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Ashley M. Poole
Old Dominion University

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COMMUNICATION, ROMANTIC RECONCILIATION, AND EMERGING

ADULTHOOD: A RELATIONAL DIALECTICS STUDY

by

Ashley M. Poole
B.S. December 2011, Old Dominion University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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MASTER OF ARTS

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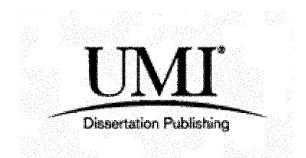
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Approved by:

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Thomas Socha (Director)

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Gary Beck (Member)

_____
Frances Hassencahl (Member)

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ABSTRACT

COMMUNICATION, ROMANTIC RECONCILIATION, AND EMERGING ADULTHOOD: A RELATIONAL DIALECTICS STUDY

Ashley M. Poole
Old Dominion University, 2014
Director: Dr. Thomas J. Socha

Building on the extant research of on-again/off-again (on-off) romantic relationships, the current thesis focused on building upon past findings by utilizing a unique theoretical methodology in an emerging demographic. A sample of 22 emergent adult (ages 18–29) participants who were currently in or had recently experienced an on-off relationship completed face-to-face interviews discussing communicative processes during romantic reconciliation. The primary purpose of this thesis was to identify and define discursive struggles found within on-off relationships during reconciliation attempts, and understand how they are used between partners to give meaning to the terms "on" and "off" as a precursor to restructuring relational identity after reconciliation. More specifically, the goals of this study were to better understand how on-off partners create meaning through their discourses, rather than focus on previously identified on-off characteristics. As a result, this thesis focused on the unique romantic partnerships at a dialogic level.

Contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011) was performed to answer five proposed research questions. Findings indicated that relational production, in comparison to relational reproduction was a defining discursive struggle during reconciliation. The data suggested partners using relational reproduction were less likely to have a successful reconciliation as they continued to harbor past relational tensions in the present

relationship. Further, the production-reproduction discourse was found to produce a nuanced understanding of relational maintenance. Specifically, on-off relationships viewed from a dialogic perspective favor relational maintenance as a form of change versus relational maintenance as continuity of the past status quo. The presence and impact of social network support, relational uncertainty, and ambiguity surrounding on-off terminology within and between partners were also discussed. Finally, potential avenues for future research examining on-off relationships across the life course were discussed.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Cindy and David Poole.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

PROJECT FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

Phillippe Aries's seminal publication *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1962) set the foreground for human development scholars to debate historical roles, as well as societal attitudes towards the concept of "childhood." Ultimately, the central thesis of Arie's research suggests that historically, societal attitudes regarding childhood are generationally progressive and only with the evolution of economic change and social advancement has the role of childhood flourished as a life stage among industrialized societies. The profound significance of Arie's work lies in his ability to disregard childhood as a biological given, and provide evidence that childhood is instead a social construction.

From his findings, scholars began to conceptualize and debate how and why life stages develop, creating a framework for lifespan development research. Thus, it is now commonly understood among scholars in various academic fields that childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and old age are socially constructed in regards to their meanings due to economic and social conditions. Based on this assumption, Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut (2005) suggested that because life stages are socially constructed, a society that collectively views old practices as unworkable is likely to introduce new societal norms to diffuse older, dysfunctional structures. Today, the traditional standards and roles of "young people" are becoming more ambiguous as economic and societal norms are currently in flux.

During the 1960's, young individuals transitioned, more or less directly, into "adult" roles following adolescence. During the 1960s it was not uncommon for persons in their early twenties to have completed college, be settled into a well-paying career, and married with a child on the way. Social and institutional structures by their design supported these norms, yet today the timing and meaning of "coming of age" is, in fact, viewed very differently than it was fifty years ago. Psychologists and sociologists alike are finding that young people's transition from adolescence to adulthood has become both hyper-individualized and deinstitutionalized (Arnett, 2000; Cote, 2000). Arnett (2005) suggested, "More than ever before, coming of age in the 21st century means learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person, capable of making choices and decisions independently from among a wide range of possibilities" (p.4). However, it is important to note that emergent adults are not striving to remain isolated, but instead are working towards developing a secure, independent identity to achieve a healthy person-environment fit regarding personal relationships, romantic relationships, and successful school-to-work transitions.

Whereas prior theoretical paradigms viewed adolescence as a time for exploration leading to stability in young adulthood, today the paradigm has shifted suggesting that individuals no longer emerge as young adults immediately after adolescence. Instead, young individuals—roughly ages 18 to 29— have begun experiencing a new life stage known as "emerging" adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults are less likely during this period to be constrained by adult role requirements, making their demographic status less predictable and the scope of their potential activities more broad. The 1980's marked a pivotal turning point in human development, where "Macrolevel forces reshaped

opportunity structure and value systems... resulting in a changed landscape of adulthood" (Tanner & Arnett, 2011, p.14). Here, individuals deviated away from prior structural adulthood paths and instead placed emphasis on the value of self-identity exploration to secure an independent identity from family and romantic partners before committing to traditional and stable adults roles such as marriage.

Arnett (2000) specifically referred to the ages 18 to 29 as emerging adulthood and described it as having five distinct features that were proposed as a stepping stone towards a new developmental paradigm. First, emerging adulthood is said to be a time for individuals to continue identity explorations. Unlike identity development as adolescents where parental monitoring inhibits complete autonomy, emerging adults are free to self-reflect and find answers to questions such as "What kind of person am I?", "What kind of characteristics do I want in a life partner?" and "Where am I going in life?" (Tanner, Arnett, & Leis, 2009). During this time, individuals are not yet committed to adult responsibilities, allowing emerging adults to explore different options as a prelude to the adult roles they will take on in later life stages. The shift in exploration of adult roles has been attributed to the rise in both marital age and parenthood, participation in higher education, and greater acceptance of premarital sexual relationships and cohabitation (Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2006).

Second, emerging adulthood is considered to be a time of instability (Tanner *et al.*, 2009). Emerging adults experience instability while, for example, exploring various work environments, social relationships, education, and residential change. Another element contributing to emerging adulthood is the idea that individuals are self-focused. To be "self-focused" should not be confused with "self-centeredness" or selfishness, but

rather to be seen as a time where emerging adults have very little tying them down in regards to commitments (Tanner *et* al., 2009). By and large, emerging adults are single (i.e. not married) and childless. The Pew Research Center found that a mere 20% of millennial's (ages 18-29) were married, dropping from 59% in 1960 (2014). Further, 69% of unmarried millennial's attributed financial instability due to inadequate levels of income during higher education obtainment as a precursor to postponing marriage (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends, 2014). Emerging adults are beginning to make independent decisions that reflect their development for future growth. It is a time to make temporary commitments and test out new waters before committing themselves to enduring, lifelong responsibilities.

Fourth, emerging adulthood is a time where individuals feel "in between" adolescence and young adulthood (Tanner *et* al., 2009). The time in between these two stages allows individuals to tread new responsibilities slowly, with relatively little guidance. Findings suggest that accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions and becoming financially independent are the top three criteria's for adulthood, which occurs gradually across the life stage (Arnett, 2005). As emerging adults age and begin accepting more responsibility, they will eventually begin to transition out of the in-between feeling.

And, fifth, emerging adulthood is an age of possibilities (Tanner *et* al., 2009). It is a time of optimism in which emerging adults have high hopes for lucrative and self-fulfilling careers while imagining themselves in happy and successful partnerships (Arnett & Tanner, 2005). Never again will individuals have so much freedom and personal choice as they do in emerging adulthood.

A common criticism of emerging adulthood is the negligence of attributing the variables of socioeconomic status, education levels, and culture to population samples. However, for example, it is unfair to suggest all individuals from lower social class backgrounds do not strive to better their current economic standing or obtain better education and work prospects (i.e., tenant five of emerging adulthood, a time of high hopes and optimism). In doing so, it would not be uncommon for emergent adults of lower economic classes to bounce from one job to another, creating uncertainty (i.e., a defining characteristic of emergent adulthood) and maintaining romantic relationships. Furthermore, emergent adult's average seven career changes (Arnett, Hendry, Kloep, & Tanner, 2011) after college suggesting job insecurity is just as uncertain for college graduates as it is for non-college graduates.

Moreover, a defining characteristic of emerging adulthood is the feeling of being in-between while attempting to accept responsibility for ones' self, making independent decisions, and attaining financial independence. Individuals that do not attend university are still very much a part of this emergent population. While their day-to-day routine may be different, they still encounter the same overall demands necessary to "achieve" the feeling of being as adult including securing an identity, finding a romantic partner, and achieving independence. A notable study examining emergent adulthood as a dynamic process versus a static life stage concluded tolerance and awareness of nontraditional adult transitions varied little by socioeconomic background, religion, race, and gender (Settersen, 2003). All participants (ages 18-30) concluded financial stability, independence from family, social-work identity, and a stable romantic relationship were all necessary precursors to eliminating the "in-between" feeling.

Emerging Adulthood: A New Development Stage

It is imperative to recognize that young individuals today are in a distinct developmental period that was not seen in previous generations. Prior generations exited adolescence and entered young adulthood more quickly due to the abundance of career opportunities not requiring higher education as well as stricter gender roles positing women into family roles instead of higher education. Tanner *et* al., (2009) found that emerging adulthood provides young individuals with a diversity of learning experiences, both personal as well as educational. These experiences are novel to emerging adults as they are learning to independently manage finances, balance personal relationships with school, work or often both, all while attempting to find their purpose in life. Arnett (2005) suggests that emerging adulthood is not simply a generational phenomenon, and because so, it needs to be recognized as a new life stage inherent to defining characteristics, most notably "an extended period of exploration and instability" that will continue for generations to come (p.4).

Salient to the concept of emerging adulthood is the notion for scholars and theorists to not collapse late teens and early twenty-something's into "extended adolescence". This is because there is much more freedom and independence due to a substantial decrease in parental control (Arnett, 2004). However, individuals in this period should not be considered young adults, because this terminology would acknowledge that individuals have reached and begun to fulfill adult roles.

As will be discussed below, both societal and institutional norms have dramatically and quickly shifted over the last half-century leading late teens and twenty-something individuals to experience heightened self-exploration and instability (Arnett, 2005). Roughly a decade has been added between adolescence and adulthood creating a

time of uncertainty, turbulence, and instability. Because emerging adulthood is so new, this life stage requires a thorough understanding with concerns to how young individuals communicate, develop, and balance their intimate relationships, family life, careers, financial independence, and education.

Significant to the theory of emerging adulthood is the large variability among demographic characteristics, "reflecting the wide scope of individual volition during these years" (Arnett, 2000, p. 471). Prior researchers relayed similar findings suggesting it is the only period across the life stage that has such a wide spectrum of variance (Wallace, 1995). Characteristics such as personality development (e.g., ego development, self-control, social competency, self-agency), cognitive development (e.g., thinking dualistically vs. multiplicity, collecting information vs. application of knowledge gained), restructuring family relationships, finding "the one", maintaining meaningful friendships, and achieving successful work-to-school transitions to achieve financial stability and autonomy all are achieved during emerging adulthood. However, the timing and achievement of these developments are distinctive due to individual pathways chosen by each emergent adult as well as a lack of institutional structure. Based on these findings, it is necessary to understand the emphasis that change and exploration have on this age period. Prior theories did not incorporate the many demographic transitions that now take place during the late teens and twenties.

Specifically, the rise in median age of marriage, college enrollment, and job insecurity provide strong empirical evidence that societal and institutional norms have shifted with respects to the age period from the late teens through the late twenties (Arnett, 2005; Tanner & Arnett, 2009). These characteristics are relevant to the theory of

emerging adulthood, because they reflect new norms in society. Current demographics exemplify how the period between the late teens and late twenties have undergone a change in terms of how young people make enduring commitments. Emerging adulthood has created a period where young individuals have time to try out different career positions, relationships, education, and living arrangements before they make life-long decisions.

Today, Americans first marry on average five years later than they did fifty years ago (Arnett, 2000; Arnett & Taber, 1994). As of 2010, the median age of first marriage hovered in the mid to late twenties for both men and women. On average, women first marry around 26 years of age while men first marry around the age of 28 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010). Since 1960, the age of marriage in the United States has consecutively increased decade to decade, but the pattern of men marrying two years later than women has remained consistent (Arnett, 2004). Moreover, Modell (1989) found the variance of age has widened as well where some men and women marry in their early twenties while others marry in their late twenties or early thirties. Whether individuals marry early or wait until their later twenties neither is deemed socially unacceptable. Arnett (2004) put forward two hypotheses regarding the dramatic rise in marital age, the 1960's sexual revolution and higher education.

First, the sexual revolution of the 1960's allowed women to actively and safely seek out birth control, and so began a more tolerant outlook towards non-marital sexual relationships (Arnett, 2004). Today, non-marital sexual relationships are commonplace and are not looked down upon but rather expected. Moreover, emerging adults tend to have a series of sexual romantic relationships, prior to marital commitment, usually

beginning in their mid to late teens. These relationships are socially acceptable as long as they fall within two parameters. Non-marital sexual relationships should not begin "too young" and the number of sexual partners should not be "too many" (Arnett, 2004). Westernized cultures are not very clear as to what constitutes "too young" and "too many" in regards to these relationships. Albeit, what has become apparent over the years is that "although Americans may not be clear, in their own minds, about what precise rules ought to be for young people's sexual relationships, there is widespread tolerance now for sexual relations between young people in their late teens and twenties in the context of a committed, loving relationship" (Arnett, 2004, p. 5).

Secondly, the prolonged commitment of marriage in recent years can be attributed to a rise in higher education (Arnett, 2004). In today's economy, it is vital for young individuals to have earned a degree from a higher education institution or at the least, complete a vocational training program. In the post-industrial market, companies seek out highly skilled individuals. A high-school education is simply not enough to posit individuals onto a successful career track.

College enrollment rates have also consistently risen each decade since 1960 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Education has contributed, in part, to the rise in marital age due in part to prolonged education, where a typical four-year degree may take five, potentially six years to complete. Also, an increasing amount of emerging adults are defaulting to graduate school due to a lack of job opportunities after college graduation, whereas previous generations sought out careers to provide financial stability to their families, emerging adults today are looking for careers that are both lucrative and self-fulfilling (Arnett, 2000). Thus, emerging adulthood is a time of limbo

where individuals have no one to support except for themselves, exemplifying the idea that emerging adulthood is a time to explore different options and in essence viewed as a time of "high hopes and big dreams" (Arnett, 2004, p.3). Lastly, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of women enrolling in higher education. Today, women exceed men in regards to higher education enrollment following high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Whereas women previously were discouraged from obtaining college educations, it is now socially acceptable as well as encouraged for women to seek out and earn college degrees and for good reason. Women excel over men at every level of education beginning in grade school and continuing through graduate level programs (National Center for Education, 2005).

Emerging adulthood is unique today not only because of the aforementioned demographic characteristics, but also because of the sheer freedom all individuals share. Prior to the 1970's, young people were constricted due to gender roles and economics (Arnett, 2004). The 21st century proved that gender roles are evolving for the better. Women are represented in virtually every occupational role as men. Although fields such as engineering are still male dominated, multiple initiatives have been taken to increase women's opportunities in STEM education and work employment (Brown, 2013). Economic circumstances have also improved, allowing for more freedom during intervening years. Generation X'ers, which includes today's emergent adult population, were raised by parents that chased after the "American Dream". And, the success that Baby Boomers endured financially has allowed them to provide financial assistance to their millennial children. Serido and Shim (2014) suggested young individuals today are more dependent on their parents than any generation that has come before. Whereas

economics and gender roles constricted young individuals in the past, today emerging

adults are granted the opportunity gradually to take on adult responsibilities.

As argued above, there appears to be connections between delayed adoptions of

traditional adult roles, changing job markets, increases in higher education enrollment,

changing institutional norms, and historical events that have led to the need for a new

developmental stage (Arnett, 2000). Reifman (2011) argues "...it is this rich matrix of

societal and individual psychological trends that creates the opportunity for the concept

of emerging adulthood to enhance the study of close, romantic relationships" (p.18).

Further, because emerging adulthood is full and intense for many individuals, it can only

be expected that the explorations of young people may not always end well.

Disappointment, disillusionment, or rejection may occur while exploring romantic

relationships in emerging adulthood. Investigating the way in which individuals handle

and overcome adversity will help researchers better understand communicative and

behavioral patterns among this age group.

Further Defining Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood captures the dynamic, ever-changing processes that seem to

occur to young individuals in the 21st century, but it is important as to not make

sweeping generalizations about this life stage, yet. Although emerging adulthood is a

distinct period which possesses different attributes than adolescence and young

adulthood, to some extent emerging adulthood is defined by its heterogeneity.

Arnett (2000) states "Emerging adulthood, then, is not a universal period, but a

period that exists only in cultures that postpone the entry into adult roles and

responsibilities until well past the late teens" (p. 478). Although the majority of data on emerging adulthood has been collected in the United States as well as some Western European countries, it seems as though culture not country is a more reliant factor as to whether or not emerging adulthood occurs. For example, industrialized and postindustrial countries are said to encompass the majority of emergent adults. With this said certain cultural, economic, and religious conditions affect the length and content of emerging adulthood. Arnett (2000) suggested several factors which may hinder the development of emergent adulthood in other cultures, but offers potential suggestions as to why it is only a matter of time before emerging adulthood is seen across the globe.

