship (Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2001). In sum, the study of close relationships within the field of interpersonal communication is founded on the premise that people's communication behavior is inherently tied to the ways they conceptualize their associations (Planalp, 1993).

This assumption raises a particularly challenging question for scholars of interpersonal communication in close relationships. Namely, how are close relationships simultaneously defined in the minds of individuals but sustained by the communication that occurs between partners? Given the obstacles to reconciling the cognition of individuals with the communication of dyads, it is not surprising that much remains unknown about the issue (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1983; Planalp, 1985; Wilmot, 1980). Thus, we seek to advance the study of interpersonal communication by examining how relationship conceptualizations are embedded in conversation. We begin by identifying three meaningful aspects of people's relationship conceptualizations. Next, we advance predictions linking those constructs with features of conversation. Finally, we describe an empirical study designed to test our predictions.

THE NATURE OF RELATIONSHIP CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Because people understand their relationships in a variety of ways, a myriad of constructs can be classified as elements of relationship conceptualizations (e.g., Frei & Shaver, 2002; Planalp & Rivers, 1996; Surra & Bohman, 1991).[1] How then should scholars delineate features of relationship conceptualizations that have particular relevance for interpersonal communication? We adopted one strategy for addressing this question by conducting a content analysis of theory and research focused on the intersection between interpersonal communication and close relationships (see Knobloch, 2001). Our goal in reviewing the literature was to identify diverse themes that were firmly grounded in conceptual frameworks. To that end, we privileged constructs that spanned multiple disciplinary traditions and diverse programs of inquiry, and we avoided themes nominated by just one line of work.

Shaped by these criteria, our content analysis identified three key characteristics that people associate with their relationships: (a) reliance on relational knowledge, (b) interdependence, and (c) mutual commitment. We recognize that these themes are by no means exhaustive of the domain of constructs that define how individuals characterize their intimate associations. Clearly, a host of other concepts are relevant to people's relationship definitions. On the other hand, we believe that reliance on relational knowledge, interdependence, and mutual commitment

represent a reasonably diverse sample of the universe of ways individuals understand their close relationships. Thus, we chose these constructs as a starting point for investigating the link between relationship conceptualizations and conversation. We describe the themes and the frameworks that emphasize them in the following paragraphs.

Reliance on Relational Knowledge

Work on both interpersonal communication and close relationships suggests that variation in the degree to which people rely on relational knowledge is an important aspect of dyadic understanding. At its core, interpersonal communication requires partners to employ personalized information (Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994). Accordingly, a variety of interpersonal communication theories emphasize the ability to use relational knowledge as a fundamental dimension for understanding relationships. These include perspectives on uncertainty reduction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Sunnafrank, 1990), social penetration (Altman & Taylor, 1973), and planning (Berger, 1997). Notably, frameworks focused more squarely on close relationships also highlight the importance of utilizing relational knowledge, including attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and relational models theory (Fiske & Haslam, 1998).

Relational knowledge is the relationship-specific data individuals use to create and interpret messages (see Planalp, 1985; Planalp & Rivers, 1996); *reliance on relational knowledge* indexes the degree to which people depend on idiosyncratic information about specific partners and relationships (e.g., Berger & Bradac, 1982; Miller & Steinberg, 1975). Individuals participating in close relationships are able to draw on either normative, role-category information or differentiated knowledge that is tailored to unique individuals (Fitzpatrick, 1988; Miller & Steinberg, 1975). As partners come to rely on relational knowledge, they gain a heightened ability to explain each other's behavior (e.g., Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer, & Heron, 1987), to predict the rewards and costs associated with involvement in the relationship (e.g., Sunnafrank, 1990), and to plan for subsequent interaction episodes (e.g., Berger, 1997).

Interdependence

Literatures focused on both interpersonal communication and close relationships also highlight interdependence as a fundamental dimension for characterizing relationships. Interpersonal communication requires coordinated behavior between people (Cappella, 1987); thus, interdependence is an essential feature of dyadic relating. A host of interpersonal communication theories underscore interdependence as a core element of relationship conceptualizations, including interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), communication accommodation

theory (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991), and communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002). Theories within the domain of close relationships also accentuate the importance of interdependence; examples include Berscheid's (1983) emotional investment perspective and Rusbult's (1983) investment model.

Interdependence entails the coordination of mutually rewarding interaction patterns (e.g., Kelley et al., 1983; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). As individuals become increasingly interdependent, they exert greater degrees of influence over one another (Berscheid, 1983) and assimilate their previously independent activities into meshed sequences of behavior (Kelley et al., 1983). Quite unavoidably, partners' initial efforts to merge their behavioral routines result in interference as they learn through trial and error how to promote each other's goals (Berscheid, 1983; see also Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). In contrast, highly interdependent partners exert their influence by facilitating, rather than interfering with, each other's outcomes (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Accordingly, we conceptualize interdependence as an umbrella construct that is evident in a partner's propensity for *interference* and *facilitation*.

Mutual Commitment

Theories of both interpersonal communication and close relationships converge on mutual commitment as a third aspect of relationship conceptualizations that is intertwined with message production and processing. On a fundamental level, interpersonal communication embodies the process through which people develop expectations about how the relationship will progress over time (Honeycutt, 1993; Honeycutt, Cantrill, Kelly, & Lambkin, 1998). Consequently, a key component of interpersonal relating is partners' understanding of the degree to which their investment levels are similarly matched within the association (Baxter, 1987). A number of theories of interpersonal communication privilege issues related to expectations for the relationship's future, including the interactional paradigm (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967), expectancy violations theory (Burgoon & Hale, 1988), and relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Similarly, mutual commitment is stressed in perspectives on close relationships that seek to define intimacy, including Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love and Fehr's (1994) prototype analysis of love.

Mutual commitment is the degree to which partners are both invested in maintaining the association. Individuals negotiating mutual commitment cultivate the joint expectation that the relationship will continue into the future (e.g., Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999) and attach considerable value to the partnership (e.g., Rusbult, 1983). In the absence of mutual commitment, individuals differ in their expectations about the

future of the association (e.g., Baxter, 1987) and are not similarly dependent on the relationship (e.g., Drigotas et al., 1999).

Up to this point, we have argued that understanding how people's dyadic definitions are visible in conversation is central to the study of close relationships within the field of interpersonal communication. We identified three features of relationship conceptualizations that are notable within literatures focused on both interpersonal communication and close relationships: (a) reliance on relational knowledge involves people's propensity to use information tailored to a specific partner and relationship, (b) interdependence concerns their ability to coordinate behavior, and (c) mutual commitment entails their expectations for the future. Theories of interpersonal communication and theories of close relationships represent overlapping yet distinct domains of inquiry, but both literatures evidence the prominence of reliance on relational knowledge, interdependence, and mutual commitment. The diverse set of constructs captures cognitive as well as behavioral representations of relationships, information about individuals as well as information about the relationship between partners, and perceptions grounded in people's previous experience as well as their future expectations. We next turn our attention to how these constructs may be apparent in conversation.

RELATIONSHIP CONCEPTUALIZATIONS
WITHIN CONVERSATION

All messages convey two levels of information: The *content message* is the denotative meaning of an utterance, and the *relational message* is the information an utterance provides about the nature of the relationship between interactants (Bateson, 1972; Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Watzlawick et al., 1967). Because the distinction between content and relational messages provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding interpersonal communication (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Dillard et al., 1996), we use it to organize predictions about how features of relationship conceptualizations are evident in conversation.