First, minority cultures, such as members of the Mormon Church, have cultural practices that prohibit many of the features of emerging adulthood such as disapproval of premarital sex and a strong emphasis on large families. Thus, there is social pressure on adolescent girls to marry young and begin having children. Moreover, Morch (1995) suggested minority groups may be less likely to experience emerging adulthood even in industrialized countries. But, Arnett (2000) counters this claim, and suggests it may be social class that is the more important contributing factor than ethnicity. Second, economic circumstances can hinder emerging adulthood. Emerging adults from the middle to upper classes are more likely to experience the explorations of this period. But, an understudied alternative may be that individuals from working classes experience a different kind of emerging adulthood where there is more emphasis placed on work-place exploration rather than educational exploration (Arnett, 2000).

Worldwide, emerging adulthood tends to appear in more urban versus rural areas (Arnett, 2000). In developing countries, urban areas tend to be more westernized with

young individuals focusing on education and delaying marriage and parenthood until their later twenties or early thirties. However, as globalization of the world economy persists the likelihood of emerging adulthood becoming more pervasive across developing countries is high. With globalization comes the need of skilled workers, which requires prolonged education.

Lastly, with economic development comes increased life expectancy among younger generations (Arnett, 2000). As life expectancy rises, emerging adulthood will be seen as a more practical life stage. Thus, Arnett (2000) suggests that as the 21st century progresses it is plausible that emerging adulthood will become a normative, developmental life stage across the globe. But, as can be seen today in the United States the length and context of emerging adulthood will still vary. With this said, the heterogeneity of emerging adulthood should be viewed as a defining characteristic rather than a limitation (Arnett, 2000). The opportunity to have such a diverse period emerge due to changing demographics, and societal norms make emerging adulthood a complex, dynamic life stage to study.

Early Theoretical Perspectives on Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a time for young individuals to cultivate life-long goals and discover their passion in life through education and self-exploration. Theorists such as Erik Erikson previously suggested that adolescence is a time for self-exploration, but it seems more fitting for individuals to "find themselves" once they are free to make their own choices as legal adults. During adolescence, individuals are still under their parent's authority making individual choices that effect development difficult. Tanner *et* al.

(2009) support this stating "...learning and development become the responsibility of the individual and prioritization of continued education and maturation requires self-directness" (p.34).

The theory of emerging adulthood posited by Arnett (2000) is critical to life span development research because it is the first theory that acknowledges the period of 18–29 as a distinct life stage. Arnett *et* al. (2011) suggest, "Due to the increasing de-standardization and impermanence of life course paths, traditional theories of human development have become outdated" (p. 5). Existing theories suggest one of two scenarios, neither of which takes into consideration the distinctive characteristics that occur while emerging adulthood. As will be discussed below, prior theorists either view development as something that terminates at the end of adolescence, or it is viewed as a prolonged period of adolescence. Even where theorists such as Erikson (1950, 1959, 1968) acknowledged the psychosocial moratorium, the period although recognized, remained unnamed. The conceptual vagueness surrounding the terminology concerning the development of late teens and twenties can be seen as a contributing factor as to why a separate period of life never became widely accepted among developmental theorists (Arnett, 2000).

Seminal works by Freud (1905), Piaget (1973), and Vygotsky (1978) extended their theories of human development only until the end of adolescence, ignoring the developments that continue to occur throughout life. Stuart Hall's (1904) publication *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, and Religion* was one of the first works acknowledging adulthood is unachievable until approximately the age of 25 as he saw the need for identity

development to occur autonomously from parent or legal guardianship. Despite Hall's forward thinking, during this time, his work simply extended the life stage of adolescence from 18 until approximately 25.

Arnett (2004) finds this extension of adolescence problematic based on the inherent differences that can be found between adolescence and emerging adulthood. For the majority of individuals, adolescents live at home with their parents; they are mandated to attend secondary school, all are experiencing physical changes due to puberty, and adolescents are legally under the authority of parental responsibility or legal guardianship (Arnett, 2004). On the contrary, emerging adults are considered legal adults by law, they have the choice to enroll in higher education, virtually all have reached reproductive maturity, and they have diverse living arrangements (Arnett, 2004). The significant distinction between adolescence and emerging adulthood is the need for independent, autonomous thinking to occur. While the argument suggesting that some emergent adults are expected to attend college is not the point. The independent train of thought, that is, autonomous decision-making is the critical developmental task to accomplish. For example, emergent adults should not think of higher education as a mandated requirement, but rather as a stepping-stone to achieve desired goals and future ambitions. The discrete transitions that occur during each life stage are vastly different making it inadequate to simply lump together 12–29 year olds on a spectrum of development that is extended and doesn't stop.

Additionally, theorists such as Erik Erikson (1968) and Robert Havighurst (1972) advanced human development theories through the acknowledgment that development occurs across the lifespan. Havighurst cited adolescence ending around 20 years of age.

As such, individuals were able to formulate their identities and develop career paths independently as legal adults. His theory of human development seemed reasonable during the time in which it was published, but it no longer represents real-life experiences today due to rising marital ages, an influx of higher education enrollment, and the prevalence of uncertainty regarding employment.

Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory articulated adolescence (ages 12-18) as a time of identity formation, where the central crisis for young people during this stage was identity versus role confusion. During this period, it would seem plausible that individuals had a heightened sense of self-identity towards the end of adolescence seeing as they matured and entered into adult roles much more quickly than adolescents today. However, this did not stop Erikson from expanding on the concept because the 1960's were a time of immense change, both socially and economically. Erikson (1968) hinted towards the need of industrialized societies to prolong adolescence suggesting, "This period can be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him" (p.156). Erikson acknowledged a period where adult roles and responsibilities are delayed, and as an extension, prolonged role experimentation beyond the adolescent years.

Daniel Levinson (1978), conceptualized the "novice" phase of development, which he believed occurred between the ages of 17 and 33. During the novice phase, young people experience a vast amount of instability due to the many changes occurring in regards to their work trajectories and romantic relationships. More, individuals are investigating different roles and possibilities as they prepare to move into the adult phase

that includes establishing a well-rounded life structure. Like Erikson, Levinson argues that role experimentation extends beyond the age of 18 and takes place during the psychosocial moratorium. His theory on life structure is important to the concept of emerging adulthood because it is one of the few theories suggesting that identity and professional development happens well into the late twenties.

A key finding that resonated within all of the aforementioned life stage theorists developmental work is that instability is a unifying feature during the late teens and twenties. These instabilities are brought on due to changing roles in regards to work, relationships, education, and societal norms. As previously noted, prominent developmental theorists conjured up various life stages more than 20 years ago. A considerable amount of change has occurred over the past two decades, yet social scientists still rely on life stages proposed by early contributors. Thus, there is a need for research to examine the proposed theory of emerging adulthood as a distinct period of life that can help better explain and support human development.

Romantic Relationships during Emerging Adulthood

People can initiate new relationships at any stage of life, just as they can stop and start new careers or educational pathways at any stage of the life span. But, it is after one leaves home and before permanent commitments that many potential life-long roles are initiated, deliberated and rejected, over and over. Romantic relationships during emerging adulthood follow a similar path, allowing individuals to investigate the main question: Given the kind of person I am, what kind of person do I wish to have as a partner through life? (Arnett, 2000).

Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory states that adolescents are facing an identity versus role confusion crisis whereas young adults are experiencing a crisis between intimacy and isolation. In order for individuals to successfully transverse to the next life stage, Erikson suggested that individuals must resolve their current stage crisis. For the majority of young people, today, it is almost impossible for individuals to achieve a secure identity in terms of who they are, what career path they envision, how they fit into society, and so on by the end of adolescence. It would be unreasonable to expect that at 20 years of age, the end of adolescence cited by Erikson, that young adults would be able to achieve success in the crisis between intimacy and isolation if individuals are unaware of their own identity. Thus, the need for a new lifespan category of emerging adulthood can be seen as a conceptual necessity in life stage theorizing in order for individuals to secure an identity apart from parental guidance and then establish intimacy roles.

Arnett (2004) suggested that a romantic relationship during emerging adulthood is a time to explore a variety of relational options. By their nature, relationships during emerging adulthood are exploratory partnerships that help individuals discover what kind of person they wish to marry in the future, and allow individuals to gain relational experience before committing to a life-long engagement. This perspective suggests relationships during this time period are self-focused and unstable. Because these relationships are largely exploratory, it would seem that they would have little direct influence on future relational behavior. But, Elder's (1985) life course perspective suggested that future life trajectories are directly linked to prior life stages and experiences. The way in which romantic relationships are initiated, developed, and maintained is built on the foundations learned from previous relationships in prior life

stages. Although emerging adults have many options and possibilities to explore, the choices they make have important ramifications on future relationships. Fincham and Cui (2011) support this stating "The establishment of stability, satisfaction, and closeness in romantic relationships is important for emerging adult's later development, including marriage" (p.5).

In regards to transitioning from adolescence to emerging adulthood, relationships begin to take on new meanings and require a heightened sense of communicative skills. A transformation occurs during emerging adulthood where relationships are no longer "just for fun", and Diamond and Fagundes (2011) suggest "the work of building and sustaining a long-term bond has begun" (p. 252). Competent communication styles are important to achieving relational stability, satisfaction, and closeness during emerging adulthood. Rodrigues, Hall, and Fincham (2006) found that poor communication, high levels of conflict and low relationship efficacy were leading factors regarding a relational dissolution during emerging adulthood. Communication is a critical resource allowing couples to satisfy personal needs as well as the needs of their partner. This requires individuals to look beyond immediate self-satisfaction and look towards future satisfaction in the form of a life-long commitment with their partner.

For example, Finkel and Campbell (2001) found a couple's ability to engage in accommodation is a crucial communicative co-regulation resource to help ensure a healthy, positive romantic relationship during emerging adulthood. Accommodation can take on many forms such as using humor to diffuse a difficult interaction, apologizing when necessary, or simply "letting go" of a perceived disturbance. Using communication constructively during periodic moments of transgression contributes to relational stability

(Baxter, 2011).

ON-AGAIN/OFF-AGAIN RELATIONSHIPS

Prior relational research has typically conceptualized non-marital dating relationships dichotomously as either "together" or "terminated." In doing so, researchers tend to conceptualize "relational instability" primarily as a feature of transitioning a relationship to termination. Yet, this perception ignores the possibilities of other romantic partnership trajectories where "instability" may actually be a part of a relationship's definition. For example, at some point across the life course, individuals at one point in time may have been romantically involved with a partner and terminated the romantic relationship. However, even after a romantic termination, later on couples may decide that their relationship deserves another chance, and a romantic reconciliation occurs. Couples that experience relational reconciliation represent a relational category known as on-again/off-again relationships. The act of recommitting to a previously terminated relationship debunks the dichotomous view of relational categories, and suggests the need to investigate alternative relationship patterns. Further, during emerging adulthood romantic partnerships should be thought of as dynamic trajectories involving "a heterogeneous and multidirectional array of transitions" (Binstock & Thorton, 2003, p.432).

In spite of limited research, given the fluctuating patterns of dating during emerging adulthood described earlier it makes sense that on-again/off-again relationships occur more often than previously assumed, especially during emerging adulthood. To date the number of communication scholars explicitly researching on-again/off-again

relationships are few. A notable exception to this is the research of Dailey and her colleagues at the University of Texas (Dailey, Brody, LeFebvre, & Crook, 2013; Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010; Dailey, Jin, Brody, & McCracken, 2013; Dailey, Jin, Pfiester, & Beck, 2011; Dailey, McCracken, Jin, Rossetto, & Green, 2013; Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2011; Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009; Dailey, Rossetto, McCracken, Jin, & Green, 2012; Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). Dailey and colleagues provide a conceptual foundation upon which the present study builds. Specifically, they provide a working definition of on-off relationships, highlight key attributes that differentiate cyclical from non-cyclical partnerships, and importantly, whereas prior relational researchers categorized partners as either together or terminated (Karney, Bradbury, & Johnson, 1999), Dailey, Rossetto, et al. (2009) challenged the dyadic conceptualization of relational categories acknowledging the importance of identifying the diversity within romantic relationships. Moreover, these studies suggest the importance of understanding on-off relationships at various developmental points—stability, dissolution, and importantly, reconciliation (Dailey, Jin, et al., 2011; Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009; Dailey, Rossetto, et al., 2009) because of the unique differences that have been identified between on-off and non-cyclical relationships.

To begin, Dailey defines on-off relationships as "committed dating relationships that have broken up and renewed at least once" (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009, p.24) with the potential of repeating the cycle several times. A recent study investigating relational patterns in young adults concluded that 60% of those respondents had experienced an on-off relationship at least once, and that 75% of those respondents had terminated and renewed their romantic relationship at least twice with the same partner (Dailey, Pfiester,

et al., 2009, Study 1). In addition, a second study revealed that 40% of participants experienced an on-off relationship in either their current or most recent relationship (Dailey, Pfiester, *et* al., 2009, Study 2). Similar studies have yielded comparable results, such as Bevan and Cameron's (2001) study. They found that 75% of respondents had experienced an on-off relationship. Other relational studies reported approximately 40% of participants had engaged in an on-off relationship (Cupach & Metts, 2002), further suggesting an over looked social phenomenon in romantic relationships.

A study by Kalish (1997) found rekindled relationships, that is, those that reconciled after at least a five-year period initially started before 22 years of age. Various other studies support this finding, alluding to an idea that many on-off relationships begin during emerging adulthood. This finding has many implications for the development of romantic relationships. Because emerging adults have access to broad social networks (Arnett, 2000) individuals may perceive better alternatives with another partner, ultimately facilitating a break-up (Kalish, 1997; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Additionally, because on-off relationships begin early during emerging adulthood individuals have more time to develop post-dissolution relationships with their prior partners, which may lead to a renewal when expectations with alternative partners are not met (Dailey, Pfiester, *et* al., 2009, Study 1).

The seemingly high prevalence of on-off relationships found among emerging adults suggests the possibility that post dissolution relationships have their own unique qualities, and that repeated reconciliation may be a natural outgrowth. Studies examining post-dissolution partnerships highlight an increasing trend where in contrast to severing ties, former partners develop friendships and/or maintain some form of interpersonal

contact (Busboom, Collins, Givertz, & Levin, 2002; Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008; Lannutti & Cameron, 2002). Partners that form positive, post-dissolution relationships may do so to increase the likelihood of reconciliation (Cupach & Metts, 2002; Dailey *et* al., 2012; Lannutti and Cameron, 2003). Because this form of romantic partnership has previously been disregarded from relational development and dissolution models despite recent studies highlighting their prevalence, relational scholars have noted that "…research that does not distinguish on-off relationships from relationships without a cyclical nature may yield results that mask or exaggerate certain phenomena in dating relationships" (Dailey, Pfiester, *et* al., 2009, p. 44).

Specifically, the notion of recommitting to a previously terminated relationship debunks the dichotomous view of relational categories, and exemplifies the need to reshape the way communication scholars study interpersonal communication and relational development, effectively reworking the stages of coming together and coming apart. Important to this point is that communication scholars have acknowledged the potential for reconciliation, but have limited this idea to relational maintenance, that is, while partners are still committed to one another (Baxter, 1984; Conville, 1987). Interestingly, it has been suggested that relational maintenance operates differently in on-off relationships compared to noncyclical relationships (Dailey *et* al., 2010), further providing support for new models of romantic partnerships. Whereas relational maintenance has traditionally been defined as a means to stabilize or maintain a relationships' status quo (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1994), relational maintenance in on-off relationships has been found to be used less during both the romantic and post-dissolution relationship, and instead is implemented more during re-escalation in order to

renew the partnership (Dailey *et* al., 2010). However, as the newly reconciled relationship ensues relational maintenance begins to dwindle away which could be reason as to why on-off partners report higher negativity levels in their relationships compared to non-cyclical partners (Dailey *et* al., 2010). Relational maintenance is implemented not as a proactive tool but as a reactive defense because there is no regular maintenance, and these relationships are prone to falling apart due to this neglect.

Models of relational development signify the progression of an intimate relationship including factors such as increased self-disclosure, intimacy, and communication, effectively working to decrease the amount of uncertainty between two partners (Altman & Taylor, 1973). More, similarities have been identified between on-off and noncyclical partners during relational escalation such as physical attractiveness, ease of communication, and shared interests. However, unique differences do arise. Specially, reconciled partners have prior knowledge of partners' interaction and patterns of behavior (Patterson & O' Hair, 1992). On-off relationships tend to be defined as less satisfying compared to noncyclical relationships where a decrease in satisfaction is often associated with an increase in relational cycles (Dailey, Pfiester, *et* al., 2009). More, despite the claim that relational closeness helps to decrease relational uncertainty, on-off partners report much higher levels of relational uncertainty in contrast to those who have not cycled (Dailey *et* al., 2010). Relational uncertainty is often times linked to relational maintenance strategies, which are reportedly used less often in on-off relationships.