Reliance on Relational Knowledge

Content Messages

At the content level of messages, the intimacy of topics people discuss may be tied to their tendency to rely on relational knowledge. *Content intimacy* is the degree to which people's conversations focus on private issues (Planalp, 1993; Planalp & Benson, 1992). Conversations high in content intimacy are exemplified by intimate self-disclosures, discussion of personal matters, and displays of intense emotion. Although

content intimacy bears some resemblance to the depth and breadth dimensions of self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973), it is not limited to only those utterances that contain self-disclosure. Rather, all messages can be arrayed on a continuum of content intimacy ranging from very superficial to very private (e.g., Planalp, 1993; Planalp & Benson, 1992).

A growing body of work indicates a link between people's use of relational knowledge and the degree of intimacy in their content messages. For example, Hale, Lundy, and Mongeau (1989) found that intimacy was positively associated with partners' reports of the depth of their self-disclosure. Similarly, Walther and Burgoon (1992) discovered that people perceived the depth of their self-disclosure to increase over time within computer-mediated relationships. Most recently, Planalp (1993) found that friends, as compared to acquaintances, displayed more content intimacy within conversation. Taken together, these results suggest that people's propensity to employ relational knowledge is evident in the content intimacy of conversation. Formally stated:

> H1: Reliance on relational knowledge is positively associated with content intimacy.

Relational Messages

The use of relational knowledge may be relevant to personalism at the relational level of messages. *Personalism* is the extent to which relational messages are uniquely tailored to the dyad (Baxter & Wilmot, 1983; Knapp, Ellis, & Williams, 1980). Personalized messages are individualized and customized; messages lacking personalism are general and nonspecific (Knapp et al., 1980). Personalism can be displayed in conversation in a variety of ways, including allusions to the partner's background (Planalp & Benson, 1992), to past relationship experiences (Holmberg & Veroff, 1996), and to shared information about social network members (Planalp, 1993). Personalized communication is useful because it facilitates both the efficiency (Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994) and the effectiveness (Kent, Davis, & Shapiro, 1981; Planalp, 1985) of conversation. In sum, personalized communication occurs when partners adapt their messages to one another.

Research suggests a positive association between reliance on relational knowledge and personalism. For example, Knapp et al. (1980) found that intimacy coincided with partners' heightened expectations for using messages that are tailored to the dyad. Further, Bell, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Gore (1987) discovered that partners employed personal idioms to emphasize their unique shared history. Planalp (1993) found that friends, as compared to acquaintances, displayed their heightened understanding

in conversation by making shorthand references without offering detailed background information. Viewed as a set, these findings suggest that people's use of relational knowledge is apparent in the personalism of their relational messages. Consequently, we offer a second prediction:

> H2: Reliance on relational knowledge is positively associated with personalism.

Interdependence

Content Messages

One feature of content messages that may function to convey interdependence is people's use of dyadic pronouns. *Dyadic pronouns*, which are first-person plural pronouns that refer to the interactants, generally demonstrate solidarity within content messages (Dreyer, Dreyer, & Davis, 1987). In contrast to individual pronouns such as *you*, *I*, and *me*, which signal a cognitive focus on the differences between people (Dreyer et al., 1987), dyadic pronouns such as *we* and *us* reflect a mental representation of commonality and togetherness (Raush, Marshall, & Featherman, 1970).

Support for a link between interdependence and dyadic pronoun usage stems from three empirical studies. First, Raush et al. (1970) showed that spouses who employed a communal orientation toward marriage used an increased number of dyadic pronouns. Second, Fletcher et al. (1987) found that relationship length was positively associated with dating partners' propensity to describe their relationship using interpersonal terms (e.g., "we like doing things together," p. 483). Finally, Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, and Langston (1998) observed that dating partners who possessed a pluralistic representation of their relationship tended to describe it using a greater number of dyadic pronouns.

We argued previously that developing interdependence is marked by changes in a partner's capacity to hinder and enhance an individual's goal-directed behavior. More specifically, we posited that whereas independent partners tend to disrupt each other's activities, interdependent partners tend to promote each other's outcomes. The following prediction formalizes our logic about how dyadic pronoun usage should coincide with a partner's interference and facilitation as the foundations of interdependence:

> H3a: Whereas a partner's interference is negatively associated with dyadic pronoun usage . . .
> H3b: . . . a partner's facilitation is positively associated with dyadic pronoun usage.

Relational Messages

Interdependence is likely to be displayed in the synchrony of communication between partners at the relational level of messages. As a fundamental dimension along which interpersonal communication varies (e.g., Knapp, 1978), *synchrony* is the extent to which communication is coordinated between people (Baxter & Wilmot, 1983; Knapp et al., 1980). Synchrony manifests itself in interactions that are "smooth-flowing, effortless, spontaneous, relaxed, informal, and well-coordinated" (Knapp et al., 1980, p. 277). Because synchrony emerges from the coordinated behavior of both interactants (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973), it requires partners to mutually accommodate each other's actions (Knapp et al., 1980).

Research indicates a connection between interdependence and the synchrony of people's relational messages. For example, Knapp et al. (1980) found that individuals perceived more synchrony of relational messages within intimate versus nonintimate relationships. Baxter and Wilmot (1983) discovered that communication within developing relationships was marked by heightened degrees of interaction effectiveness (calculated as a hybrid of the relational message features of synchrony and efficiency). More recently, Planalp (1993) reported that conversations between friends were characterized by more spontaneity and more smoothness than conversations between acquaintances. Taken together, this work suggests that interdependence, as constituted by a partner's capacity for interference or facilitation, is apparent in synchrony. Accordingly, we propose a fourth set of predictions:

H4a: Whereas a partner's interference is negatively associated with synchrony . . .
H4b: . . . a partner's facilitation is positively associated with synchrony.

Mutual Commitment

Content Messages

Partners' level of mutual commitment may be evident in the amount of relationship talk they engage in. *Relationship talk* encompasses those content messages that pertain to the nature of the relationship between partners (Acitelli, 1988). Relationship talk provides a venue for individuals to define the status of their association (Baxter, 1987), to conduct relationship transitions (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993), to negotiate critical relationship events (Emmers & Canary, 1996), and to execute bids for increased or decreased intimacy (Bell & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1990; Owen, 1987). Despite the potential usefulness of relationship talk, people typically view it as threatening to both themselves and their relationships (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Hence, romantic partners appear to

engage in relationship talk only infrequently (Baxter & Wilmot, 1984, 1985).

Mutual commitment may heighten people's propensity to engage in relationship talk. Mutual commitment typically allows partners to gain a degree of security within the relationship (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998), to avoid an imbalance of power between partners (Drigotas et al., 1999), to guard against potential threats posed by rivals (Buunk, 1995), and to feel confident in their understanding of the relationship's definition (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). For these reasons, people who have established mutual commitment may be able to reference the relationship without incurring substantial threat (Baxter, 1987). In fact, relationship talk in the presence of mutual commitment may function to affirm and reaffirm this balance over time (e.g., Knapp & Taylor, 1994; Wilmot, 1980). Hence, mutual commitment is likely to facilitate the exchange of messages alluding to the status of the relationship.

On the other hand, partners who lack reciprocal commitment may view the state of the relationship as a taboo topic because the dyad is relatively fragile (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Indeed, Baxter and Wilmot (1985, p. 265) drew the following conclusion from their examination of topic avoidance: "In placing the relationship 'on the table' for discussion, [our] respondents perceived that the unequal commitment levels would become clear and eventually destroy the relationship." When mutual commitment is not present, individuals may not talk about the relationship both to protect their own face and to avoid damaging the relationship (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Baxter, 1987). Hence, we advance a fifth prediction:

H5: Mutual commitment is positively associated with relationship talk.

The *explicitness* of people's relationship talk is a second feature of content messages that is likely to correspond with mutual commitment. All messages can be classified along a continuum ranging from highly explicit to highly implicit (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). The explicitness of a message is a function of the association between its literal and figurative meanings. An explicit utterance possesses a strong correspondence between its abstract meaning and its surface meaning (e.g., "Go out on a date with me on Friday night."), and an implicit utterance implies a different abstract meaning than its surface meaning (e.g., "I haven't seen you for a while."). Thus, the explicitness of a message is its clarity of meaning in the absence of contextual information (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Clark, 1979; Searle, 1975).

An especially interesting paradox exists between explicitness and implicitness within close relationships. Explicit talk is beneficial because it functions to crystallize a relationship's definition (Baxter, 1987) and it is

relatively efficient (Brown & Levinson, 1987). At the same time, explicitness is risky because it may damage the personal face of the interactants (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and expose differences between partners (Baxter, 1987). Thus, speakers must balance competing goals when selecting the degree of explicitness to employ in an utterance: Whereas an explicit message is clear and precise (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), it is redundant if the listener already possesses the detailed information it contains (e.g., Hornstein, 1985; Planalp & Benson, 1992), and it is face-threatening if the speaker and the listener disagree about the topic at hand (Baxter, 1987).

Mutual commitment may facilitate explicit relationship talk. When individuals are unsure about the mutuality of commitment between them, they appear to avoid direct communication about the state of the relationship (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Reichert, 1996). On the other hand, people are likely to engage in explicit relationship talk under conditions of mutual commitment because face threat concerns are alleviated (Baxter, 1987; Solomon, 1997) and efficiency goals may be salient instead (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In sum, whereas people may rely on implicit communication about the state of the relationship in the absence of mutual commitment because it diminishes face threat, they may engage in explicit relationship talk under conditions of mutual commitment to facilitate the precision and efficiency of their messages (Baxter, 1987; Solomon, 1997). Consequently, we offer the following prediction:

H6: Mutual commitment is positively associated with the explicitness of people's relationship talk at the content level of messages.

Relational Messages

Whereas mutual commitment may be apparent in the amount and explicitness of relationship talk at the content level of messages, it may be displayed in equality at the relational level of messages. *Conversational equality* is a feature of relational messages that signals equivalent degrees of influence between partners (e.g., Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Millar & Rogers, 1976; Watzlawick et al., 1967). Displays of inequality indicate that one partner "has the right to direct, define, and delimit the actions of the interpersonal system" (Millar & Rogers, 1976, p. 91). Conversely, displays of equality demonstrate that partners possess a similar capacity to regulate each other's behavior (e.g., Bateson, 1958). Conversational equality is not a feature of speaking turns enacted by individuals, but rather it is defined by partners' negotiation of influence (Millar & Rogers, 1976; Rogers & Farace, 1975). Thus, equality arises when people grant each other similar amounts of control within conversation.

We propose that mutual commitment is evident in relational messages that convey equality. When partners are mutually committed to

a relationship, they are likely to communicate in ways that display equal investment (e.g., Drigotas et al., 1999), balanced power (e.g., White, 1981), and reciprocated trust (e.g., Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Conversely, when partners are not mutually committed, they may be vulnerable to insecurities stemming from unequal exchange processes (Drigotas et al., 1999) and increased relational uncertainty (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Guided by our suspicion that mutual commitment is apparent in conversational equality, we propose a final hypothesis:

H7: Mutual commitment is positively associated with conversational equality.

METHOD

Sample and Procedures

Students enrolled in communication courses at the University of Wisconsin–Madison earned extra course credit for participating in the study with a romantic or potentially romantic partner of their choosing. The sample was comprised of 120 heterosexual dyads (120 males and 120 females) in which at least one person reported being romantically interested in his or her partner. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 30 years old; approximately 93% were between 18 and 22 years of age ($M = 20.55$, $SD = 1.54$, $Mdn = 20$). On average, participants indicated being romantically interested in their partner for approximately 11 months ($range = 1$ week to 6 years, $SD = 12.29$ months, $Mdn = 7$ months).

Upon reporting to the laboratory facility, partners were separated to complete an initial questionnaire that contained measures of the independent variables. Next, participants engaged in a 5-minute conversation to become acquainted with the microphone and videotape procedures. To that end, couples received instruction cards describing an informal talk interaction (see Appendix A), engaged in the videotaped conversation, and then were separated to complete a short follow-up questionnaire.

To ensure that the generalizability of our findings would not be limited to only one topic of conversation, couples were assigned to one of three topics comprising the main interaction. In an effort to balance couples' perceptions of their relationships across the three topics, the assignment was based on the *chance of marriage* score participants reported in the initial questionnaire. This measure was a single item that read: "At the current time, what is the likelihood that you will marry your partner?" (Lloyd, Cate, & Henton, 1984). Respondents circled a response between 0% and 100% using a scale that provided 5% increments (*range* = 0% to 100%; $M = 46.95\%$, $SD = 34.31\%$, $Mdn = 50\%$).

Following the procedure used in conjunction with the first conversation, the researcher provided participants with instruction cards for the second interaction that described one of three conversation topics selected in a pretest to this study.[2] Appendix A contains the text of the instruction cards. After engaging in a 10-minute videotaped conversation on their assigned topic (positive talk, $n = 40$ dyads; negative talk, $n = 41$ dyads; surprising event talk: $n = 39$ dyads), partners individually completed a brief follow-up questionnaire. Couples completed the study in approximately 65 minutes.

Measures of Independent Variables and Conversation Perceptions

The independent variables were measured in the initial questionnaire using closed-ended items; variables indexing participants' perceptions of the conversation were assessed in the follow-up questionnaire to the second interaction. For all of these items, respondents indicated on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *disagree* and 6 = *agree*) the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements. We used confirmatory factor analytic procedures (Hunter & Gerbing, 1982) to identify sets of unidimensional items, and we computed the measures as the average of the responses to the individual items (see Appendix B).

Reliance on Relational Knowledge

We measured this variable using items developed in a second pretest.[3] Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements describing their use of relationship-focused information to guide their behavior when interacting with their partner. To provide a point of comparison, those items were interspersed among filler items addressing respondents' use of role-category knowledge within interaction. A total of six items formed a unidimensional scale measuring reliance on relational knowledge ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.95$, $\alpha = .85$).

Interdependence

Consistent with our characterization of developing interdependence as indexed by a partner's capacity to interfere with and promote an individual's outcomes, we employed measures of interference and facilitation from partners developed in previous work (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Participants reported their agreement with statements that offered potential descriptions of their partner. Seven items measured a *partner's interference* ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.13$, $\alpha = .93$), and a parallel set of five items measured a *partner's facilitation* ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.03$, $\alpha = .85$).

Mutual Commitment

We wrote items specifically for this study to operationalize mutual

commitment as the extent to which both partners are invested in continuing the relationship. For these judgments, participants indicated how committed partners were to dating each other exclusively. Four items comprised a unidimensional scale ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.80$, $\alpha = .94$).