In spite of lower relational quality, factors have been identified as to why relationships renew, or reconcile. Bevan, Cameron, and Dillow (2003) defined reconciliation as former partners reverting back to a prior romantic relationship. When

this occurs a cycle has begun, that is, partners move from an "off" to an "on" state. Moving beyond the simplistic idea that partners reconcile because they want to give their partner another chance (Dillow, Morse, & Afifi, 2008), research has provided the field with several possible reasons as to why partners renew "terminated" relationships. Factors such as lingering feelings, unsuccessful or unfulfilling attempts with an alternative partner, increased communication between partners, perceived positive changes within a partner, decrease in pre-identified relational stressors, and an overall belief that the "break" was time constructive, ultimately improving the quality of the relationship or helping partners redefine the relationship have been found to contribute to relational reconciliation (Dailey, Pfiester, *et* al., 2009; Daily, Rossetto, *et* al., 2009).

In contrast to the studies discussed above, relational research examines the progression and deterioration of relationships, but stops once the relationship has "terminated." As such, understanding how emerging adults transverse through periods of post-dissolution and reconciliation represents an area of communication research that has been understudied, but can potentially provide the field with a better understanding of relationship patterns among the broader adult population.

RELATIONAL MODELS, THEORIES, AND STAGES

Romantic relationship termination has received much research attention within the communication and psychology fields over the last three decades. When examining the relational disengagement literature, studies tend to fall into one of four categories: relational deterioration (Duck, 1982; Knapp 1984; Lee, 1984), relational termination predicators (Cupach & Metts, 1986; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau 1976) relational

disengagement strategies (Baxter, 1979, 1984; Cody, 1982) and most recently added, relational reconciliation (Dillow *et* al., 2008; Patterson & O'Hair, 1992). What unites the aforementioned categories of relational deterioration, predictors, and strategies is the assumed "death" of a relationship after termination. In contrast, reconciliation has emerged from these categories as a potential relational stage which revitalizes a previously terminated romantic relationship. Below I discuss prominent models, theories, and stages that have set the stage for scholars to examine the potential for romantic reconciliation.

Relational Deterioration

Duck's (1982) model of relational deterioration suggests four phases associated with relational deterioration. The first stage is the *intrapsychic phase*, which can be viewed as a time of relational reflection by a partner. During this phase, the dissatisfied partner internally scrutinizes relational problems. This is the first time a partner begins to weigh the costs of connection versus the rewards of autonomy. Thus, the dissatisfied partner begins to debate the idea of relational termination.

If while weighing the costs and benefits of disengaging a romantic relationship the dissatisfied partner finds the benefits of autonomy to be higher, then the partner will enter into the *dyadic phase*. It is here that interpersonal communication with one's partner begins. During this stage, the dissatisfied partner will approach the other partner and express frustrations. Here, partners will openly discuss the stated problems within the relationship. The dyadic phase is a stage for both partners to communicate and attempt to reconcile the relational issues, therefore allowing the relationship to continue towards

connection and away from autonomy.

The third phase, the *social phase*, occurs when partners either cannot or do not wish to carry on the romantic relationship and relational termination occurs. It is during this time that each individual shares the news of the relational termination with his or her social networks. Also during this phase, each partner must communicate their desired outcome in regards to their post-dissolution relationship. The final phase is the *grave-dressing phase*. During this time, individuals devise their own stories in regards to the relational termination and explain this version to their social network. Further, each individual reflects back on how the relationship began, progressed and ultimately terminated while creating his or her own story of the relationship. During this phase, former partners seek closure in order to move on from the terminated relationship.

Knapp (1984) also devised a relational disengagement model and posited five stages that characterize the "coming-apart" process, or relational deterioration. The model reflects a reverse hypothesis, that is, the five stages of deterioration are essentially the reverse of Knapp's five stages of coming together. *Differentiating*, or the first deterioration stage involves both partners communicating their apparent differences rather than commonalities suggesting that they are no longer as similar as they once were. Here, each partner is beginning to re-establish a self-identity apart from ones partner, essentially establishing more autonomy than connection.

As the relationship continues to deteriorate, partners experience the second phase known as *circumscribing*. During this phase, both partners limit the amount of conversation they are willing to have with their partner. Importantly, it is during this stage that the amount of communication significantly decreases within the relationship

and both partners surrender to "polite" conversation.

As the relationship continues to deteriorate, *stagnation* occurs. During the third period, partners have all but completely given up on their relationship. Partners have no desire to communicate, and in a sense are just waiting for the break-up to occur. With this said, if only one partner is dissatisfied with the relationship and the other partner desires a chance at relational repair, then this stage may be drawn out for an extended period of time.

The fourth stage, *avoiding* involves minimal communication. Knapp indicates that communication during this stage is either direct (e.g. "I do not want to spend time with you.") or indirect (e.g. "I have a lot of work to do, and I do not know when I can see you."). Although these messages suggest to the other partner that she or he is no longer interested in spending time together; the communicative messages during the avoiding stage are not meant to terminate the partnership. The fifth and final stage is known as *terminating*; it ends relational deterioration and marks the "end" of the relationship.

Lee's (1984) relational dissolution framework proposed a five-stage model that is case specific for examining pre-marital romantic dissolutions. The first stage is the *discovery of dissatisfaction stage*. Here, the problem or conflict is recognized as a threat to the continuation of the romantic partnership. The dissatisfied partner begins the process of weighing the benefits of autonomy to the costs of connection.

Second, the *exposure stage* is the time for interpersonal communication to begin between partners as the dissatisfied partner confronts the other. Next, the couple moves into the *negotiation stage*. The third stage involves both partners discussing the consequences of a relational termination as well as a discussion of relational

dissatisfaction.

During the fourth stage, *resolution*, partners decide whether to repair or terminate the relationship. Lee's final phase, the *transformation stage* occurs when relational change is actually initiated and implemented. During the final stage, former partners take time to grieve and accept the ending of their partnership. Further, ex-partners share their version of the break-up with their respected social networks.

Predictors of Relational Termination

Whereas the aforementioned scholars focused their research on relational disengagement stages, other scholars have examined specific predictors of relational termination (Cupach & Metts, 1986; Hill *et* al., 1976). Over the past three decades, psychological and communicative fields have been flooded with researchers investigating relational termination predictors, which promoted a meta-analytic study investigating the predicating factors of nonmarital romantic relationship dissolution (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). The study examined a range of individual, relationship and external factors attributed to a relational dissolution.

Overall, Le *et* al.'s (2010) study found that relationship factors (e.g., commitment, self-disclosure, satisfaction and relationship duration) were better predictors of relational dissolution than individual factors (e.g., conscientiousness, self-esteem, growth beliefs and attachment styles). In regards to external factors (e.g., network support, network overlap), network support proved to be a reliable predictive factor of relational termination. More interesting, network support was comparable to predictors such as satisfaction and investments. This may suggest the importance of communication in a

relationship. A partnership is comprised of two individuals, as well as their social networks. Although research has suggested that as adolescents move into emerging adulthood emotional support and day to day self-disclosure occurs more frequently between romantic partners than with close friends, communicating positively with other individuals is an important part to a relationship. Moreover, it is important that a partner is supportive of the other partner's friendships.

Hill *et* al. (1976) examined the heterogamy of partners to determine specific predictors of relational disengagement. Results indicated that dissimilarities in characteristics such as age, physical attraction, educational pathways, intelligence, and future ambitions were indictors of potential dissolution among romantic partners. Further, Hill, *et* al. identified three additional predictors including: relationships in which one partner contributes more to the partnership, relationships that have a decrease in intimacy between partners, and lastly, relationships where one partner is more emotionally attached than the partner.

Cupach and Metts (1986) foundational work on the accounts of romantic relationship dissolution examined why intimate relationships terminate. Specific predictors of relational termination were identified and placed under six larger representative labels, or factors. The six factors contributing to relational termination were identified as individual (e.g. partner trait, affective state, one's attitude about the other), role enactment (e.g., cost-rewards, redefinition, performance), relationship cohesion (e.g., incompatibilities, intimacy, relational ambivalence), regulation (e.g., internal communication, aggression, external communication), third-party involvement (e.g., affairs, other participants), and external forces (e.g. unexpected, undesired,

unavoidable changes such as relocation or job loss).

While this typology is comprehensive, "whether these are the only factors playing a part in the actual disengagement process or the only factors people are willing to admit publicly is uncertain" (Cupach & Metts, 1986, p. 323). Thus, communication during relational disengagement is thought to be the most authentic at an intimate level between two partners. Once ex-partners begin to re-construct their own version of the story and relay them to third parties, "facts" get fuzzy in regards to why the relationship terminated.

Relational Disengagement Strategies

Salient to the research surrounding relational termination is coming to understand how relationships are terminated (a process view). Specifically, researchers in this area have identified communication strategies that partners will use to "end" a relationship. These disengagement strategies can also be considered positive (prosocial) or negative (antisocial). Thus, for the purposes of the current study it is important to more deeply understand the various strategies used by partners to "terminate" relationships in order to see how these strategies function and the effects they have on future reconciliations, if any. Where the previous models discussed above have examined the process endured by partners across a termination, they fall short of examining the depth of the many ways partners might "terminate" the relationship, as well as how "permanent" such terminations might be. The following section will discuss specific strategies identified as relational disengagement strategies (Baxter, 1984; Cody, 1982) that stand as a repertoire of possibilities for partners to choose when terminating a relationship.

Cupach and Metts (1994) suggested, "Ending a relationship is perhaps one of the

most face-threatening situations we encounter" (p.81) and because so, partners resort to more indirect disengagement strategies in order to minimize embarrassment or guilt and ultimately save face. Baxter (1982, 1984) found that relationships could be terminated through implementation of either a direct or indirect strategy. Whereas direct strategies tend to be more verbal, and often times occur face to face, indirect strategies employ more nonverbal forms of communication, tend to be more subtle and may be communicated via media other than face to face. Further Baxter noted that terminations fall into one of two categories. A unilateral strategy refers to one partner initiating the breakup, whereas a bilateral strategy refers to a joint decision between two partners to end the relationship.

Baxter (1979) found that 71% of participants, an overwhelming majority, resorted to indirect strategies when terminating a romantic relationship. Furthermore, Baxter (1984) found that 76% opposed direct communication strategies during a termination and relied on indirect communication. The trend of implementing indirect communication during a termination often times results in mixed messages that create uncertainty, which can prolong the disengagement process. In Baxter's (1984) study of disengagement strategies, it was discovered that when indirect communication strategies were used, only 22% of recipients believed the relationship was in deed "over." This creates a more painful break-up for ex-partners, and psychological damage can impede. Relational termination is emotionally distressing and implementing direct communication may be a route to a healthier, positive breakup.

Baxter (1982) identified four relationship disengagement strategies. The first strategy, *Withdrawal/Avoidance* was identified as the most common and least direct

strategy. This strategy is likely to be implemented when there is little desire for a post-dissolution relationship. It is considered to be a unilateral strategy, as one partner tends to implement avoidance of direct communication about the dissolution. In Baxter's 1984 study, disengagement accounts study, 66% of couples were found to have implemented *Withdrawal/Avoidance*. It was suggested "Although avoidance may seem expedient to the disengager in the short-term, it may exacerbate the termination trauma in the long-run" (Baxter, p. 231, 1982). This finding suggests that less communication during a breakup may by be easier for the disengager at the time of the breakup, the mixed messages associated with their intentions will likely lead to a prolonged disengagement process.

Secondly, Baxter (1982) identified *Manipulation Strategies* as a unilateral, indirect strategy to terminate relationships. Leaking the impending breakup to shared social networks, asking a third party to break the news, and threatening remarks all classify as *Manipulation Strategy*. Baxter suggested that individuals in very close relationships were less likely to implement Manipulation. Next, Baxter found that disengagers may use *Positive Tone* strategies. This unilateral strategy is an attempt by the disengager to limit the amount of pain the disenagee encounters and attempts to make them feel better about the break up. For example, the disengager could take up the fairness approach (e.g. "If I were to stay in this relationship, it would not be fair to you."). Other *Positive Tone* strategies include compliments (e.g. "I am so sorry this is happening, but, know you are an intelligent woman and I wish things could have worked out."). Lastly, disengagers who implement *Positive Tone* strategies may do so in a selfish attempt to save face (e.g. "This is no one's fault, it just needs to be this way. This break

up is for the best."). *Positive Tones* are an indirect termination strategy and as such can result in ex-partners holding on to hope that the relationship is not really over.

Lastly, Baxter (1982) identified *Openness* as a direct communication disengagement strategy. *Openness* refers to the willingness of a disengager to openly discuss his/her desire to end the relationship. *Openness* also requires the disengager to openly discuss his/her reasons for wanting to end the relationship (e.g. "I no longer feel we are compatible, and I wish to see other people."). Baxter (1984) found 81% of receivers accepted the break up message offering no resistance. Thus, a direct communication strategy does not provide indications that partners will get back together, leading to a shorter disengagement process.

Whereas Baxter's (1982) disengagement strategies were identified as close relationship termination strategies, Cody (1982) developed a set of strategies that were specific to romantic relational termination. Cody developed a five-factor typology of disengagement strategies. *Behavioral De-escalation* is a very indirect form of relational termination. The disengage refrains from any and all contact with their partner, leading the disengagee to pull away. The second strategy identified, *Negative Identity Management* is a set of statements consisting of messages that the couple should date other people and that the break up is in the best interest of both partners. When this strategy is used, it is considered to communicate directly that the relationship is over, however the underlying meaning is less clear leaving room for negotiation and a potential reconciliation down the road.

Justification, identified as the third disengagement strategy consists of explanations for why the relationship must come to an end (e.g. "I only have time for

school right now,"), why one partner is no longer happy in the relationship ("I think we are becoming too dependent on each other."), and/or a potential identification of things that have changed between the partners leading to relational uncertainty ("I do not think you are ready to settle down and commit long term to this relationship."). These kinds of statements are often times seen as less threatening because it does not blame either partner. This is helpful if the individual that is terminating the relationship believes their partner has lots of faults, but does not want to hurt their feelings or self-esteem. Justification is often used in very close romantic relationships because of the non-threatening nature.

The fourth strategy, *De-escalation* is a vague tactic used by partners and often time insinuates that the couple may reconcile in the future. This strategy is implemented to avoid a complete break up initially, and instead suggests that the relationship de-escalate in an attempt to improve the relationship (e.g. "Let's take a break for a bit and just be friends."). Lastly, *Positive Tone* was identified as the fifth disengagement strategy. Positive tone is used to try and break the news lightly to the disengagees. Statements tend to reinforce how much the disengager still cares about the other, that the disengager feels regret about ending the relationship, and lastly, that the disengager wants to end the relationship on a positive note for future encounters. This strategy provides some information about why the relationship is ending, but may cause the disengagee to not take the break up seriously due to the friendly tone. Because of this, the break-up often times has to be reinforced multiple times by the disengager.

Dillow and Hale (2001) also examined relational disengagement strategies specifically looking at how certain strategies may leave room for a reconciliation.

Following the classification of strategies proposed by Cody (1982), Dillow and Hale found that reconciliation was less likely when negative strategies (e.g. behavioral de-escalation) were used compared to positive strategies (e.g. positive tone) and neutral strategies (e.g. negative identity management). These findings suggest that the likelihood of reconciliation may rest upon the disengagement strategy implemented.

Relational Reconciliation

Arnett (2000) suggested romantic relationships during emerging adulthood are a time of instability due to their exploratory nature. Although relational termination can be a painful experience, it is not an uncommon occurrence due to the experimental nature of emergent adult romantic relationships. Further, Synder (2000) stated "Learning how to form, maintain, and gracefully end romantic and sexual relationships with others is arguably one of the critical developmental tasks of adolescence and early adulthood" (p. 161). As the aforementioned disengagement strategies suggest, there are positive, direct strategies to ending romantic relationships, yet the extant research does not discuss what occurs after romantic relationships are terminated and if positivity in relational dissolution plays a role in reconciliation. Implications can be drawn suggesting that at least one partner is happy with the dissolution, and that former partners are not likely to continue communication. However, disengagement strategies such as *De-escalation* suggest that romantic relationships may not be over for good, and implies that a "break" from the relationship may lead to reconciliation. Despite this, little research examines the strategies, discussions, and the process in which ex-partners go through to rekindle a terminated relationship.

Patterson and O'Hair (1992) were among the first of very few scholars that examined and suggested relational repair and maintenance strategies are fundamentally different than strategies adopted by ex-partners to try and reconcile a romantic relationship. Specifically, Patterson and O'Hair argued that repair strategies seek to maintain the status quo of a romantic relationship, whereas reconciliation strategies seek to change the current relationship status. The study identified seven different strategies of reconciliation including, *Spontaneous Development, Third Party Mediation, High Affect/Ultimatum, Tacit/Persistence, Mutual Interaction, Avoidance, and Vulnerable Appeal.*

Spontaneous Development refers to the act of reconciliation just happening. When reported, neither partner could acknowledge how the reconciliation occurred. Because there is reportedly no actual strategy in use, the relationship just started back up, labeling Spontaneous Development a strategy is a stretch. Second, *Third Party Mediation* refers to an outside individual who stages an intervention unbeknownst to the two ex-partners. Because Third Party Mediation does not acknowledge either of the former partners, it is difficult to consider a strategic resource for partners to use. The third strategy, *High Affect/Ultimatum*, was identified by Patterson and O'Hair as a "last ditch effort" (p. 123) to try and win a partner back using ultimatums. Fourth, *Tacit/Persistence* is a strategy by means of continually asking an ex-partner to do something for or with her/him. Communication is indirect in terms of not asking the ex-partner to get back together specifically, but the strategy is an effort by one partner to spend time and show emotion to the other partner and hoping this will trigger reconciliation.