Conversation Perceptions

We measured participants' perceptions of the main interaction by asking them to report their agreement with statements describing the conversation. Four items operationalized the *relational importance* of the episode ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.42$, $\alpha = .87$), four items measured the *realism* of the interaction ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.22$, $\alpha = .88$), and four items evaluated the *ease* of the conversation task ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.11$, $\alpha = .73$).

Measures of Dependent Variables

To operationalize the seven dependent variables, we trained independent judges to code or rate communication behaviors that participants enacted in the second conversation. In preparing for these coding and rating tasks, the conversations were transcribed from audiotapes of the interactions and then the transcripts were checked for accuracy against the videotaped versions. We divided a group of 13 judges into smaller work teams to code or rate the dependent variables. Each team of judges participated together in training sessions, coded or rated a subset of conversations individually, met as a team to recalibrate their coding or rating standards, and repeated the process until they had coded or rated the full sample of conversations. All judges were blind to the hypotheses of the study.

Content Intimacy

As per Planalp (1993; see also Planalp & Benson, 1992), three judges evaluated the degree of content intimacy evident in each 1-minute segment of conversation. Judges rated each interval by responding to an item that read: "Participants discussed intimate topics during this time interval" (1 = *disagree strongly* and 5 = *agree strongly*). The reliability of the judges' ratings for the one-minute intervals, which we computed using an intraclass correlation coefficient (ρ_I) was acceptable ($\rho_I = .88$). We then calculated one content intimacy score for each dyad as the average of ratings across the ten time intervals ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.64$). The consistency of scores across the 1-minute segments of conversation, quantified by α, was also acceptable ($\alpha = .93$).

Personalism

Three judges provided ratings of the degree of personalism couples

displayed in each 1-minute conversation segment. Judges used a 5-point Likert-type scale to indicate their response to an item that read: "Participants relied heavily on shared information during this time interval" (1 = *disagree strongly* and 5 = *agree strongly*). We averaged judges' ratings across the ten time intervals to produce one score for each couple ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.79$). Reliability statistics indicated that the judges were consistent in their assessments for the 1-minute intervals ($\rho_I = .79$) and the scores for the 1-minute intervals were consistent across the conversation ($\alpha = .93$).

Dyadic Pronouns

Following Planalp (1993), dyadic pronouns ("we," "we're," "we'll," "we've," "we'd," "us," "let's," "our," "ours," and "ourselves") were coded from the transcripts of couples' conversations. A judge classified each dyadic pronoun into one of two categories: those pronouns that referenced only the participants in the conversation, and those pronouns that referenced one or both participants in the conversation plus other people. The judge indicated her decision by responding to the following prompt: "Did this pronoun refer to (both and only) the participants in the conversation?" To evaluate the reliability of the coding task, a second judge coded a subset of 71 conversations (59% of the sample). Across 1,743 dyadic pronouns coded in common, judges achieved 96% agreement (*kappa* = .90). Disagreements between judges were resolved through discussion. We calculated the dependent variable as the number of dyadic pronouns each person used to refer to both and only the interactants in the conversation ($M = 9.23$, $SD = 8.72$).

Synchrony

Three judges rated synchrony for each 1-minute interval of conversation by evaluating the extent to which participants' verbal and nonverbal messages were coordinated, smooth, and in sync. Judges used a 5-point Likert-type scale to indicate their response to an item that read: "Participants were synchronized during this time interval" (1 = *disagree strongly* and 5 = *agree strongly*). We averaged judges' ratings across the ten time intervals ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.69$, $\rho_I = .80$, $\alpha = .97$).

Relationship Talk

Relationship talk was operationalized using coding procedures. Two judges, while watching the videotaped interaction and reading the transcript of the conversation, noted the speaking turns in which participants referenced their relationship. Judges were instructed to include both implicit and explicit references to the relationship. In making their decisions, judges answered the following question: "Did this speaking turn reference

the relationship between the participants?" Judges achieved an acceptable level of reliability across the 18,040 total speaking turns (*kappa* = .72).

Because the number of speaking turns of relationship talk were highly correlated between partners (*r* = .99), we calculated this variable by averaging the number of speaking turns they performed. Disagreements between judges were resolved using a decision rule that promoted the inclusiveness of the measure. Namely, for speaking turns judges classified differently, the decision made by the judge who recorded the most speaking turns of relationship talk for the sample was selected. In total, 108 of 120 couples (90%) engaged in relationship talk (*range* = 0 to 105 speaking turns, *M* = 21.56, *SD* = 19.92).

Explicitness of Relationship Talk

In preparation for operationalizing this variable, the speaking turns of relationship talk were unitized into acts to provide precise boundaries for judging explicitness. As per Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Redmon (1983), a judge followed three decision rules: (a) classify speaking turns as acts when the speaking floor changes by either turn-taking or interruption, (b) divide speaking turns into acts when a participant talks about two distinct topics within the same speaking turn, and (c) combine two speaking turns into one act when a participant is interrupted but continues speaking until he or she has uttered a complete thought. To evaluate reliability, a second judge unitized the speaking turns of relationship talk enacted by 32 couples (30% of the couples who engaged in relationship talk). The judges agreed on 95% of the boundaries of the 1,242 total acts they identified (Guetzkow's *U* = .02).

When the unitizing was complete, three judges were trained to rate the explicitness of each act of relationship talk. In making their decisions, judges used a 5-point Likert-type scale to respond to the following prompt: "This speaking turn explicitly referenced the relationship" (1 = *disagree strongly* and 5 = *agree strongly*). Because the speaking turns initially coded as relationship talk had subsequently been unitized into acts, judges also utilized a *not applicable* category for acts that did not constitute relationship talk. If all three judges agreed that an act was not relationship talk, the act was dismissed, and participants' relationship talk scores were adjusted accordingly (*M* = 2.82, *SD* = 0.53, α = .88).

Conversational Equality

To measure conversational equality, three judges rated each 1-minute interval of conversation. Judges began the task by recording their response to the following item on a 5-point Likert-type scale: "Participants had equal status within this interval." Because judges had difficulty achieving an acceptable level of reliability, they subsequently adopted a 3-point

Likert-type scale (1 = *disagree strongly* and 3 = *agree strongly*). Despite the substantial training they received, judges did not achieve adequate reliability during their first pass through the data (ρ_I = .65). An examination of judges' ratings revealed that many of the 40 couples with the greatest variance in ratings had been evaluated very early in the assessment process. To resolve discrepancies in scores for those couples, judges performed a second round of rating. Comparisons revealed that judges demonstrated less variance in their second wave of judgments for 90% of the re-rated couples. Thus, we used judges' revised ratings as a basis for computing the variable. We calculated a single score for each conversation as the average of judges' ratings across the ten time intervals (M = 2.52, SD = 0.31, revised ρ_I = .72, α = .87).

RESULTS

Data Analytic Strategy

We used an α level of .05 for all statistical tests. Consequently, the power to detect a small effect (r = .10; Cohen & Cohen, 1983) was .34 for between-subjects analyses (N = 240) and .19 for between-dyad analyses (N = 120). The power to detect a medium effect (r = .30) was .99 for between-subjects analyses and .92 for between-dyad analyses.

We included two sets of covariates in the tests of our hypotheses. First, because our predictions address how relationship conceptualizations are evident in conversation beyond topic differences, we controlled for topic assignment (e.g., positive talk, negative talk, surprising event talk). Similarly, because our hypotheses concern the link between relationship conceptualizations and communication beyond perceptions of the topics, we covaried conversation perceptions of relational importance, realism, and ease. We recognize that controlling for topic assignment and conversation perceptions produces hypotheses tests that are quite stringent, but we adopted this strategy to generate the clearest picture of how relationship conceptualizations are apparent in talk.

We also took steps to address the statistical dependence present in our data set because observations from both partners are included (e.g., Gonzalez & Griffin, 1997; Kenny & Cook, 1999).[4] To assess predictions that incorporated dependent variables operationalized using the individual as the unit of analysis (H3, H6), we entered a set of k-1 dummy codes on the first step of hierarchical regression models to covary the effects attributable to couple differences. These dummy codes control for all of the differences between dyads, including variance due to conversation topic assignment. On the second step, we included participants' perceptions of relational importance, realism, and ease. We then added the independent variable

on the third step. Finally, we entered two-way interaction terms representing the product of each of the conversation perceptions and the independent variable. This final step evaluates whether the association between the independent and dependent variables varies as a function of the conversation. Although these hierarchical regression models are quite conservative because they statistically control the variation between couples, we employed them to evaluate the strength of the association between the independent and dependent variables over and above the variance due to membership in the dyad.

For hypotheses in which the dependent variable was operationalized using one score per couples' conversation (H1, H2, H4, H5, H7), we conducted hierarchical regression models evaluating couple-level data ($N = 120$ dyads). Specifically, on the first step of the models, we regressed couples' score for the dependent variable onto five covariates that controlled for effects of the conversation: two variables that were dummy-coded to represent the three conversation topics, and three variables that indexed couples' perceptions of the relational importance, realism, and ease of the conversation. On the second step, we added a term calculated as the average of couples' scores for the independent variable. Finally, we included two-way interaction terms representing the product of each of the covariates and the averaged independent variable. These significance tests indicate whether the correspondence between the independent and dependent variables varies as a function of the conversation. Although this technique has the potential to create variables that are not precise reflections of either partner's perceptions, we used it to accommodate the dependent variables focused on the level of the conversation.

Reliance on Relational Knowledge (H1, H2)

Our first hypothesis predicted a positive correlation between reliance on relational knowledge and content intimacy. Because content intimacy was measured at the level of the conversation, we tested this prediction using the couple as the unit of analysis ($N = 120$). Findings from the first step of the model demonstrated differences in content intimacy by conversation (see Table 1). When we added couples' averaged score for the independent variable on the second step of the model, results demonstrated a small positive association between reliance on relational knowledge and content intimacy that approached statistical significance. None of the interaction terms was a predictor of content intimacy on the third step of the model. Hence, H1 received modest support.

H2 anticipated a positive association between reliance on relational knowledge and the personalism of people's relational messages. Similar to H1, this analysis utilized the couple as the unit of analysis ($N = 120$). Findings from the first step indicated that the covariates explained a

TABLE 1
The Regression of Content Intimacy or Personalism
onto Reliance on Relational Knowledge

	Content Intimacy	Personalism
$R^2\Delta$ Set of Covariates for Conversation Differences	.45 ***	.15 **
Dummy Code 1 β	-.36 ***	- .06
Dummy Code 2 β	-.09	-.23 *
Relational Importance β	.48 ***	.24 *
Realism β	.06	.25 *
Ease β	-.12	-.03
$R^2\Delta$ Relational Knowledge	.02 [a]	.02 [b]
Relational Knowledge β	.14 [a]	.16 [b]
$R^2\Delta$ Interactions	.03	.01
Dummy Code 1 x Relational Knowledge β	-1.23	.43
Dummy Code 2 x Relational Knowledge β	-.64	.33
Relational Importance x Relational Knowledge β	-.66	-.04
Realism x Relational Knowledge β	-.05	.52
Ease x Relational Knowledge β	-.95	-.42

NOTE: $N = 120$. Dummy Code 1 was coded such that positive talk = 1, negative talk = 0, and surprising event talk = 0. Dummy Code 2 was coded such that positive talk = 0, negative talk = 1, and surprising event talk = 0.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a] $p = .06$. [b] $p = .08$.

statistically significant portion of the variance in personalism (see Table 1). Results from the second step revealed a small positive association between reliance on relational knowledge and personalism that approached statistical significance. Although the size of the effect was small, this result is consistent with H2. The main effects were not qualified by interaction effects on the third step of the analysis.

Interdependence (H3, H4)

H3a predicted that a partner's interference is negatively associated with the number of dyadic pronouns individuals use, and H3b posited that a partner's facilitation is positively correlated with the number of dyadic pronouns they employ. We tested these predictions in separate analyses using the individual as the unit of analysis ($N = 240$). Both sets of results are included in Table 2. Not surprisingly, findings from the first two steps of the models revealed that a substantial portion of the variance in dyadic pronoun usage was explained by differences between couples. Whereas a partner's interference shared a small negative association with dyadic pronoun usage that approached statistical significance on the third step (H3a), a partner's facilitation was not correlated with dyadic pronoun usage (H3b). None of the interaction terms was a predictor of dyadic pronoun usage on the final step of the models. Consequently, H3a received

TABLE 2
The Regression of Dyadic Pronoun Usage onto a Partner's Interference or Facilitation

	Partner's Interference	Partner's Facilitation
$R^2\Delta$ Set of Covariates for Couple Differences	.81 ***	.81 ***
$R^2\Delta$ Set of Covariates for Conversation Differences	.00	.00
Relational Importance β	.01	.01
Realism β	.03	.03
Ease β	.07	.07
$R^2\Delta$ Interdependence Variable	.01 [a]	.00
Interdependence Variable β	-.12 [a]	-.05
$R^2\Delta$ Interactions	.01	.01
Relational Importance x Interdependence Variable β	.26	-.39
Realism x Interdependence Variable β	.00	.27
Ease x Interdependence Variable β	.23	-.36

NOTE: $N = 240$.
*** $p < .001.$ [a] $p = .07.$

qualified support, but H3b was not supported.

H4a expected a negative correlation between a partner's interference and synchrony, and H4b anticipated a positive correlation between a partner's facilitation and synchrony. Because synchrony was measured at the level of the conversation, the dyad served as the unit of analysis ($N = 120$). Findings indicated that the set of covariates explained a statistically significant portion of the variance in synchrony (see Table 3). On the second step of the model, neither a partner's interference (H4a) nor a partner's facilitation (H4b) was correlated with synchrony. No interaction effects were apparent on the third step. Thus, the data failed to support the hypotheses concerning synchrony.