The fifth identified strategy is *Mutual Interaction*. This strategy involves direct

communication by bother partners, openly discussing their desires to reconcile, the problems they must overcome, and suggestions to improve the potential 'new' relationship. *Avoidance*, the sixth strategy, involves both partners intentionally avoiding the discussion of relational problems that lead up and caused the dissolution. Lastly, *Vulnerable Appeal* is considered a direct communication reconciliation strategy. Here, one partner often initiates the conversation, and accepts blame for the break-up. In doing so, this partner states willingness to make the necessary changes for the relationship to work. This strategy seems to be the most direct and related to romantic reconciliation as its sole purpose is to reconcile.

Although this first attempt at organizing relational reconciliation strategies provided the field with evidence as to why there is a need for a different typology of strategies as well as how relational reconciliation strategies serve a different purpose than relational repair strategies, the aforementioned scholars failed to indicate the likelihood of use of each strategy as well as why some strategies would be chosen over others. Nevertheless, this study ultimately concluded "more diverse strategic repertoire than repair or maintenance" (Patterson & O'Hair, 1992, p. 127) is required for reconciliation. This suggested the area of relational re-development is a unique phase of romantic relationships and provided reason for further investigation.

Dillow *et* al. (2008) attempted to fill this gap of knowledge by examining information-seeking styles and implicit theories of relationships to better understand factors that contribute or hinder relational reconciliation. First, destiny theorists were examined which includes individuals that believe their partnership is just meant to be (Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003). On the contrary, growth theorists view relational

turbulence as "the impetus for positive change and growth in the relationship" (Dillow *et* al., 2008, p.352). Whereas relational happiness by destiny theorists rests on the ability of partners to idealize each other, which in turn provides a greater opportunity for disappointment, growth theorists believe that all relationships have the ability to work as long as partners are able to engage in emotional work (Knee, 1998). Thus, when relationships turn sour, growth theorists are likely to turn to relational maintenance strategies to try and fix the problem, whereas destiny theorists are likely to terminate the relationship due to the inability to idealize a partner in a positive light.

Further, individuals rely on one of two coping styles during relational turbulence, monitoring or blunting (Miller, 1987). Individuals that resort to monitoring crave high amounts of information, whether that information is positive or negative. Here, individuals seek information to reduce uncertainty. On the contrary, blunders prefer uncertainty rather than the potential of negative information (Miller, 1987). Thus, blunders do not want seek out nor wish for information to be communicated. For blunders, if the information is negative it becomes a reality and they must deal with the consequences. Not seeking out information allows blunders to continue viewing the relationship in a positive light and even change certain information about the negative event (Dillow *et* al., 2008).

Through an examination of these factors Dillow *et* al., (2008) found that the desire of reconciliation rests upon ones information seeking style, and that the basic belief one holds about relationships impact the desire for information. How one seeks out information was identified as a communicative element accompanying the desire to reconcile (Dillow *et* al., 2008). Specifically, growth theorists are more likely than destiny

theorists to seek out information in an attempt to rectify a previously terminated

relationship. Further, monitors are more likely than blunders to attempt reconciliation.

Blunders do not wish to seek out information, and as such, will avoid communicating

with ex-partners. A decrease in the amount of communication makes it difficult to

reconcile a relationship. Monitors on the other hand seek out information, thus setting the

stage for communication to occur, ultimately opening the door for potential

reconciliation.

Characteristics of On-Again/Off-Again Relationships

Dailey, Pfiester, *et* al. (2009) found that there are unique differences between on-

off and noncyclical relationships when examining relational maintenance behaviors,

dissolution strategies, issues of uncertainty, and importantly, the rekindling of a

terminated relationship. A study examining on-off relationships found positive

characteristics were less abundant in on-off relationships during both the initial and

secondary phase compared to non-cyclical relationships (Dailey, Pfiester, *et* al., 2009).

Moreover, the level of relational dissatisfaction reported by on-off daters rose as the

number of cycles accumulated. Interestingly, Dailey *et* al. noted that on-off partners

might experience fewer external obstacles (e.g. disapproving family, geographic distance)

in comparison to noncyclical partners, suggesting internal factors (e.g. satisfaction,

commitment) portray a better image of relational differences as well as highlight

characteristics to be studied in future research.

In regards to relational disengagement, on-off relationships tend to initially be

terminated unilaterally and often times indirectly (Baxter, 1984). That is, because at least

one partner presumably wants the relationship to continue, one side will attempt communication during the post-dissolution stage. Communication keeps the doorway open for potential reconciliation. Moreover, relationships that end indirectly can create a high level of uncertainty between partners leaving one partner vying for information. This also prolongs the post-dissolution stage and communication often continues.

Towards a Typology of On-Again/Off-Again Dating Relationships

The unique study conducted by Dailey, McCracken, *et* al., (2013) is the first of its kind to use a turning points approach to identify types of on-off relationships providing the field with a better understanding of these relationships. Specifically, five on-off types were identified through qualitative research assessing how romantic partners negotiated breakups and renewals across their relationships. While this study certainly extends research regarding negotiations during relational reconciliation, a typology account suggests individualized characteristics, limiting the generalizability to the larger population. Results from this two-part study found five types of on-off relationship which included: habitual, mismatched, capitalized-on-transitions, gradual separators, and controlling.

The first type suggested by Dailey, McCracken, *et* al., (2013) was the habitual category. To begin, the negotiation of transitions were portrayed with high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty. Because of this, individuals that are typed as "habitual" appeared to not only ignore the process of transitioning but they appeared to quickly delve back into the relationship exhibiting the same patterns of behavior as before. Further, habitual partners tended to exhibit a level of dependence on their significant

others. Relationship reconciliation typically began due to a lack of companionship found during a break, or because the relationship was convenient at that time.

The second type identified was the "mismatched" relationship. This category included external factors such as partners reporting incongruent timing or geographical distance as reasoning for an on-off relationship. This category also included "partners having different desires, being enthusiastic about or committed to the relationship at different times, or being at different life stages" (Dailey, McCracken, *et* al., 2013, p. 388). Further, partners noted unequal involvement during their relationship due to the lack of synchrony regarding their personalities and overall relational desires.

Partners often made the most of their time apart, which lead to a third relationship type, capitalized-on-transitions (Dailey, McCracken, *et* al., 2013). This type was identified when partners used a breakup and renewal to initiate change, or strategically used transitions to better the prior relationship. When partners used a break as a strategic plan, it was often times to test either themselves or their partner. Partners noted that they were unsure of their commitment to their significant other due to lack of experience. Participants that feel into this type of on-off relationship were found to explicitly discuss the breakup and renewal.

Gradual separators was the fourth type to be identified where "participants' reports of the transitions showed a pattern in which partners gradually drifted apart or had less interest in the relationship with each subsequent transition" (Dailey, McCracken, *et* al., 2013, p. 390). In this category, participants described having more closure as well as a more defined ending suggesting that a higher number of cycles reflected more realization that the relationship would never come to full fruition. The last category,

controlling, portrayed the imbalance of desire that is often found in on-off relationships. The controlling category tended to have one partner wanting a final resolution, while the other partner wanted reconciliation. This led to participants having to take drastic measures to get their point across. Dailey and colleagues found "Overall, the transition negotiations within this type reflect partners' use of manipulation or persistence to control the relationship… and connotes a certain dysfunction in these relationships" (p.391).

SUMMARY

This chapter reviewed the literature pertaining to emerging adulthood and on-again/off-again relationships. I have highlighted prominent scholars that have set the foundation for understanding romantic relationships as well as more recent scholars who advance research forward. Using this information, I move forward in the next chapter to discuss Baxter's (2011) Relational Dialectics Theory to highlight the need for a better understanding of on-off relationships during emergent adulthood using a dialogic perspective.

CHAPTER II

RELATIONAL DIALECTICS THEORY

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE THESIS STUDY

Due to the multivocality found within on-off relationships during emerging adulthood, this study applied relational dialectics theory to uncover the interplay of relational tensions within on-off relationships. Relational dialects theory (RDT) is "a theory of the meaning-making between relationship parties that emerges from the interplay of competing discourses" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p.349). Moreover, social life, including romantic relationships, is multidiscursive expressing "an open dialogue characterized by multivocality and the indeterminacy inherent when those multiple voices interpenetrate" (Baxter, 2004a, p.2). This multivocality is, at times, characterized by unified-yet-opposed discourses, while at other times; it is characterized by the existence of unified-yet-different discourses (Baxter, 2011). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) began their formal articulation of relational dialectics theory with the need to understand the complexities and on-going "messiness" that lies within the dialectical nature of social processes, that is "...a belief that social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a *ceaseless interplay* between contrary or opposing tendencies" (p.3). Additionally, in her more recent work, Baxter (2004a, 2004b, 2011) examines and details the influence Bakhtin's theory of dialogism has had on the progression of relational dialectics theory. Specifically, Baxter (2011) identifies five interrelated differences between the articulation of relational dialectics theory first discussed by Baxter and

Montgomery (1996) and the progression to a more evolved theory of relational dialectics theory which has allowed for a "richer palette of concepts" (p.1).

In the following pages, I provide an overview of relational dialectics theory. Specifically, I engage in what Baxter (2011) discusses as RDT 2.0, a more dialogically grounded understanding of relational meaning making. Thus, I highlight its roots in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, its focus on communication as constitutive of meaning, and importantly, the utterance chain. Lastly, I engage the idea of relational turning points as a form of constitutive communication. Relational dialectics theory regards change as a messy, ongoing process where major relational turning points "appear to construct a relationship by fits and starts, in what can be an erratic process of backward-forward, up and down motion" (Baxter, 2004a, p.11). Baxter discusses relational dialectics theory as a sensitizing theory allowing researchers to "be heuristic, enabling us to see relating in a new light; and its ability to render intelligible the set of practices known as a relating" (2004a, p. 17). Thus, I argue that relational dialectics theory will serve as a heuristic tool in the present study helping me illuminate the process through which on-again/off-again partners attempt to discursively construct, maintain, and negotiate their multivocal and often contradictory realities during relational reconciliation attempts and in doing so illustrate the ways reconciled partners create systems of meaning.

BAKHTIN'S THEORY OF DIALOGISM

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), a Russian theorist of literature and culture committed his career to understanding the influence of language and discourse on "...the prosaic of everyday life, his view that Self is socially constructed, the centrality of

difference in meaning making, and the aesthetic moment" (as cited in Baxter, 2011, p.

24). Bakhtin's theory of dialogism forms the foundation for relational dialectics theory, a

tool that has provided the field a richly layered and complex view of dialogue (Baxter,

2004a, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998). Although the

term *dialogism* was never formally stated within Bahktin's work (Baxter, 2004a),

Holquist (1990) explained that dialogism refers to the "interconnected set of concerns"

that characterized Bakhtin's philosophy of knowledge. Bakhtin (1981) regarded social

life the product of "a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled

tendencies" (p. 272). The two conflicting tendencies, the centripetal (i.e., discourses of

unity) and the centrifugal (i.e., discourses of difference) represents the dialogic view that

was grounded in the articulation of relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Montgomery,

2006). More, Bakhtin centered social life in the utterance chain that is existing between

two consciousness (Baxter, 2004a, 2011). Social life is "not a closed, univocal

monologue in which only a single voice (perspective, theme, ideology, person) could be

heard; social life was an open dialogue characterized by multivocality and the

indeterminacy inherent when those multiple voices interpenetrate" (Baxter, 2004a, p. 2).

Because both relational and personal identities are constituted, and reconstituted through

changing interactions with others, the idea that identity negotiation is a socially

constructed, dynamic process is logical. In contrast to balancing opposed or different

voices to understand social processes as suggested by other researchers, Baxter (2004a)

suggests the multidiscursive nature of dialogue as the crux to understanding relational

identities.

Specifically, Bakhtin considered social life to constantly be in a centripetal-

centrifugal flux. Thus, a relational dialectics approach to studying relational communication engages the dialectical tension of contradictory verbal-ideological forces (Baxter, 2004a). This stands in sharp contrast to traditional approaches. For example, Berger's uncertainty reduction theory suggests a relationships development and maintenance reduces uncertainty between partners (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Interdependence theory suggests partners possessing high levels of autonomy are evidence to a lack of happiness or closeness within a relationship (Kelley, *et* al., 1983). However, Baxter suggested "these approaches are monologic and ignore the dynamic interplay of these centripetal discourses with their centrifugal counterparts" (2004a, p.8). Relational dialectics plays on these aforementioned contradictions as well as many others, suggesting that relating is conceived through unified opposites.

Much research regarding on-off relationships within the relational communication field has focused on dominant approaches to relationships. That is, an articulation of connection, certainty, and openness (Baxter, 2004a). Bakhtin (1986) suggested, "An utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside it that is given and final. It always creates something absolutely new and unrepeatable" (pp. 119–120). From this it can be implicated that all utterances produce something more, different, and new beneath the surface. Thus, while prior on-off research has focused on traditional aspects of relating, it seems necessary to expand our knowledge of relational dialogue by identifying new contradictions and in doing so begin to understand how the unity of these contradictions enhance and complete one another while simultaneously limit or constrain one another (Baxter, 2011).

In this present study, I focused on relational partners' utterance chains situated in

participant interviews discussing relational dialogue in order to understand the discourses upon which partners draw as they attempt to reconstruct the meaning and identity of a reconciled romantic relationship. With its roots in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and emphasis on communication as central to the construction of romantic relationships, relational dialectics theory was used to explore the form and function of multivocality found in romantic partner discourse and examine how meaning is reconstructed through relational reconciliation.

COMMUNICATION AS CONSTITUTIVE PROCESS

From a traditional viewpoint, communication functions as an individualistic, persuasive force (Baxter, 2007). While this conception of communication is by and large widely accepted by many scholars both within as well as outside the field of communication, I would argue there is an alternative view that positions communication as constitutive. Communication from a constitutive perspective suggests individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and goals are formulated through interpersonal communication. Baxter (2004a) states, "A constitutive approach to communication asks how communication defines, or constructs, the social world, including ourselves and our personal relationships" (p.3).

Relational dialectics theory adopts and centers communication as a constitutive process (Baxter, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2011). Accordingly, individuals attempting to reconcile romantic relationships do so by re-identifying the meaning of their relationship by constructing, maintaining, and negotiating new and old relationship identities through a joint communicative process. Further, according to Baxter (2004a), "relationships are

constituted in communication practices" (p.3). Bakhtin's idea of dialogism is centered within the constitutive process. That is, "the self of dialogism is a *relation* between the self and other, a simultaneity of sameness and difference out of which knowing becomes possible" (Baxter, 2004a, p. 3). Known as a chronotope, each individual is in the same time-space dialogue but both bring a different way of seeing the event. This helps to provide a more complete, whole view of the self and the other within a relationship. Baxter (2004a) suggests, "Chronotopic similarity is the stockpile of shared time-space experiences that a pair constructs through their joint interaction events over time" (p.4). Romantic relationships that are cycled are therefore reformed and re-identified because each party is constituted during communicative interaction.

Chronotopic similarity constructs a relationships' identity through scaffolding. Baxter (2004a) found for example that over time through mundane events, some relationship partners developed more or less empathy for one another while others developed more or less patience. Importantly, this does not simply appear nor is chronotopic similarity performed. It is a task that is emergent over time, a romantic relationships history through relational events as well as qualities each individual brings to a relationship. "Chronotopic similarity is accomplished in both the mundane communication events that a pair engages in while conducting everyday relating and those momentous events that function as turning points" (Baxter, 2004a, p.4). Through informal events such as small talk and making plans or through momentous events such as turning points partners attempting to reconcile a romantic relationship are able to do so by creating their own history.

A romantic relationship that is reconciled is a compilation of unique histories that

are not found within non-cyclical relationships (Dailey *et* al., 2010). Thus, turning points such as quality time, relationship talk, dyadic traditions such as reminiscing, storytelling, and celebrations all hold different and varied meanings (Baxter, 2004a). For example, many romantic partners use a particular date as a turning point in which they communicatively remember and annually celebrate an anniversary. However, for on-off partners this turning point may reflect differences. They must jointly decide if they will still honor this date, or if they will begin a new tradition on the date when their relationship was reconciled. Thus, although turning points are experienced jointly this example provides evidence that supports the relational dialectics notion that "the business of relating is as much about differences as similarities" (Baxter, 2004a, p.5). According to dialogism as well as relational dialectics theory, difference between partners is essential to relationship building and should be viewed in a positive light (Baxter, 2004a, 2004b). From this, it can be implied that romantic partners whom reconcile a past relationship use their differences to help forge new beginnings, leaving behind negative attributes from the former relationship and, in return, jointly build new events which helps to construct their relationships in transforming ways.