Mutual Commitment (H5, H6, H7)

H5 predicted that mutual commitment is positively associated with relationship talk. The very high correlation between partners' relationship talk scores ($r = .99$) required the dependent variable to be calculated using the couple as the unit of analysis ($N = 120$). Findings from the first step of the model demonstrated that the covariates were predictors of relationship talk (see Table 4). Consistent with H5, mutual commitment was positively associated with relationship talk on the second step. Notably, however, these main effects were qualified by an interaction effect: namely, mutual commitment and relationship talk were positively correlated when relational importance was both low ($B = 5.36, p < .01$) and moderate ($B = 2.07, p < .05$), but they were unrelated when relational importance was high ($B = -1.23, ns$). These data suggest that mutual commitment and relationship talk are positively correlated in

TABLE 3
The Regression of Synchrony onto a Partner's Interference or Facilitation

	Partner's Interference	Partner's Facilitation
$R^2\Delta$ Set of Covariates for Conversation Differences	.12 *	.12 *
Dummy Code 1 β	.15	.15
Dummy Code 2 β	.17	.17
Relational Importance β	-.12	-.12
Realism β	.14	.14
Ease β	.12	.12
$R^2\Delta$ Interdependence Variable	.00	.01
Interdependence Variable β	-.03	.09
$R^2\Delta$ Interactions	.01	.03
Dummy Code 1 x Interdependence Variable β	-.06	.48
Dummy Code 2 x Interdependence Variable β	.26	-.25
Relational Importance x Interdependence Variable β	.17	-.19
Realism x Interdependence Variable β	.25	.30
Ease x Interdependence Variable β	-.19	.39

NOTE: $N = 120$. Dummy Code 1 was coded such that positive talk = 1, negative talk = 0, and surprising event talk = 0. Dummy Code 2 was coded such that positive talk = 0, negative talk = 1, and surprising event talk = 0.
* $p < .05$.

conversations that are not especially important to the relationship.

According to H6, mutual commitment and the explicitness of people's relationship talk are positively associated. Because the dependent variable was uniquely measured for each participant, this hypothesis was tested using the individual as the unit of analysis. Only those who enacted at least one unit of relationship talk were included ($N = 214$). Results, which are presented in Table 5, indicated a negative association between mutual commitment and explicitness over and above the variance explained by the covariates. In addition, an interaction between mutual commitment and the ease of the conversation topic was evident such that mutual commitment and explicitness were negatively correlated when ease was both high ($B = -.26, p < .01$) and moderate ($B = -.20, p < .01$), but they were unrelated when ease was low ($B = -.13, ns$). Thus, the association between mutual commitment and explicitness was opposite of the direction predicted by H6, and the strength of the negative association was greater as couples' perceptions of the ease of the conversation task increased.

Our final hypothesis anticipated a positive association between mutual commitment and the degree of conversational equality in people's relational messages. Because conversational equality was measured at the level of the interaction, we employed the couple as the unit of analysis ($N = 120$). Findings from the first step of the model indicated differences in

TABLE 4
The Regression of Mutual Commitment
onto Relationship Talk or Conversational Equality

	Relationship Talk	Conversational Equality
$R^2\Delta$ Set of Covariates for Conversation Differences	.25 ***	.13 **
Dummy Code 1 β	-.33 **	.25 *
Dummy Code 2 β	-.37 ***	.26 *
Relational Importance β	.26 **	-.18
Realism β	.05	.01
Ease β	-.01	.03
$R^2\Delta$ Mutual Commitment	.03 *	.02
Mutual Commitment β	.17 *	-.14
$R^2\Delta$ Interactions	.03	.04
Dummy Code 1 x Mutual Commitment β	-.30	.26
Dummy Code 2 x Mutual Commitment β	-.10	.52
Relational Importance x Mutual Commitment β	-.65 *	.27
Realism x Mutual Commitment β	-.12	.43
Ease x Mutual Commitment β	-.24	.37

NOTE: $N = 120$. Dummy Code 1 was coded such that positive talk = 1, negative talk = 0, and surprising event talk = 0. Dummy Code 2 was coded such that positive talk = 0, negative talk = 1, and surprising event talk = 0.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

conversational equality attributable to the covariates (see Table 4). The predictors entered on the final two steps of the model did not explain a statistically significant portion of the variance in conversational equality; thus, our study did not generate support for H7.

DISCUSSION

We began this article by asserting that reliance on relational knowledge, interdependence, and mutual commitment are likely to be apparent within conversation. Taken as a set, the results of this study suggest that the three relationship conceptualizations have only modest associations with the content and relational messages we studied. Although statistically significant effects were limited in both number and size, we note that our decision to control for differences between couples as well as effects due to the topic of conversation provided conservative tests of our hypotheses. As a result, we have greater confidence that the effects we did observe reflect meaningful associations between relationship conceptualizations and interpersonal communication. In the sections that follow, we first interpret the results of our hypotheses individually, and we then discuss the ramifications and limitations of our findings as a whole.

TABLE 5
The Regression of Mutual Commitment onto Explicitness of Relationship Talk

	Explicitness
$R^2\Delta$ Set of Covariates for Couple Differences	.62 *
$R^2\Delta$ Set of Covariates for Conversation Differences	.00
Relational Importance β	-.04
Realism β	.02
Ease β	.00
$R^2\Delta$ Mutual Commitment	.02 *
Mutual Commitment β	-.54 *
$R^2\Delta$ Interactions	.02
Relational Importance x Mutual Commitment β	-.38
Realism x Mutual Commitment β	.44
Ease x Mutual Commitment β	-1.20 *

NOTE: $N = 214$.
* $p < .05$.

Reliance on Relational Knowledge

Content Messages

Our results documented a positive correlation between reliance on relational knowledge and content intimacy that approached statistical significance (H1). Although the size of the effect was small, this finding suggests that partners who employ relationship-focused information to guide their behavior may be more likely to discuss intimate topics. Moreover, the current investigation contributes to the literature by developing reliable and precise measures of these constructs. Up to this point, people's use of relational knowledge had been the focus of considerable theorizing (Planalp & Rivers, 1996), but empirical research had yet to operationalize it. Instead, scholars had focused their attention on creating measures of related constructs like attributional confidence (Clatterbuck, 1979), relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999), and relationship schemas (Honeycutt et al., 1998). Content intimacy, on the other hand, had been measured with less precision in previous work: Some operationalizations relied on categorical judgments rather than evaluations of degree (Planalp, 1993), or employed quite large segments of conversation for assessment (Planalp & Benson, 1992). Hence, this research is valuable for providing both insight into H1 and measures for use in future work.

Relational Messages

We found a positive association between reliance on relational knowledge and personalism that approached statistical significance in the direction specified by H2. On a conceptual level, this finding implies that

partners who cultivate, assimilate, and use dyad-specific information may engage in more personalized communication patterns. On a pragmatic level, our results shed light on potential benefits of using relational knowledge. Because personalism heightens the effectiveness of communication by increasing both the efficiency (Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994) and the salience (Kent et al., 1981; Planalp, 1985) of messages, these data suggest that communication may be enhanced when individuals utilize relational knowledge. Consequently, we speculate that reliance on relational knowledge may coincide with beneficial patterns of communication at the relational level of messages.

Interdependence

Content Messages

Our findings revealed a small negative correlation between interference from partners and dyadic pronoun usage (H3a) that approached statistical significance; however, no association was evident between a partner's facilitation and dyadic pronoun usage (H3b). These results suggest that the absence of a partner's disruption, rather than the presence of a partner's assistance, may correspond with interdependence conveyed through language choices. Notably, the results of H3a parallel previous findings involving individual pronoun usage: Whereas Raush et al. (1970) found that people who possessed an individual orientation towards marriage employed more individual pronouns, this study implies that people who experience interference from a partner may utilize fewer dyadic pronouns. Thus, we propose that developing interdependence, as indexed by decreasing levels of a partner's interference, may be modestly linked to dyadic pronoun usage.

Relational Messages

Contrary to H4, results failed to document overlap between either a partner's interference or facilitation and synchrony. The lack of an association, despite work asserting that interdependent relationships demonstrate synchronous communication (Baxter & Wilmot, 1983; Knapp et al., 1980), raises questions about the features of this study that may have obscured the correspondence between the variables. We suspect that, relative to more natural contexts, synchrony may have been restricted within the laboratory setting. Synchrony requires interactants to communicate in a spontaneous, casual, and relaxed fashion (Baxter & Wilmot, 1983); moreover, synchrony arises when partners are comfortable enough to accommodate each other's behavior (e.g., Knapp et al., 1980). For both of these reasons, synchrony is likely to be quite fragile. Participants in interdependent relationships may not have achieved their ordinarily high levels

of synchrony because the laboratory setting was disruptive (e.g., Jacob, Tennenbaum, & Krahn, 1987). Hence, the degree of synchrony we observed may have been limited by the somewhat artificial nature of the interaction context.

Mutual Commitment

Content Messages

As expected, mutual commitment was positively correlated with relationship talk (H5). This result complements work suggesting that relationship talk is risky for people to enact if they have not established a mutual commitment to the relationship (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Baxter & Wilmot, 1984, 1985). Moreover, this finding is compatible with characterizations of relationship talk as venue for participants in mutually-committed relationships to establish and reestablish their bond over time (e.g., Wilmot, 1980). Taken together, these two lines of logic suggest that the function of relationship talk may vary at different points in a relationship's trajectory (e.g., Honeycutt & Wiemann, 1999). Whereas it may operate to jeopardize intimacy in the absence of mutual commitment by intimidating those not ready to make such a pledge (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998), it may operate to sustain intimacy in the presence of mutual commitment by reaffirming partners' investments (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2002).

Contrary to H6, we observed a negative correlation between mutual commitment and the explicitness of relationship talk that was most pronounced as participants' perceptions of the ease of the conversation task increased. Why did the correlation emerge in the opposite direction than predicted? The answer may hearken back to the paradox of explicitness that we described previously. Explicitness possesses both advantages and disadvantages for communicators: An explicit message can furnish clarity and precision (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), but it can also generate redundancy (Hornstein, 1985; Planalp & Benson, 1992) and face threat (Baxter, 1987). We predicted a negative association between mutual commitment and explicitness by highlighting the risks that explicitness poses to the speaker, the listener, and the relationship. Instead, the results of H6 imply that people who have negotiated mutual commitment may engage in implicit relationship talk because they are confident that their partner already understands fundamental contextual information (e.g., Hornstein, 1985; Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994), because they wish to avoid redundancy that limits the efficiency of their message (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987; Planalp, 1993), and because they recognize that the potential for miscommunication is low (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1987; Kent et al., 1981). In these ways, mutual commitment may encourage people to increase the efficiency of their relationship talk by employing implicit messages.

Relational Messages

We did not find evidence that mutual commitment promotes conversational equality (H7). We recognize, however, that difficulties in operationalizing conversational equality may account for the lack of an association. Three experienced judges were unable to attain an acceptable level of reliability using a 5-point Likert-type scale to record their evaluations; their reliability remained quite low even after they adopted a less precise 3-point scale. These difficulties compromised measurement in two ways. First, the low reliability restricted the magnitude of the correlation that could be observed with mutual commitment. Second, the move to the 3-point scale substantially reduced the variance available to covary with mutual commitment. Challenges in operationalizing equality are not unique to this study; indeed, self-report techniques for measuring equality suffer from problems with both internal consistency (Burgoon & Hale, 1987; Hale et al., 1989; Walther & Burgoon, 1992) and external consistency (Burgoon & Hale, 1987). Future work, then, must devote effort to refining both the observer rating approach and the self-report approach to operationalizing conversational equality.

General Implications

Thus far we have discussed inferences that can be drawn from our findings individually, but our results as a whole also have implications for the study of interpersonal communication in close relationships. A first conclusion addresses the substance of the characteristics people associate with their relationships. On a pragmatic level, our review identifies specific constructs that figure prominently in existing theoretical frameworks focused on both interpersonal communication and close relationships. Perhaps more importantly, this study highlights the multi-faceted nature of relationship conceptualizations. Up to this point, scholars have tended to define relationship conceptualizations as a unitary construct that encompasses people's entire understanding of their relationship, and empirical investigations have typically attended to only one aspect of relationship conceptualizations (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Honeycutt et al., 1998; Planalp, 1985). The findings of the current investigation, in contrast, emphasize reliance on relational knowledge, interdependence, and mutual commitment as variegated aspects of relationship definitions.

On a related note, our findings also have ramifications for understanding people's experience of close relationships. Of course, data documenting a link between interpersonal communication and relationship conceptualizations are not unique to this study. As one example, consider the relational communication tradition focused on message themes (e.g., Burgoon & Hale, 1984), message features (e.g., Rogers & Millar, 1988),

and message processing (e.g., Dillard et al., 1996). This body of work, united in topic but stemming from a variety of conceptual and methodological perspectives, assumes that relationship conceptualizations are manifest in interaction across all levels of intimacy. In contrast, our study underscores the particular relevance of reliance on relational knowledge, interdependence, and mutual commitment to interpersonal communication in close relationships.

Viewed as a set, our findings permit us to evaluate our assertion that reliance on relational knowledge, interdependence, and mutual commitment are apparent in conversation between romantic partners. Perhaps because of the conservative strategy we used to analyze our data, we observed only a few modest associations. Our data most definitively substantiated our predictions about reliance on relational knowledge, but our results were less conclusive about the role of interdependence and mutual commitment. Thus, we leave future research to identify other conversation variables, particularly at the relational level of messages, which may coincide more strongly with interdependence and mutual commitment.

Most generally, we believe our topic of inquiry provides a profitable region of connection between the interpersonal communication literature and the close relationships literature. As previously noted, these traditions represent intertwined but unique lines of scholarship. Not surprisingly, scholars of interpersonal communication have tended to privilege the message portion of the equation (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger & Calabrese, 1975), and scholars of close relationships have typically emphasized the dyadic understanding portion of the equation (e.g., Fiske & Haslam, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). We see a valuable opportunity for collaboration: Interpersonal communication scholars can contribute their nuanced understanding of message production and processing, and close relationship scholars can provide their sophisticated models of relationship conceptualizations. If collaboration ensues in this way, both lines of scholarship will benefit from gaining insight into the correspondence between interpersonal communication and relationship conceptualizations.

Among the limitations of this study is the potentially artificial nature of the interaction setting. To the extent that participants' communication was influenced by the laboratory context in which these data were collected, the generalizability of the findings to more representative interaction settings is restricted (Howe & Reiss, 1993; Jacob et al., 1987). Although people are unlikely to engage in wholly contradictory conversation behavior in laboratory versus natural settings, they probably communicate in more moderate, restrained, and homogeneous ways in a laboratory context compared to a naturally-occurring context (Gottman, 1980; see also Jacob et al., 1987). Two precautions guarded against artificiality

in this study: Couples engaged in a warm-up conversation to familiarize themselves with the audiotaping and videotaping equipment, and couples discussed conversation topics that pretest participants had rated as realistic and easy to enact. At the same time, however, a tendency toward moderation may have obscured communication differences between couples. Hence, the degree to which participants perceived the interaction context to be artificial exists as a weakness of the study.

A second limitation also stems from the difficulties of examining the link between cognition and conversation. Namely, our decision to operationalize content intimacy, personalism, synchrony, and conversational equality at the level of the interaction forfeits our ability to draw conclusions about micro-level features of messages (e.g., Rogers & Farace, 1975). We selected the conversation as the unit of analysis because these content and relational messages are negotiated between individuals rather than evident in isolated speaking turns. As an added benefit, our strategy also provided a degree of external validity. Nonetheless, we recognize that our data should be complemented by future work that evaluates how relationship conceptualizations are apparent in more precise features of messages.