Lastly, because dialectical tensions are the foundation of relational dialectics theory, Baxter (2004a, 2004b, 2011) and Baxter and Montgomery (1996) asserted that dialectical tensions are constituted communicatively as an interpersonal process in addition to the self and relationships. Dialectical tensions are jointly managed and negotiated communicatively between partners. With this said, it is important to take into account that romantic relationships are in an ongoing negotiation and often times contradictory-ridden partnership with third parties. According to relational dialectics, it is

not so much the third party individuals themselves (e.g., social networks) but instead "more on their communication patterns and the systems of meaning constituted in those patterns" (Baxter, 2004a, p.7). As relational partners develop, change, and grow the relationships meaning and identity, partners are constantly immersed in communication with outsiders.

Outsider communication plays a unique role in on-off relationships. Relationship partners are subjected to advice giving, gossip, and others' relational experiences in regards to how others view relating. Specifically, third-party interactions often voice approval and disapproval with regards to social conventions of relating. On-off partners, just as non-cyclical partners are subjected to active communication with friends and family during all developmental points-entry, development, maintenance, and dissolution-during which time partners hear other viewpoints about how a relationships' identity is conceptualized. Unique to on-off partners is the developmental point of reconciliation. Romantic partners must jointly and communicatively navigate three contradictory ideologies, integration-separation, certainty-uncertainty, and openness-nonexpression (Baxter, 2011). For example, partners attempting to reconcile a relationship may hear from close friends that they need to "take things slow." Although this does not directly speak to the integration-separation tension, it does however, at a more mundane level suggest a time-management tension of how much time to spend together versus how much time to spend with others. This tension, or sub-tension speaks to the multivocality that can be found within a single contradiction (Baxter, 2011).

The tension mentioned above highlights the interplay of utterances and provides evidence as to why relational dialogue, based on the complex assumption of an ongoing

centripetal-centrifugal flux needs a more complex approach than the traditional linear model of progression to relationship development. Specifically, Baxter (2004a) suggested that relationship partners experience heightened dialogic activity during turning points, such as relationship talk during romantic reconciliation. Because dialectical tensions are the foundation of relational dialectics theory, they will be discussed in more thorough detail in the following sections. In the present study, I sought to investigate the dialectical tensions of, and the intricacies of the process through which on-again/off-again romantic partners attempt to construct the "given" with the "new" in romantic reconciled partnerships.

THE UTTERANCE CHAIN

Relational Dialectics Theory suggests the central dialogic building block of communication is the utterance chain, which adds depth and complexity to the understanding of communication as well as the relationships that are found within (Baxter, 2011). According to Baxter, "Utterances are intertextual acts—utterance chains—riddled with a myriad of competing systems of meaning that are resources that enable meaning making" (2011, p.49). The utterance chain acts as an organizing scaffold in understanding discursive struggles within relationships. Moreover, according to a dialogic perspective, utterances are only useful when a dialogue, the utterance chain, gives that utterance meaning because "...a single utterance is bounded by a change of speaking subjects; it is a turn talk" (Baxter, 2011, p.49). Thus, an utterance cannot be viewed as an isolated communicative act, but a foundation upon which communication is socially manifested. As stated previously, meaning making occurs within the utterance

chain, or what Bakhtin labeled, "the chain of speech communication" (Baxter, 2011, p.50).

The utterance, which is at the center of the utterance chain, is comprised of four distinct forms of utterance links: distal already-spoken, proximal already-spoken, proximal not-yet-spoken, and distal not-yet-spoken (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011). Each utterance link represents discourses found in a given utterance, which ultimately constructs meaning. In relation to the immediate utterance, proximal versus distal are labeled to acknowledge "...the temporal proximity of prior and anticipated utterances to the immediate utterance" (Baxter, 2011, p.50).

First, the distal already-spoken link refers "to utterances circulating in the culture at large, which are given symbolic life when voiced by speakers" (Baxter, 2011, p.50). Distal already-spoken utterances can be thought of as previously stated cultural communication spoken by new parties because of the length of space and time found between its first use when meaning was attributed and its use by relational partners. These utterances are common and ever-present due to the generations that have come before which embedded systems of meaning into today's modern dialogues. When examining relational communication within a dialogic perspective it is important to first identify distal-already spoken utterances due to its overwhelming presence within all communication because, "...there is no such thing as culture-free interpersonal communication" (Baxter, 2011, p.53). Due to the cultural influence on language, language itself is said to be dialogic because of the struggle between multiple ideological viewpoints. Bakhtin termed heteroglosia to explain how individuals use language that is filled with socially constructed meaning, suggesting that utterances should not be studied

as a struggle of individual contradictions, but as an utterance of culturally enhanced verbal ideologies (Baxter, 2011). This terminology places emphasis on the need to take into account the shared cultural meanings of the spoken language. To this end, Baxter makes the claim that relational dialectics are very much influenced by culture, thus are culturally specific allowing particular discourses to repeatedly circulate in a society (2011). Moreover, this claim provides evidence as to why certain interplays are so pervasive in particular dialogues when applying a relational dialectics approach.

Secondly, the proximal already-spoken link refers to "a discursive site in which the relationship's past meaning bumps up against the meaning of the relationship in the present" (Baxter, 2011, p.51) and represents a more immediate link as the utterances are in a current interaction event. From this, it can be implied that past communicative interactions plays a pivotal role in shaping a relationship as well as the kinds of communicative interactions that take place. Baxter (2011) labeled this form of dialogic interaction as the relational meaning system. Here, past and current communicative interactions shape the meaning of a present relationship. This is not to say that relational meaning making is static, it is of course, ever changing. But, proximal already-spoken links do serve to provide a dominant, meaning-of-the-moment reality for relationships, and in doing so bring certain discourses to the forefront, or centripetal dominance (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010).

Overtime, the centripetal discourse can become authoritative, that is, both parties accept the discourse as truth. But, over time the less dominant, muted discourse may emerge to the forefront forcing the aforementioned authoritative discourse to the centrifugal margin. Certain discursive struggles may not be of particular importance, or

may knowingly be avoided by partners leading these struggles to remain muted, but they are never fully eradicated from the table. Discursive avoidance can occur when relational partners specifically dialogue which discourse will be marginalized, and which discourse will become the front and centered topic.

Lastly, discursive struggles between partners can be dealt with by ambiguity, or equivocation (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). An ambiguous meaning suggests the possibility of multiple interpretations, which eliminates the centripetal-centrifugal struggle. In essence, to resolve the uncertainty, the interpreter gives meaning to discourse. Communicative activity is in opposition to the aforementioned discursive avoidance activity. Here, in the same communicative event relational partners create a hybrid meaning that is formed by mixing competing discourses together (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010) and in doing so, partners create new meaning. A second form of communicative activity has been referred to as an aesthetic moment; that is, during meaning making an oppositional discourse is merged to completely change the system of meaning into something new, and positively welcomed (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010).

The third link found in the utterance chain, proximal not-yet-spoken "…focuses on the interaction of the speaker with the hearer and anticipates a more immediate response than the distal. The speaker is both similar to, yet different from, the hearer" (Baxter, 2011, p.52). During this utterance, a speaker is already expecting a particular answer or reaction and because of this, will communicate the listeners anticipated response into the statement. In other words, the speaker is attempting to deflect the assumed response into the communicative act. Here the interplay is between difference and similarity. "Difference—the divergence of speaker-hearer meaning systems—is in

play with similarity—the convergence of speaker hearer meaning systems—in the proximal not-yet-spoken" (Baxter, 2011, p.52). The proximal not-yet-spoken link in the utterance chain commands attention during a communicative act between partners, and in some ways reflects the act of using the other to construct the self. Thus, this link is important because it speaks to how relational partners dance around both their similarities and differences in meaning systems that helps to construct their relational identity. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) suggested from a dialogic perspective that utterances are not to be thought of, as something owned by a speaker. Instead, because the act of addressivity can be applied to all utterances, they should be thought of as jointly owned, that is, by the speaker and the respondent. Thus, the proximal not-yet-spoken link is in line with what Bakhtin found to be central to dialogism, addressivity and answerability (Baxter, 2011). Relational identity is created through a communicative dance, a back and forth motion between speaker and hearer.

Lastly, the fourth link in the utterance chain is the distal not-yet-spoken, which focuses on "…the anticipated normative evaluation to be provided by a possible future listener who is not physically present when the utterance is voiced" (Baxter, 2011, p.113). The super-addressee, or someone who may hear an utterance at a future time through a third-party, is often times anticipated by the speaker influencing his/her utterance. Due to the anticipation of a super-addressee response whether they be proximal or distal, the speaker will adapt the utterance to gain approval from not only the immediate hearer, but the super-addressee as well (Baxter, 2011). With this said, culturally diverse morals and ethics make it hard to always assume what the super-addressee will consider positive, right, or socially correct. But, what can be found within

the distal not-yet-spoken link is insight into the discursive struggle between the "ideal" with and against the "real" through a speakers moral accounts and reasoning behind their utterances (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). In regards to what is morally acceptable by a super-addressee, one can turn to the centripetal-centrifugal struggle. At any given time, the super-addressee will have a centripetal dominant discourse to analyze the utterance given by the speaker. Thus, based on the dominant discourse, the speaker will be judged as either conventional and ideal, or morally wrong.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the present study, relational dialectics theory is used as a "conversational partner" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006, p.5) in order to understand the process of relating described individually by on-again/off-again partners during romantic reconciliation attempts as well as how reconciled partners manage discursive struggles during relational meaning making. Numerous communication scholars have implemented a dialectical method shedding light on the process of relating, particularly in the area of romantic partnership (e.g., Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981; Baxter, 1987. 1988; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Burgoon & Hale, 1984, 1987; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998; Conville, 1991; Rawlins, 1989, 1992; Shotter,1993, 2000). Further, several dialectical scholars have expanded their scope beyond romantic partner relating and explored the management of dialectic tensions found within each developmental stage of romantic partnerships (e.g., Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Cupach & Metts, 1986; Herrmann, 2007).

Two limitations have been identified within these prior relational studies. First, to date there is limited research examining romantic reconciliation as a distinct developmental stage within romantic relationships (Patterson & O'Hair, 1992). Secondly, at this time, to my knowledge, there has yet to be research conducted on romantic reconciliation attempts examined with relational dialectics theory as a primary guiding lens to investigate the salient communication processes in romantic partnerships formed through romantic reconciliation, nor have scholars used relational dialectics theory to explore or explain the dialectical tensions communicatively enacted or managed in romantic relationships that form through reconciliation. Thus, in this present study, I sensitize the multivocality inherent in on-again/off-again relationships using relational dialectics theory as a guiding lens and as a "conversational partner" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006, p.5) to describe romantic partner relating within this unique partnership formation by illuminating the processes through which partners of reconciled romantic relationships communicatively constitute their multivocal partnerships.

When relational dialectics theory is used as a guiding lens, the researcher is centered within the processes of communication, conceptualizing communication as a constitutive process of selves, relationships, and dialectical tensions. This allows the present study to examine the processes through which romantic partners discursively attempt to manage dialectical tensions during emerging adulthood in order for a reconciliation to occur as well as identify, if any, competing discursive forces that may arise from message strategies used to implement a new relationship based on the communicative strategies used to discontinue the prior romantic relationship. By identifying dialectical tensions that romantic partners communicatively enact and manage

as they engage in romantic reconciliation as well as engage in relational meaning making of the reconciled relationship, I seek to broaden the understanding of this process. Based upon the theoretical rationale, I pose the following research questions.

RQ1: During emerging adulthood, is there a relationship between individuals' understandings of the circumstances leading to the discontinuance of a romantic relationship (competing discursive forces) and their choices of message strategies used as a part of a first attempt to restart a romantic relationship?

RQ2: What are the competing discourses experienced by individuals during emerging adulthood as they seek romantic reconciliation attempts?

RQ3: What communication approaches are taken to manage these dialectical tensions during emerging adulthood in order for a reconciliation to occur?

RQ4: Is there a gender difference in the kinds of message strategies when planning and executing a first attempt at relational reconciliation during emerging adulthood?

RQ5: During emerging adulthood, is there a level of dependence on third-party individuals when (a) deciding to seek a reconciliation attempt (b) constructing message strategies and (c) executing reconciliation?

SUMMARY

This chapter looks to understand a more dialogic undertaking of Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter, 2011). In particular, I addressed the myriad directions in which Baxter reiterates a classic theory of interpersonal communication and moves it

forward in an innovative manner to help relational scholars illuminate the meaning making process from competing discourses. Well suited for the present study, this chapter set the foreground to further the understanding of on-off relationships implementing a dialogic lens. Next, I discuss the ways in which RDT helps to extend previous research on on-off relationships by looking to identify discursive struggles during reconciliation attempts.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

In the present study I sought to explore how on-again/off-again romantic partners discursively attempt to construct the reformation of their reconciled relationship. Additionally, I explored what, if any, dialectical tensions partners communicatively enact and manage as they engage in romantic reconciliation. The present study seeks to more deeply understand the web of meanings within reconciled relationship attempts through the communicative actions of partners. This particular study aligns with the tenants of interpretive meta-theoretical discourse (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). This method was implemented in contrast to the "traditional stronghold of quantitative and postpositivist research" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p.21) within interpersonal communication research. The interpretive paradigm has been slow to accommodate relational research and as such has inhibited scholars from identifying potential paradigmatic shifts within relationship research. This method is implemented in the current study to examine a traditional research topic in an innovative manner.

The interpretive paradigm focuses on questions of meaning and interprets the answers through the participants' viewpoint, yet also maintains the researchers' personal interpretation (Potter, 1996). The primary tenets of interpretivism is to describe shared experiences, acknowledge the potential for multiple realities, accept and portray human action as purposive, and describe the complexities of social life (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). The current study investigates how on-off partners discuss their experiences and struggles

during romantic reconciliation attempts. Centered within the current research study was how partners created meaning through discursive interplays. Additionally, it was decided that detailed, nuanced data (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) would help to paint a more descriptive picture of on-off relationship experiences than currently exists in this area of relational research.

This study utilized a qualitative methods approach for data collection. Baxter and Babbie (2004) suggested, "Often, relationship partners do not welcome the prospect of being "shadowed" by a third-party participant-observer as they conduct their private business of relating" (p.326). It can be implied from this statement that interviewing is a less invasive technique to "gain some understanding of how relationships are initiated, developed, sustained, and ended" (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p.326). Interestingly, although not to any surprise, the term reconciliation is not associated or listed as a specific stage of relating. Thus, as described below, I used semi-structured interviewing as a qualitative method of data collection in order to better understand the process of reconciliation that is experienced in some relational circumstances.

Semi-Structured Interviewing

Semi-structured interviewing, a qualitative method of data collection has been regarded as "one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p.361). For the present study, I used semi-structured interviewing as a method to collect data from participants. Mason (2002) regarded this method as a touchstone of qualitative research allowing researchers to gain in-depth understanding of participants' experiences at a more

approachable level, yet still remain in control of the interview. A semi-structured interviewing format allowed for commonality of questioning among all participants, yet permitted flexibility to adjust questions as discussions progressed in unexpected directions.

The semi-structured interview guide for this study consisted mainly of open-ended questions. Questions were designed to elicit previously identified on-off characteristics. These included characteristics for renewals (Dailey, Jin, *et* al., 2011; Dailey, Middleton, *et* al., 2011; Dailey, Pfiester, *et* al., 2009), initiating transitions (Dailey, Rossetto, *et* al., 2012; Dailey, McCracken, *et* al., 2012; Patterson & O'Hair, 1992), individual interpretations of the break-up (Patterson & O'Hair, 1992), management of relational transitions (Dailey, Rossetto, *et* al., 2012), redefining a reconciled relationship (Foley & Frasser, 1998; Metts, Cupach, & Bejlovec, 1989), individual understanding of a post-dissolution relationship (Busboom, Collins, Givertz, & Levin, 2001; Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003; Lannutti & Cameron, 2003), and third party mediation (Dailey, Jin, *et* al., 2011; Dailey, Rossetto, *et* al., 2009; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). Further, closed-ended questions were used to identify structural features, such as number of renewals, length of each break-up, length of post-dissolution relationship, and length of entire relationship (Dailey, Middleton, *et* al., 2011). The semi-structured interview probe employed for the present study appears in Appendix A.

PARTICIPANTS

Since emerging adults were the focus of the current study, participant eligibility was defined as those who were between the ages of 18 and 29. This particular period in

the life course was used because prior research suggests securing a stable, committed relationship is a key developmental task during this time (Arnett, 2000). Further, this study was solely interested in those emerging adults currently involved in, or previously involved in a non-marital on-again/off-again relationship. Less is known about non-marital cyclical relationships, and as a result gaining a more descriptive understanding is important. Moreover, non-martial relationships are not governed by "default exit rules" (e.g. legal divorce or separation) and have less structural commitments (Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013, p.171). This calls into question a need to understand why young individuals would continue to reenter a relationship despite no legal or structural ties. An on-again/off-again relationship in this study followed the definition set forth by Dailey and colleagues as a committed, romantic partnership that incurred a termination and then a recommitment, at least once. Thus, the first criteria put forth to recruit participants was their age and relationship status.

A second selection criterion was that on-off emerging adults must have been, or currently be in a cyclical, heterosexual relationship. The current research looked to identify, if any, gender differences between the kinds of message strategies used when planning and executing a first attempt at relational reconciliation. Thus, men and women were both recruited. While it is important to understand processes of romantic reconciliation experienced by individuals of various relational formations including same-sex relationships, I was able to better center my focus on this relational phenomenon by examining one particular subset of relational partners. Further, by interviewing only heterosexual partners, I was able to focus on how partners

communicatively engage in romantic reconciliation that primarily addresses their relational struggles rather than differences resulting from same-sex relationships.

Lastly, as previously stated, individuals did not need to be currently involved in an on-off relationship at the time of their interview. While it was certainly expected that the participants were willing and able to recall these past relationships, individuals were not excluded because of this. However, participants not currently in an on-off relationship were scanned and eliminated if their on-off relationship was more than two years prior to the interview. This was necessary to ensure that individuals were talking about on-off relationships that were occurring during emerging adulthood and not a relationship that had occurred during late adolescence as well as to make sure participants were able to accurately remember relationship details.

Participant Recruitment

The Old Dominion University, College of Arts and Letters,' Institutional Review Board approved the study (as exempt from full IRB review) before participant recruitment began (October 1, 2013; 13-007). Participants were recruited using several approaches. First, I announced my study in various communication courses at a large Mid-Atlantic university. Second, I posted flyers of my study around the campus of the aforementioned university. Third, I used network sampling, a process that involves asking others I know to pass on information about the study. Fourth, in an attempt to sample a broader population, the information was disseminated through the online ad website Craigslist. Prior research has acknowledged that findings were not generalizable to the general emerging adult population because of their limited use in only college

students (Dailey, Pfiester, *et* al., 2009, Study 1). The most recent statistics released by the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) showed that 39.9% of emerging adults between the ages of 20 and 24 were enrolled in higher education, and a mere 14.8% of emerging adults between the ages of 25-29 were enrolled in higher education. Thus, a broader representation of the emerging adult population has previously been overlooked. Lastly, I used snowball sampling, a process that involves asking individuals I interviewed to pass on the information to others they know who may meet the participation criteria and be interested in participating.

Participant Information

In all, 22 participants currently in or recently in an on-off romantic relationship were solicited and interviewed for this thesis. A little more than half the sample was female (n=12, 54.5%), and participants averaged 22 years of age (M=22.09, SD=2.689, range= 19-27). At the beginning of interviews, participants were asked to indicate if they were reporting on a past or current relationship to ensure that all subjects had been in a romantic relationship, deeming them as an eligible participant. In this process a third category emerged, which was those participants reporting they were not currently together, but they did not consider the relationship to be fully "terminated" as they were currently in the process of working towards "reconciliation." Thus, 36.4% of participants (n=8) identified their relational status as current, or in a successful, recommitted romantic relationship, 45.5% of participants (n=10) reported on a past, unsuccessful reconciliation attempt, and 18.2% (n=4) of participants reported that they were currently working towards reconciliation with their partners. Participants were asked to indicate the number

of cycles their on-off relationship had experienced, which is represented in Table 1. The

average duration of romantic relationships (i.e., time span from initiation to breakup, or,

if current, date of interview) was 35.95 months (SD=15.936, Mdn=12 months) and

ranged from 14 to 70 months.

Table 1. *Frequency and percentage of participant cycles in on-off relationships*

Cycles	Frequency	Percentage
C1	10	45.5%
C2	2	9.1%
C3	1	4.5%
C4	3	13.6%
C5	0	0%
>C6	6	27.3%
	N=22	100.0%

Finally, participants were also asked to report on their current occupational status.

Of the sample, 40.9% (n=9) of participants were currently enrolled undergraduate

students, 13.6% (n=3) of participants were currently enrolled graduate students, 36. 4%

(n=8) of participants were employed full-time, and 9.1% (n=2) of participants had

completed college but were currently unemployed. Thus, this sample portrays a broader

spectrum of emergent adults compared to prior studies.

Interview Procedures

As the purpose of the present study was to understand the discursive struggles romantic partners encounter during reconciliation attempts, one on one, face to face, semi-structured interviews were conducted. In order to gain as much insight as possible from each participant during the one time, sit down interview I followed Spradley's (1979) rapport process. He argued that building rapport with participants must be made a priority in order to receive a free flow of information.

To begin, I explained the research process to participants to help reduce participant anxiety. Spradley (1979) suggested that the more informed the participant is in regards to interview expectations, the more comfortable they will feel during the process. Thus, the interview began with an overview of the current study, and what I was looking to understand. Further, I attempted to personalize the interview when explicating the overview to participants' by individualizing the process. I informed participants that I was interested in learning about their communicative processes during reconciliation attempts. Each participant was asked to read through a participant notification form and allowed to ask any questions they had about the current research or the interview. Participants were verbally informed of the interview procedures, and were asked to verbally give their consent to be audio recorded. In an effort to maintain the privacy of participant's, verbal consent was used as opposed to a participant waiver. I informed the participants that interviews were to last approximately 45 minutes, and that if at any point they were uncomfortable and wished to skip a question they could do so. The participant notification form used in data collection appears in Appendix B.

Prior to beginning the audio-recorded interview, each participant completed demographic questions, (e.g., age, race, gender, school/occupation) as well as questions about their relational history (e.g., status of the relationship being discussed, number of times the relationship cycled, the total length of the relationship, how they defined on/off). This information allowed for a descriptive summary of the sample and provided information to frame each interview. I provided additional information to participants about the interview questions. I informed participants that I was gathering demographic information to summarize the overall sample and that the interview would be centered on their communicative processes during reconciliation.

Once the participant went through the notification form and I gained their approval to record the interview, I asked all participants to tell me their stories in relation to how they met their partner and how the relationship escalated. The opening question served as a stepping-stone to understanding their relational history in a narrative form. This nondirective, tour question (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) allowed participants to communicatively immerse themselves in their experiences, and in a sense, allowed respondents to warm up before discussing more specific and intimate relational questions. Of further value, this opening question allowed participants to discuss in their own terms, the beginning, the end, as well as what they considered to be important turning points and events during their relationship. In return, I was able to better frame each interview.

After the initial question, the remainder of the interview followed the semi-structured protocol. Flexibility in terms of how questions were ordered throughout the interview tended to vary based on the participants' responses. Thus, the direction each interview took was very much determined by the participant responses. The interviews

included discussions about how relationships progressed, factors which led to relational termination, conversations that occurred during post-dissolution relationships, how individuals made sense of these relationships, how their relationships have transformed as a result of communication during post-dissolution relationships, and how external networks affected their romantic relationships.

Several forms of questions were asked in the interview. The interview protocol included experience questions (e.g., "Do you recall experiencing conflicting emotions?"), example questions (e.g., "Did you express any fears or apprehensions, such as problems from the past that may affect reconciliation?"), sensitive questions (e.g., "Did you feel a sense of grief or loss?"), compare-contrast questions (e.g., "Was there a difference between how your friends and family felt versus your partners, and did this have an effect on the reconciliation process?"), devil's-advocate questions (e.g., "What do you say to those that disagree with your relational choices?"), vernacular elicitation (i.e., Paraphrasing a participants' response where a more detailed response was warranted), probes (e.g.," Can you explain what you mean by indirect?") and, loose-end questions (e.g., "I'd like to ask you about something you said earlier..."). Lastly, I asked all participants if they felt there was anything I had missed or anything they would like to clarify before ending the interview. Once the interview ended, each participant was thanked for their time and received their ten dollar Starbucks gift card as compensation.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Each interview was audio recorded using two devices, a digital Philips Dictation Memo recorder and HRRECORDER, a digital recording application on my iPad. Two

separate devices were used during each interview in case one method failed and a backup was needed. Notes were also taken throughout the interview for clarification to particular statements, notable hand gestures, and expressive facial gestures. After each interview was completed, the audio recording was uploaded to my personal computer. The iPad recordings were not uploaded to a computer, but stored on the device in a password-protected file folder. Interviews were then transcribed using Philips SpeechExec ProTranscribe transcription software and foot pedal. I transcribed all interviews in order to begin immersing myself into the data; a technique Baxter (2011) considered an important first step in analyzing data.

Contrapuntal Analysis

Articulated by Baxter (2011), contrapuntal analysis is a methodological companion to relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). A form of interpretive, thematic analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, 2011; Manning & Kunkel, 2014), contrapuntal analysis places systems of meaning as semantic categories working as a discourse analysis which allows researchers to examine language use as a form of meaning-making (Baxter, 2011). In this way contrapuntal analysis is a unique discourse analysis that seeks to understand how relational meaning is constructed through competing discourses. Contrapuntal analysis differs from a discourse analysis as the focus is not only to uncover the multiple discursive meanings created through communication, but also highlight how discourses work against or with each other to form various meanings within romantic partner dialogue. Thus, the central aim is to

uncover the multiple, diverse interplays that arise during communication. This method was used in the current study to analyze collected data.

Contrapuntal analysis follows three steps: identifying a text, identifying competing discourses, and identifying the interplay of discourses (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Because I was interested in better understanding how systems of meaning change over time in romantic relationships, I focused on the proximal already spoken link in the utterance chain allowing participants' to discuss how the communicative past is put into play with the communicative present. In order to analyze this kind of data, interviews were conducted and the transcriptions were identified and labeled as the text. Next, the general guiding question for contrapuntal analysis, "What are the competing discourses in the text and how is meaning constructed through interplay?" (Baxter, 2011, p.152) was considered during the first three readings of the transcribed data as I became acquainted with, and more familiar with the text.

The second step of contrapuntal analysis involves identifying competing discourses within the previously identified text. Specifically, Baxter (2011) stated a contrapuntal analysis is interested in two particular forms of meaning making, including those discourses that are implicated in individual identity (e.g., Who am I in this relationship?, Who are you in this relationship?) and discourses that are implicated in relationship identity (e.g., Who are we?, What is our relationship?). More, Baxter claimed that systems of meaning are either sociocultural or interpersonal by nature and can be identified by their communicative place in the utterance chain. That is, sociocultural discourses are emphasized in the distal already-spoken and the distal not-yet-spoken. Proximal already-spoken and proximal not-yet-spoken contain interpersonal

discourses, where partner(s) craft systems of meaning through their unique relational history.

In order to identify competing discourses, Baxter (2011) suggests the researcher rely on an interpretive method. Thus, in the present study a thematic analysis was conducted. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, one that involves six steps. Throughout, I also used the aid of a second coder (thesis advisor) to ensure that the steps where being applied systematically and reliably.

Step one involves becoming familiar with the text. To do so, I transcribed the interview tapes myself, and then read through each of the transcribed interviews in their entirety. After becoming familiar with the data, the second step of thematic analysis is initial coding. During this step, I coded the first text and developed an initial coding scheme with various coding categories identified from textual segments. I then proceeded to code the remaining texts. I continued to code textual segments into coding categories in a back and forth manner, refining and revising the coding categories until no new coding categories emerged.

Third, the codes were used to generate themes creating a larger system of meaning. This step, which is similar to step two, was an iterative practice. Here, codes were combined with similar codes to create various themes. Thus, this step moves the researcher away from identifying initial codes by answering an overarching, general question and instead allows the researcher to combine multiple codes that ultimately creates various themes working to answer specific research questions. Step four of the thematic analysis requires the researcher to review all of the themes that were created in step three. During this step, I employed the help of both my thesis advisor and another

graduate student to run a check to make sure the themes that were created during steps two and three made sense. After consulting with both member checkers, adjustments to the themes and codes were made accordingly.

Fifth, I determined the final theme names to be used within the study as well as worked to appropriately define each theme. Following Braun and Clark's (2006) recommendation, I also used this step to employ additional validity checks. During this step, I asked three participants to read through a particular portion of the data analysis. Here, participants looked to see if they felt their voice and experience could be heard in the findings. Another form used to check validity was to use constant comparison introduced in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). When combing through the data to formulate and finalize theme names, I used this iterative process to continuously check and recheck categories allowing for more valid categories and codes to emerge in the data analysis process. Lastly, I employed triangulation by asking three nonparticipants to act as data analysts to code two transcripts independently of as well as with myself to achieve intercoder reliability.

Lastly, step six of a thematic analysis requires the researcher to find exemplars throughout the text. During this step, I pulled various examples that supported and concretely illuminated the themes and discourses identified in prior steps. Upon completion of the thematic analysis, discourses at play in the text had been identified. The second part of step two in contrapuntal analysis requires the researcher to identify competing discourses from the previously identified discourses at play. It is at this stage that contrapuntal analysis departs from a standard thematic analysis and instills an analytic process to supplement further findings, as described below (Baxter, 2011).

At this stage, Baxter (2011) stresses that discourses should compete based on the natives' point of view. When locating competing discourses within the text, Baxter found that discourses might be negating, countering, or entertaining. Relying on Martin and White's (2005) understanding of the aforementioned engagement devices, I worked through the text to identify where participants' discursive positions were competing. Negating is a form of disclaiming which rejects or renders a discourse irrelevant. Countering, another form of disclaiming occurs when an expected discourse is replaced by an alternative discursive position. Lastly, entertaining suggests that a particular discourse is but one of many discourse positions. Thus, entertaining does not reject or displace a discourse, but instead acknowledges there may be alternative stances. These markers capture the centripetal-centrifugal struggle, and are identified by their various lexical markers. At this point, I had identified the numerous competing discourses of the text and moved on to the final stage of contrapuntal analysis.

The last stage of contrapuntal analysis requires the researcher to dig deeper and identify where and how the previously located competing discourses interpenetrate. This is the stage that the dialogic researcher is most interested in as it is in these occasions when "…new meanings are wrought from existing systems of meaning—occasions of transformation through hybrids or aesthetic moments" (Baxter, 2011, p.150). Baxter (2011) notes that the interplay of discourses will indicate one of two discursive practices: dialogically contractive discursive practices (i.e., discourses that are muffled or silenced) and dialogically expansive discursive practices (i.e., discourses that are encouraged or amplified). Moreover, this supports Baxter's claim that competing discourses are rarely on equal footing during the meaning making process, which is marker by the centripetal-

centrifugal positioning of discourses. This becomes apparent when a speaker privileges a particular meaning during talk, and thus will discursively marginalize other meanings that may exist. Because of this, Baxter finds that the centering of some discourses and the muffling of other discourses constitutes a form of power. The discourses that a speaker regards as legitimate, normal, or natural are more often than not centered within a speakers discourse, and the alternative discourses that the speaker silences or marginalizes tend to be those that are easily dismissed, nonnormative, or somehow deviant. Baxter urges the dialogic researcher to closely examine how and when this discursive power dynamic comes into play within a given text.

Using the guidelines set up by Baxter (2011), a contrapuntal analysis uncovers the processes through which individuals produce new discursive viewpoints during the communicative meaning making process. In the following chapter, I address the latter two steps of contrapuntal analysis in more detail, illustrating how the analysis was conducted and put to use in the present study to understand emergent adults' meaning making processes during on-again/off-again relationships.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

GENERATING INITIAL CODING CATEGORIES AND THEMES

This chapter reviews the findings of the contrapuntal analysis of romantic partner talk among emerging adults intended to uncover discursive constructions of "romantic reconciliation" within on-again/off-again relationships that offer insight into meanings of the terms "on" and "off." Data analyses are based on 312 pages of single-spaced interview transcripts. Further, the contrapuntal analysis was conducted according to the guidelines provided by Baxter (2011) which were also detailed in Chapter 3 of this thesis. The purpose of its use in this thesis was to highlight and give detailed insights into the ways which discourses compete and engage to create meaning between and for romantic partners during romantic reconciliation. Relational communication participants can construct many meanings about many topics, but in particular I was solely interested in understanding individual/partner identity (i.e., "Who am I in this relationship"? And, "Who are you?) and relational identity (i.e., "Who are 'we' in this relationship"? "Who am I to you, and who are you to me?" "What is our relationship?").

Per Baxter's (2011) guidelines, the first step taken in a contrapuntal analysis of the data was reading it numerous times in order to become familiar with the data set. In doing so, textual segments were highlighted across all participants for each question to paint an illustration of what was happening during the particular period or situation. From these textual segments, I began to distinguish various emergent categories to shape the experiences of "on-again/off-again" partners. Baxter suggests researchers implement and

begin with an overarching, broad analytic question which allows for an initial deductive, rather than inductive understanding of the textual segments. Thus, the first strategic reading was intended to answer the question: What is being said by the participants about the meaning of "on-again/off-again" relationships? From this initial analysis the following list of categories were derived (in alphabetical order):

"On-Off" relationships are:

- Ambiguous

- In a constant past-present struggle

- Socially embedded

- Transitional

- Uncertain

- Unfinalizable

From these categories, the primary dialectical tensions were noted across three kinds of participant groups: (a) Relationship Over (relationship was "On" but now is "Off"), (b) Relationship Current (the relationship was "Off" but is now "On"), and (c) Relationship on a "Break" (i.e., relationship was "On," but is now "Off" and on 'Hold") and are described through these highlighted tensions. In general, participants noted that "on-off" relationships were constantly in flux, unhealthy, uncertain, and lacked stability. Juxtaposed, participants noted that during a relational turning point (that is, the transition from a "break" to "reconciliation") the relationship provided partners with growth, certainty, relational production, openness, and high levels of integration and initiation.