APPENDIXES

A. Conversation Topics

Informal Talk

At this time, we would like you and your partner to have an informal conversation about anything you like. You might spend this time gossiping, joking around, catching up, recapping the day's events, or getting to know each other better. Your goal is simply to have an informal conversation.

Positive Talk

We would like you and your partner to have a conversation that is positive in tone. You may focus on any relatively unimportant topic that you like. You may want to reminisce about a shared activity, make up after a disagreement, express affection, or talk about the nature of your relationship. Your goal is to discuss a pleasant topic of conversation.

Negative Talk

We would like you and your partner to have a conversation that addresses a negative topic. You might want to spend this time talking about an area of conflict, engaging in an in-depth conversation about a serious issue, talking about a problem, breaking bad news, or complaining. Your goal is simply to engage in conversation about some negative issue.

Surprising Event Talk

At this time, we would like you and your partner to talk about a *recent* and *unexpected* event that caused you to be more or less certain about some aspect of your relationship. You may want to talk about a surprising event that caused you to be more sure about the nature of your relationship. Perhaps you want to talk about an unexpected behavior that

made you question some aspect of your relationship. The recent event that you discuss may be either positive or negative in nature, but it should it should have changed the level of certainty you had about your relationship.

NOTE. Conversation topics were selected in a pretest to the study.

B. Items Measuring the Independent Variables and the Conversation Perceptions

Reliance on Relational Knowledge

1. I frequently use knowledge about romantic relationships in general to help me understand this relationship. (F)
2. When interacting with my partner, I typically use information about this specific relationship to help me understand our interaction.
3. My behavior in this relationship is guided by my understanding of romantic relationships in general. (F)
4. I often make decisions in this relationship by taking into account the unique qualities of this relationship.
5. When communicating with my partner, I generally think about how communication is in romantic relationships. (F)
6. The way I communicate in this relationship is frequently shaped by my knowledge of this specific relationship.
7. My behavior in this relationship is usually guided by my knowledge of how romantic relationships are. (F)
8. My communication in this relationship is shaped by my understanding of the communication that is appropriate for this specific relationship.
9. I frequently make decisions in this relationship by taking into account the behavior that is appropriate for romantic relationships in general. (F)
10. My behavior in this relationship is shaped by my understanding of this specific relationship.
11. When I talk to my partner, I think about how to behave in a romantic relationship in general. (F)
12. When I spend time with my partner, I think about how to interact in this particular relationship.

A Partner's Interference

1. This person interferes with the plans I make.
2. This person causes me to waste time.
3. This person disrupts my daily routine.
4. This person interferes with how much time I devote to my school work.
5. This person interferes with the things I need to do each day.
6. This person makes it harder for me to schedule my activities.
7. This person interferes with whether I achieve the everyday goals I set for myself (for example, goals for exercise, diet, studying, entertainment).

A Partner's Facilitation

1. This person helps me to do the things I need to do each day.
2. This person helps me in my efforts to spend time with my friends.
3. This person makes it easier for me to schedule my activities.
4. This person helps me to achieve the everyday goals I set for myself (for example, goals for exercise, diet, studying, entertainment).
5. This person supports my daily routine.

Mutual Commitment

1. My partner and I are both committed to not dating other people.
2. My partner and I are dating each other exclusively.
3. My partner and I are mutually committed to this relationship.
4. My partner and I have made an explicit commitment to each other.

Relational Importance

1. This conversation was an important event within my relationship.
2. This conversation made me think about my relationship.
3. This conversation was a minor event within my relationship. (R)
4. This conversation was a major occurrence within my relationship.

Realism

1. This conversation was realistic in my relationship.
2. This conversation was typical in my relationship.
3. This kind of conversation happens often in my relationship.
4. This kind of conversation was unnatural in my relationship. (R)

Ease

1. I felt uncomfortable having this conversation. (R)
2. I was able to be myself in this conversation.
3. I was not able to express myself fully in this conversation. (R)
4. I found it easy to have this conversation with my partner.

NOTE. All items were measured on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *disagree* and 6 = *agree*). For the reliance on relational knowledge measure, filler items are denoted by F. For the relational importance, realism, and ease measures, reverse-scored items are denoted by R.

NOTES

1. We define relationship conceptualizations very broadly as the characteristics that people associate with their close relationships. In other words, we use the term to encompass the variety of ways that people think about their involvement in intimate associations. In this sense, we intend the term to be more general than specific perspectives on the nature of dyadic knowledge (e.g., relationship schemas) or particular dimensions for distinguishing close relationships (e.g., intimacy).

2. We conducted a pretest to inform the selection of conversation topics suitable for use in the videotaped interactions. Our primary objective was to choose topics that carried some degree of relational importance, and our secondary goal was to identify topics that participants judged to be both realistic and easy to enact. To address these goals, we asked 53 students enrolled in communication courses to rate the relational importance, re-alism, and ease of seven conversation topics. We adapted the majority of topics from Gold-smith and Baxter's (1996) typology of everyday talk; we also included an additional topic likely to possess relational importance (e.g., surprising event talk).

Results revealed that positive talk, negative talk, and surprising event talk received the highest ratings for relational importance. Consistent with our secondary objective, we also deemed the three topics appropriate because they demonstrated sufficient levels of realism and ease. We chose a fourth topic, informal talk, for use as a warm-up conversation because it evidenced the highest degrees of realism and ease.

3. We conducted a second pretest in two phases to develop a measure of reliance on relational knowledge. During the first phase, 50 students enrolled in communication courses individually completed a questionnaire containing a variety of self-report operationalizations; the majority of these participants (68%) were also included in the sample that comprised the first pretest. Groups of 5 to 15 respondents were presented with three measures that adopted diverse formats: (a) a free-response essay that asked participants to describe their relationship (modeled after the Role Category Questionnaire measure of cognitive complexity; Crockett, 1965), (b) a thought-listing task that required respondents to generate words or phrases characterizing their relationship, and (c) a series of closed-ended items that asked participants to indicate the extent to which relationship-specific information guides their behavior.

During the second phase of the pretest, the researcher conducted an informal focus group session to gain insight into the ways in which participants interpreted the three measures. The researcher explained the construct and asked respondents to offer feedback about the extent to which the items measured it. The majority of participants commented that they found the closed-ended item format to be the best measure of reliance on relational knowledge for a variety of reasons: It was the least ambiguous, the easiest to complete, and the most effective way of prompting them to assess their dependence on relationship-specific information. Respondents also provided suggestions for rewording items they found to be unclear or awkward. We used these revised items to measure reliance on relational knowledge in the main study.

4. We evaluated the degree of statistical dependence for the 10 variables operationalized using the individual as the unit of analysis by examining the correlation between partners' scores. Whereas couples' scores for reliance on relational knowledge ($r = .03$, ns) and a partner's facilitation ($r = .17$, ns) were not statistically significantly correlated, couples' mutual commitment scores ($r = .81$, $p < .001$) and relationship talk scores ($r = .99$, $p < .001$) were very highly correlated. All of the other correlations were positive in sign and statistically significant in magnitude. In light of the considerable overlap between partners' scores, we addressed the statistical dependence within the tests of our hypotheses.

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