The second strategic reading of the textual data was answering the question of the relational history of the participants in "on-off" relationships. I was interested in

understanding how the relationship began, and specifically, how participants identified themselves in relation to their partner and the relationship at time the relationship began. Exploring the initial coming together stage in on-off relationships (considered to be a distal influence) set the foreground to later explore the differences, if any, between the initial and the re-coming together stage which is unique to on-off relationships. I am also aware that these participants are reporting their memories of how things began, which, for some, may be biased given the current state of the relationship. However, it is still useful to use their accounts (memory data) as I am after understanding how they understand meanings of "on/off" (of which memory plays a role). To begin, I have highlighted the major findings for the initial coming together stage.

Initial Accounts of "Coming Together"

- First memory of meeting partner was through mutual friends

- Due to competing demands of time and energy (e.g., friends, family, school, work), participants were not looking to begin a relationship when they met their partner

- Specific to participants that are currently with their partners, participants reported that they were hesitant to forge a "quick connection" and instead found themselves getting to know the partner well before becoming "official"

- Participants that were unsuccessful after the reconciliation attempt reported that they were not interested in having a relationship at the time when they met their past partner

- Few participants mentioned that they were currently dating someone else when introduced to the new partner however, many participants claimed they had recently ended a past relationship just prior to meeting the new partner

- All participants noted that despite the fruition of an unexpected relationship, their partners' brought novelty and a new sense of stability into their daily routines which they described in positive terms

- Unsuccessful participants claimed they became extremely close quickly, but described this process as "not good" or "unhealthy"

- Successful participants said they formed an emotional bond quickly, but made a conscious decision to take the relationship slowly

- All participants, successful or not, claimed they were not expecting to feel as strong as they did about their partners during the initial coming together phase

From this reading, several competing discourses emerged illuminating commonalities among individual discourse during the initial phase of "coming together". The discourse of autonomy-connection was referred to most frequently. Participants often stated not expecting or wanting a relationship when they met their future partners' (autonomy), yet described the unexpected formation as pleasant, emotionally satisfying, and novel (connection). However, during this initial coming together phase several participants noted that the connection they felt from the unexpected relationship escalated too quickly. In doing so, individuals cited potential relational problems stemming from this connection such as an imbalance between personal time with friends or family compared to the amount of time spent with their romantic partner. Thus, the extremities of both autonomy-connection were simultaneously discussed both positively and negatively, but

depended on the timing in the relationship. The shift in centripetal-centrifugal power discussed by participants was viewed more positively when both partners were perceived to equally engage and escalate the relationship. However, when one partner felt as though they were smothered, and ultimately denied their autonomous connections outside the relationship, a more negative undertone could be heard.

The third strategic reading of the textual data was interested in the "coming apart" narratives including: the circumstances leading up to the relationship ending, how the relationship ended, and how each partner knew the relationship was over. I was interested in the communication patterns and behaviors, specifically the effectiveness of those conversations, used by participants (or their partners) to ensure that the partner (or the participant) knew the relationship would not continue. Due to the stark differences found between the groups of participants the major findings are highlighted below by relationship status.

Break-Up Accounts: Relationship Current

- A majority of participants noted that the break-up was mutual (where mutual was defined as a joint decision between partners to terminate an existing relationship)

- A mutual break was usually initiated by one partner expressing a problem, or a pattern of problems where both partners agreed on the issues presented, and further, that the issues could simply not be solved by staying together

- Many of the problems noted by participants as "serious" were more individual issues rather than partnership issues (e.g., one partner dependent on other for happiness)

- Fighting over relational issues were usually ranked lower on the list of reasons as to why the relationship was ending

- Participants stated that breaks were needed in order to experience a new chapter, or milestone in their life (e.g., experiencing college life autonomously)

- Break-up did not occur in a heat-of-the-moment decision because of an argument, but rather were planned. This differed from arguments that had previously occurred where one or both partners would yell "this is over", but never actually end the relationship

- All participants claimed that the break-up was very direct, in that both partners were well aware that this was the end

- However, despite the "directness" all participants claimed that they remained in some form of contact during all/or part of the break-up

- All participants noted that they view a "break" and "break-up" as two very different circumstances

Break-Up Accounts: Relationship on Break

- Many participants claimed a "significant" incident occurred which caused the relationship to end

- Participants claimed that despite the incident, they had been feeling the need for a break from their partner for quite some time

- All participants claim that the break(s) were initiated very indirectly, and often times were misleading

- Participants that were broken up with stated they only knew the relationship was over because of their partners' actions, not because they had communicated about the break. Actions included breaking up through social media, hanging out and flirting with other women/men in front of their partner, stopped texting/calling, and ignored the other if they saw their partner in public

- Participants claimed they were "forced" to break from their partners because they could tell the other partner was no longer interested, but didn't want to be labeled as the "bad guy"

- All participants stated that despite these indirect actions, they knew that the relationship was on hold and believed they would get back together eventually

- Uncertainty was created for these participants because contact was never fully ended. Partners would continue to hang out together on a frequent basis, talk and text throughout the day, and not date others. Despite this, participants still claimed they were "broken up", "on a break", and "single"

- Many found that the reason a break was necessary was due to a lack of communication in regards to relationship problems

- Participants felt as though their significant others were not making enough time for them and thus they were unable to build a strong relationship

- Lack of trust was also significantly noted by participants as a reason for a break

Break-Up Accounts: Relationship Over

- Participants noted that they slowly became distant while still dating

- A majority of participants claimed in spite of a direct break, one partner still did not honor the others desire to be single

- Majority of participants stated that the break up was due to each partner being at a different point in their life course

- Participants claimed that as the number of cycles accumulated, the more drastic measures they had to take in order to stop all communication (i.e., blocking phone numbers, email accounts, social media)

- Many participants claimed they had not been dating long before a significant argument, and that was a contributing factor to ending things

- Partners wanted different things from the current relationship

- Partners couldn't come to agreement on basic values (e.g., work-family balance)

- Participants were also found to use indirect means to end a relationship through actions, rather than communication (i.e., heated argument, not end things, and then move out while their significant partner was not home)

- Friends and/or family did not agree with the relationship, causing problems between partners

- Participants claimed that their significant other was "too attached" or "too invested" in the relationship and that things needed to slow down

This reading helped to illuminate several binary discourses primarily associated with relational termination. One discourse in particular that was heard across all participant interviews despite relational status was certainty-ambiguity. This on-going tension was directly tied to the relational disengagement strategy implemented and used by disengagers to terminate a relationship. Further, indirect versus direct was a sub tension

manifested from the aforementioned binary discourse which was also prevalent across participant discourse when discussing relational disengagement. Specifically, the more direct a disengagee perceived the relational disengagement strategy; the less participants discussed the discourse of ambiguity surrounding their relational status.

However, a less direct disengagement strategy, ultimately casting greater uncertainty regarding partner status did not contribute to higher numbers of successful relational reconciliation. On the contrary, the data suggested those partners who experienced a greater degree of certainty through directly communicated disengagement strategies regarding the status of the relationship as "terminated" were more likely to successfully reconcile. The ambiguity which surrounded participant discourse due to an indirect disengagement suggested that although these relationships reconciled, they were less likely to stay in a romantic relationship. Furthermore, the data suggested ambiguously defined relationships cycled more times due to unresolved tensions and muckraking from prior relational disengagements.

The fourth strategic reading was interested in depicting dialogical tensions during the beginning stages of the reconciliation phase. This reading was twofold in that it brings full circle the initial coming together phase with the re-coming together phase by identifying differences between the way partners went about restarting communication. Further, this reading was interested in whether or not the way in which the prior relationship was ended affected communication patterns between partners during reconciliation attempts. This reading was difficult to separate from the prior ones given that many of the discursive struggles and associated meanings were conceptually woven. Key findings of the latter portion of this question are highlighted first, with the former

key findings discussed second. Because there were significant differences identified in participant narratives, the findings detailed below are reported by relational status.

Restarting Communication: Relationship Current

- Partners focused on fixing the problems associated with the break-up

- Those partners that were broken up with reported that they felt a strong need to fix those habits before restarting communication in order to accommodate the reconciliation process

- Because certain issues were unchangeable (i.e., school, distance), participants stated they were hesitant to reconcile because underlying problems could not be immediately worked on or improved, but participants stated this forced partners to discuss the problem at hand and come up with a solution

- Participants that reported a mutual break due to individual issues felt the breakup improved the relationship and did not feel as though the way the relationship ended affected how they went about reconciliation

- Participants that reported direct breakups said it did not affect how they went about beginning communication, but instead paved a smoother transition

Restarting Communication: Relationship Taking a Break

- Participants reported communication was not affected because they viewed the time apart as a "break" not a "break-up"

- Those partners who cited more than one breakup felt as though the second break was due to the same problems as the first, thus they reported being more hesitant to give the other another chance because nothing was changing

- Higher cycling partners reported being more skeptical to the way in which they went about restarting communication and felt as though they could no longer just "let things go" or "agree to disagree". Instead, participants cited the need for actually discussions and solutions before recommitment could happen

- Participants often reported less direct methods of breaking up and cited this caused more uncertainty when contemplating renewal

- Those reporting indirect breakups also reported less direct communication when beginning reconciliation

- Participants with indirect breakups reported much uncertainty regarding the status of their relationships

- Uncertainty caused most participants to hold onto grudges, which ultimately affected the way communication began

Restarting Communication: Relationship Over

- Participants recognized that certain problems couldn't be changed so they attempted to change the way they treated their partners when attempting to restart communication

- Participants that reported several cycles also reported growing further apart, and caring less about how they restarted communication

- Participants reported loss of trust as a major factor that changed the way they went about initiating communication

- Participants reported getting back together due to convenience and because of this factor, did not change the way they initiated communication

- Participants claimed they viewed their partners differently after the initial break, and did not see them as the same person when beginning communication

- When a specific problem continued to resurface between partners during the break, this only reinforced that the breakup was the right move and caused participants to alter the way they communicated when initiating contact

The following portion highlights the main tensions found between partners when beginning reconciliation with their significant others.

Tensions: Relationship Current

- What happened during the breaks made positive communication difficult

- After initial conversation began, partners often found themselves communicating about problems or incidents that occurred during the break than actually working out issues that caused the break

- Participants whom reported ending a relationship due to personal issues that needed to be solved individually said it was more difficult to restart communication when their partners reached out to them

- All participants found that during the beginning of the reconciliation phase they felt as though they were able to be more honest and open with their significant other, even more so than when first initiating the relationship

- Conversation regarding relational problems often took a backseat until partners went through an initial time period of "rekindling" their relationship

- After talking about problems and adapting specific solutions, all participants reported having a "trial period" before becoming official again

Tensions: Relationship Taking a Break

- Although participants reported talking about prior relational problems, they reported these problems were never fully resolved. However, each noted it was an opportunity to put their feelings out on the table

- Participants reported it was hard to be around their partners and only harp on past problems, so usually let the issues go

- Because many participants reported an "indirect break", many participants claimed they were never really certain of their relational status and communication never really stopped ultimately pushing the other partner away. Only when one partner finally stopped all communication would the other attempt to change their behaviors and then restart communication

- Participants that reported restarting a relationship out of convenience reported not discussing prior problems, and just hoping back into the relationship

- Many participants claimed they missed the emotional connection, and because of this avoided all "hard" conversations, ultimately letting prior problems go

Tensions: Relationship is Over

- Communication never really stopped, but participants reported it wasn't "real talk" but arguing

- Participants stated partners would often show up unannounced, offering apologies, and acting as though they were first dating again

- Participants claimed that often times the other partner was too pushy in trying to fix problems immediately after breakup, which led to the participant giving in

- Hard to imagine not being with the other partner, so gave them another chance

- Majority of participants reported partners (as well as participants) would get jealous over another's action during the break so they would attempt to fix things

- Have a friend or family member initiate conversation

- Not acknowledge any of the problems that had happen in the past, and instead would simply start talking again as though nothing had occurred

- Text and/or call to start communication on a holiday, hoping to not have to deal with any of the prior issues

This final reading provided a more complete view of the reconciliation process, highlighting the complex discourses each participant encountered and subsequently managed in order to reinitiate communication and allow the process of reconciliation to begin. While the focus of this study was not to define successful versus unsuccessful strategies in regards to managing relational tensions during reconciliation, the data does suggest from the differences highlighted above between currently successfully versus unsuccessful relational reconciliation accounts that the relational tension production versus reproduction is an important tension to focus on during initial communication.

In order to better understand the reconciliation process of participants, major themes are discussed below highlighting various tensions that emerged during the contrapuntal analysis. The themes discussed below incorporate the numerous discursive struggles that were prevalent among all participants, thus illuminating the process of romantic reconciliation among emerging adults.

Table 2. *Defining themes and definitions of on-again/off-again relationships*

Themes	Definitions
Relationship as ambiguous	This theme combines discourses associated with talking about the uncertainty of the relationship status, the on-going cyclical pattern, and the threatening of ones' relationship identity.
Relationship as normal versus relationship as atypical	This theme combines discourses associated with how individuals communicate their relationship with others, as well as how they define the relationship internally.
Relationship as bonding versus relationship as differentiating	This theme captures the discourses related to partners coming together and coming apart. Specifically, it highlights the dialogical tensions between working towards a stable, emotional connection and losing autonomy, and beginning to think independently.
Relationship transition as production versus relationship transition as reproduction	This theme ameliorates the discourses surrounding partners' reconciliation approach to either produce a new relational identity, acknowledging an "unfinalizable" process or focus on maintaining the relational status quo.
Relationship as expressive versus relationship as nonexpressive	This theme highlights the tensions related to the (un)willingness of partners to openly communicate during relational transitions regarding the self-interests versus others' interests struggle.
Relationship as unexpected happening versus relationship as choice	This theme combines the discourses during the initial stage of coming together and the (re)coming together during reconciliation.
Relationship as public versus relationship as private	This theme examines the discourses surrounding third party participation and how addresstivity is affected by superaddressees.
Relationship as romanticism versus relationship as individualism	This theme combines discourses associated with love as a totalizing experience where partners are open versus unwelcomed commitments of decreased or constrained individualism
Relationship identity as dyadic segregation versus relationship identity as socially embedded	This theme examines the expected normative evaluation of relational partners set by social influences and the effect it has on how partners transition.
Relationship transition as direct versus relationship transition as indirect	This theme combines discourses surrounding how break-ups were executed and the effects that direct/indirect transitions had on reconciliation attempts.
Relationship as trusting versus relationship as distrusting	This theme examines how participants elucidated discourses of (mis)trust during reconciliation attempts.

LOCATING EXEMPLARS

According to Baxter (2011), discourses are systems of meaning. To capture the

essence of various on-again/off-again themes, examples within the textual discourse were

identified to give meaning to individual identity (who am I and who are others in this

relationship) and relational identity (who are we and how do we compare to others).

Each theme represents a site of struggle that characterized the communication of

participants, as viewed through the lens of relational dialectics theory. The exemplars of

the systems of meaning under investigation in regards to on-off relationships are made

more tangible through the inclusion of detailed examples that represent possible answers

to the posed research questions below. For organizational purposes, only textual

segments representing possible answers to the posed research questions are reported in

order to provide the reader with examples. A more thorough discussion of the

implications uncovered from the examples is discussed in the final chapter.

> *RQ1: During emerging adulthood, is there a relationship between individuals'*
>
> *understandings of the circumstances leading to the discontinuance of a*
>
> *romantic relationship (competing discursive forces) and their choices of*
>
> *message strategies used as a part of a first attempt to restart a romantic*
>
> *relationship?*

Exemplars of categories of individuals' responses that connect their thoughts concerning

the circumstance of the discontinuance of the relationship to their message strategies that

address RQ1 follow below.

<u>Relationship transition as direct versus relationship transition as indirect</u>

- "I mentioned before how he had given me a promise ring so you would think things were going well, but clearly not. So, it was a real eye-opener for me. I was ready to commit, and then a week later he up and starts throwing around the idea of a break and before we had really talked about anything, he just stopped taking my calls. About a month later he started coming back around, asking for forgiveness. I would have been more inclined to give him, you know, a real chance without questioning him, but the way he just left without reasoning... it wasn't that easy." (Interview, 1)

- "Umm, no. Well, I mean, maybe. I don't really know. I mean, we kinda... when we reconciled the relationship, it was a mutual thing. We broke up because of distance, and we both knew we didn't want that whole long distance thing. So, I mean, like he came back for the holidays and I was just like, you know, I saw that he still had feelings for me, and I still had feelings for him and that's why we decided to give it one more try." (Interview, 14).

- "The problems we had that contributed to the breakup, those issues weren't going away. So, we were really forced to sit down and talk about what and how we were going to deal with them. I can't help the distance." (Interview, 22)

- "It did. When we started talking again, I couldn't help myself. I would slip in sly comments about her, and be like oh are you still talking to her or is she still Facebook stalking you. Stuff like that. It made him really angry, but I couldn't trust him and I was just so hurt. It would have been a hell of a lot

more easy if he had just been upfront with me from the start. But no, he had to sneak behind my back and lie, and you know, when I find out he's hanging with another girl... from that girl, I mean, anyone with a brain would question the relationship." (Interview, 11)

Relationship as ambiguous

- "The weird thing I guess was the whole, ok so we're not dating and we are broken up, but like we never stopped talking. We really never even stopped hanging out. So, how am I supposed to differentiate, or I mean I guess transition what we have or what we're doing, to like, a conversation about us getting back together. I mean, I didn't even know if we really were broken up or not, we never really had a conversation about it." (Interview, 20)

- "I felt really torn because in a way I felt really bad for her. I love her so much and I know I really hurt her and really messed things up, but she wasn't perfect either. Her actions, I mean we were always hot and cold. I never knew if we were together or apart, you can't just yell that we're done and then say, oh no we weren't, and now you have messed everything up by cheating on me. She said we were on a break, and then she said we weren't together, and then because I slept with someone else, she went back and was like I just screamed that because I was angry, I didn't mean it." (Interview, 3)

<u>Relationship as public versus relationship as private</u>

- "My one friend Lauren, she's like the queen of breaking up and getting back together. So she never really passed judgment on me when I said I wanted to try and fix things. She would always say things like just take it slow, make sure it's right, stuff like that." (Interview, 1)

- "Well, we were actually really good about hiding our disagreements. We both put on our happy faces in public, even if we were pissed at each other. So, I really strategized everything for myself." (Interview, 3)

RQ2: What are the competing discourses experienced by individuals during emerging adulthood as they seek relational reconciliation attempts?

Based on the contrapuntal analysis, dialectical tensions and exemplars that address RQ2 follow below.

<u>Relationship as "bonding" versus relationship as "differentiating"</u>

- "To be honest, I feel like it was just easier to be unofficial. It was confusing, we are both so uncertain about are futures that I mean who knows where we will be in a few years. And when we broke up, we still acted like a couple, the only difference was... well we weren't together together. I mean, he still has two years of med school and I graduate next year. I don't want to hang around here, so it's like will we just break up then anyways? Should we just stay apart, and it will suck less later? So I just try not to think about it or talk to him about it and take things day to day." (Interview, 2)

- "I kinda knew it was coming to an end. But I just tried anyways because I love her. I wanted to balance all of it out, but in the end I just couldn't. I knew what I wanted to do more which was go to school, focus, make friends, do all that...you know, have a normal college experience. And that interfered with our relationship, and it wasn't fair to her. I couldn't build a relationship with someone back home when I am here; you know we are just at two different points. And to be honest, when I left we just started to see things differently, I was growing in a different direction, growing up, and I mean, I think I was and still am changing for the better." (Interview, 13).

Relationship transition as production versus relationship transition as reproduction

- "I expressed that I wanted her to be the same, but that we both needed to recommit to this relationship with an open mind. We both want this, but we both hated, you know, not each other, but the past relationship. It wasn't so much a fresh start we needed, but a new mindset of who we were." (Interview, 10)

- "We were both so stuck in the past almost, that we forgot we have changed since we met 5 years ago. We needed to take that into account, recognize, you know our lives are different today and in order for her and I to work, we needed to change as well." (Interview, 4)

- "I think, honestly, we used each other to hide from them [insecurities] and once we acknowledged that, together, we were able to begin changing for the

better. It isn't something that happened over night, but, I dunno something we are both very aware of and at the same time something we don't openly talk about either. We just kinda take things day to day, aware we are different but also that this new different is good." (Interview, 22)

Relationship transition as direct versus relationship transition as indirect

- "We would get in arguments and I would think that things would be resolved, and then the next thing I know I have friends texting me asking if I'm alright. I would be like, umm yeah, why do you ask? And then I'd get on Facebook and see he had changed his [relationship] status to single. And I'd be like, whelp guess were done and over. But, then he'd call me the next day and apologize and change it back, acting like nothing had happened. He was so emotional, I never knew what the hell was going on but I loved him so I put up with it." (Interview, 14)

- "She told me it was over. I started yelling as I walked up the stairs to pack a bag. Of course, as I was doing that she was screaming and crying asking where I was going and why I was leaving her and why she was breaking us up. That time I really did leave. But, I mean this was a normal occurrence in our relationship, we would get in arguments and she would say that's it we are done. But then be like oh no, just kidding. It was a joke. And it made it difficult to try and get back with her." (Interview, 8)

- "She started apologizing about her actions, how she was really sorry about the emotional and mental mind games she had played after she found out I had

cheated on her. I felt so bad, I apologized, too… I told her I had been wanting to talk I just didn't know how or what to say." (Interview, 9)

Partners as trusting versus partners as distrusting

- "I am really bad at trusting people so like me getting back together with him was like a big thing for me because I was like I don't want to get hurt again because like the first time really hurt me to you know like break up with him and stuff, I was nervous about that, and I really wanted things to work out but he just makes it so hard for me to have faith and trust in him." (Interview, 20)

- "Yea, I didn't trust him at all. He was my best friend, and out of nowhere would just stop communicating with me and leave town. But, you know, since it kept happening every summer, it made each time that much more difficult. Like we had so much more that needed to be talked about. And we would keep getting back together, and I would finally start to trust him again and then he would do it again. But, each time he failed me, I would lose a little more respect for him as my boyfriend". (Interview, 17)

- "I really trusted what he was saying to me when we were trying to figure out a solution to the distance. I truly feel as though he understood how I felt and why I was upset and we were able to talk about those things before he even got home." (Interview, 14).

RQ 3: What communication approaches are taken to manage these dialectical tensions during emerging adulthood in order for a reconciliation to occur?

Continuing to use the results of the contrapuntal analysis, below are message categories and exemplars, of those whose relationships return to "on" after being "off."

Relationship as expressive versus relationship as unexpressive

- "We would fight and fight, and then make up but looking back I don't know if we ever actually resolved anything. So, we had dinner and we decided then and there we couldn't just get back together, but we knew we both wanted to. So, it was a matter of us both putting our insecurities, our problems, our issues, out on the table and saying what we wanted to change or actually, what we thought bothered us and what we knew we needed to change in order for this to work out. It was a process." (Interview, 3)

- "Because we never talked about anything, and because we kept our feelings bottled up, past problems always got brought back up in later fights. And that's really annoying. It's like, you can't be trying to fix one thing and then bring something old and totally irrelevant up. So, we really had to sit down and talk about that. But, not harp on it. I mean, the best thing we did for our relationship was having a trial run of sorts. It let us be together, without the pressure of being together together, and really reflect and openly discuss what we were both doing to help better our relationship." (Interview, 1)

Relationship as romanticism versus relationship as individualism

- "I mean I work, I am in school... I am busy. And I know he is, too. I love him though, and I want him to know that, but sometimes I just couldn't. So I had to make sure that I prioritized all my responsibilities. But, at the same time I didn't want to make him feel or think that I thought of him as a responsibility. I know I did, but I don't know, and I think that comes with the fact that I have really worked hard to change how we talk and interact. I make sure that whenever I am super busy throughout the day and I know I have class as well that I just send him text messages or pictures of what's going on throughout the day. Just to let him know I am thinking about him. Or I will try to come home between work and school so that we get a little time together on those really busy days. I also always make sure to express my gratitude for the things he does for me, and for us. It's not like I have to actually think about these things anymore, it just comes natural. I use to have this negative attitude all the time because I felt like he was a chore or something on my checklist I had to get done. It's more enjoyable now." (Interview, 1)

Relationship transition as production versus relationship transition as reproduction

- "I could see the months apart had changed us for the better. She didn't seem so controlling, and I wasn't passing judgment on to her. We took turns saying what bothered each of us, and bounced back ideas and suggestions as to how we could overcome those problems. We talked about who we were and who

we wanted to be, and ultimately, figuring out together what and where we saw our potential relationship going. I mean, that's not to say it wasn't messy... we fought and it wasn't easy. This didn't happen overnight. It was a process, but she is worth the fight." (Interview, 3)

- "He would start texting me again, usually saying something like 'hey remember when...'. I dunno I think he did it so that he could just swoop back in and not have to talk about the hard stuff. So we just began talking more, and he would flirt with me and kid around, like how he did when we first started dating. And then, I dunno, it would just go from there. But, I mean we kept breaking up and getting back together so obviously his attempt at trying to revert back to his old self thinking that we would just magically be fixed didn't work so well." (Interview, 21)

- "We used the time apart to think about things, and the time allowed us to talk things out and figure out how to go about our relationship differently." (Interview, 14)

- "She always seemed so convincing. And honestly, I had a hard time staying away from her. But, she was always pressuring me to get back together with her, and I always thought it was too soon. But, I normally just caved. And it would be good, but it was almost like walking on eggshells. You could tell we were both trying really hard to be cute and flirty like when we first met, like we were trying to be something we weren't. We weren't changing, so I mean how can a relationship be successful if we can't get along and then attempt to

take time apart but never really take it. No one can change overnight."

(Interview, 18)

Relationship as dyadic segregation versus relationship as socially embedded

- "My mom, she liked him but after I told her the stuff that had happened, I mean even though I didn't tell him that I told her, he would always say that she seemed kinda standoffish whenever he would come around, which wasn't how she used to be. So it kinda caused a problem between him and I because my family and I we are really close, and I enjoy my time with both of them." (Interview, 11)

- "He was always, I dunno, every time he was around they were always like he is bad for you and so of course he didn't like that so he hated being around my friends. So it was really hard to try and get him into my life and like have him with my friends as well, like both of them together because no one liked him." (Interview, 22)

RQ 4: Is there a gender difference in the kinds of message strategies when planning and executing a first attempt at relational reconciliation during emerging adulthood?

Overall, the results of the contrapuntal analysis highlight more similarities than differences between males and females. Here are examples from both sexes reporting more perceived similarities than differences.

<u>Female</u>

- "We just kinda started texting and messaging through email or Facebook. I could tell he was really hurt, and he knew I was really hurt, too. At first, its not like our conversations were just peachy-keen. It was a lot of he said she said gossip, each of us trying to figure out what the other had been up too." (Interview, 1)

- "Umm, I think, on our parts it was kinda equal. Because, first it was me trying to get back together with him and now its like him. So its kinda back and forth. Its like when I put myself out there he doesn't want me or anything to do with me, but then when I try and move on he come back to me and it like ooh, I want to try things again." (Interview, 11)

<u>Male</u>

- "It just sorta happened. We started texting each other, back and forth. She started apologizing about her actions, how sorry she was about all the emotional games she played after she found out I cheated on her. I felt so bad, I apologized too. And, I dunno, it kinda went from there. We both decided we wanted to start talking again, but just knew we had so much to work out. It was hard, and it was a process, but yea." (Interview, 3)

- "It was around Christmas, and I mean even though we never fully stopped talking, we increased the texting… and it continued through the New Year. From there, you know we realized we had a lot of problems, you know to work out and talk about if this was something we wanted. So we started

calling each other, and then I guess, I don't remember who but we decided to meet up. Have dinner, and try and talk. Not that it went well; she stormed out half way through dinner, and caused a scene. She was crying a majority of the time. But, I mean whatever; I knew it was gonna happen. We had a lot of baggage to handle. But, it was a start." (Interview, 16)

RQ5: During emerging adulthood, is there a level of dependence on third-party individuals when (a) deciding to seek a reconciliation attempt (b) constructing message strategies and (c) executing reconciliation?

Lastly, exemplars from the results of the contrapuntal analysis are used below to demonstrate competing discourses during reconciliation between partners and social network support participation.

Relationship as public versus relationship as private

- "One of my best friends, she knew what I was going through because she was going through the same thing with her boyfriend, too. She was the main person I turned too; because she knew despite what he put me through that I still had strong feelings for him. And, I mean, I guess it was just easier to listen to people that were on my side, cuz you know, a lot of people thought I was crazy for going back. And, I mean I still loved him, so why would I want to hear others talk so negatively about someone that I love. So, I mean, I mainly just listen to see what other people have to say and think about it, but in the end, I just do what I feel most comfortable with." (Interview, 11)

- "Well, my friends don't like him because we have broken up so many times. And, well, yea, neither does my family really. No one is really ever in support of us getting back together, but we always do. Its gotten to the point where if him and I are fighting, and he's like oh, I'm done, and I know it's something that will pass, I don't even tell them. If my friends or family find out, then I am hesitant to talk about him in front of them, I don't want them to know what's going on because I feel like they are judging me, him, just us and our relationship in general." (Interview, 9)

Relationship as normal versus relationship as atypical

- "Oh yea, there was no support what so ever. I think mostly because we always were fighting and breaking up. I mean sometimes we would keep it a secret that we had started talking again after a breakup. It would last sometimes for like almost a month; you know we would be officially but not tell anyone. We wouldn't even hang out with our mutual friends. Because, well, I mean I know its not the most normal, functioning relationship, and to be honest, like yea we had a lot of mutual friends, but I don't think it so much caused problems... I think it like became a joke or something to them. Like oh yea, typical they're fighting... stuff like that. So it was just easier to not talk to others about us." (Interview, 21)

<u>Relationship transition as direct versus relationship transition as indirect</u>

- "Her parents loved me throughout the relationship, and we still have a really good relationship. I mean, yea, obviously they didn't want to see their daughter hurt, but they weren't upset with me when it happened. If I saw them out, they were really friendly, and when we got back together they were very welcoming. I think, you know, I mean I was very open and honest when she and I took a break. I wasn't just leading her on." (Interview, 13)

SUMMARY

Romantic partners attempting relational reconciliation engage in a complex meaning making process which includes construction of meaning for the salient concepts of romanticism, relational identity, integration, and individualism. Through contrapuntal analysis, I was able to identify the meaning systems that were used by participants highlighted in the 12 defining themes which animated their interview talk, and I was able to locate exemplars to show their competition. The discursive struggles identified provide a broad framing of the utterance chain as a whole, that is, the sites of struggle previously identify above both examine the macroculutral discourses common to all dating couples as well as microcultural discourses which are less idiosyncratic and pertain to on-off partners which is ultimately shaped by their joint relational history.

Contrapuntal analysis of romantic partner talk among emerging adults revealed discursive constructions of the reconciliation process predominately organized around varying themes of relational ambiguity, which appears to have an effect on romantic partner identity. Albeit, it was apparent that varying themes of (un)certainty, (dis)trust,

(non)expressive, (un)expecting, (inter)dependence, and (re)production played equally important roles yet were more apparent at specific points of romantic reconciliation.

Eight pairs of discursive struggle animated the core theme of relational ambiguity concerning partner identity: (1) stability-change, predictability-novelty, certainty-uncertainty, given-new, presence-absence, past-present, old-new, reproduction-production. The inevitable struggle between the interplay of old and the new as well as past and the present could be heard across all themes as well as struggles in regards to relational identity. These discursive struggles which have previously been identified through topical intertextuality within conflict research (e.g., Gottman, 1999; Roloff & Johnson, 2002) are not only present, but nuanced through identifying how meaning emerges from these struggles in reconciliation.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

OVERVIEW

In this final chapter, I discuss the findings of the study, including their

implications, limitations of the thesis, and possible directions for future research. In this

thesis, I analyzed romantic partner talk for significant discursive constructions that

organize and offer meaning to romantic partner experiences in on-again/off-again

relationships. Specifically, with the intent of expanding previous relational research of

on-again/off-again relationships (e.g., Bevan & Cameron, 2001; Cupach & Metts, 2002;

Dailey et al., 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013; Patterson & O' Hair, 1992) and

turning points experienced by on-again/off-again partners (Dailey, McCracken, et al.,

2013), the present analysis details the intricacies of relational partner dialogue by

highlighting the interplay of discourses emerging adults use as they construct meaning to

the terms "on" and "off". In doing so, it exemplifies the need to understand relational

reconciliation as an unfinalizable process, rather than implying partners go through

varying stages as so done in past stage-based theories.

While much of the on-off relational research is limited by an emphasis on

individuated characteristics, and the assumption that reconciliation is a relational

maintenance strategy to maintain a relationships' status quo before an actual

disengagement, this project's goal was to gain insight into the ways in which relational

partners specifically in on-again/off-again relationships construct reconciliation. Using

relational dialectics theory (RDT), this project posed five research questions in an effort

to illustrate a conception of romantic reconciliation. The analysis yielded 12 themes, and implications of these findings at the theoretical and practical level are discussed below.

Informed by relational dialectics theory, the question of how discourses interpenetrate to create meaning for participants is central to the analysis (Baxter, 2011). The present study sought to understand how emergent adults in on-off romantic relationships construct the meanings of "on" and "off" as they relate with their partners. Six discourses (expression, bonding, individualism, integration, romanticism, and trust) come together to create the meaning of on-off relationships illustrated through the 12 previously identified themes. Defining "on" by participants resulted from a number of relational and communicative qualities such as total openness, partners valuing the others' interest, accepting support, and balancing competing time and energy.

Participants also expressed multivocality when discussing being "off" with romantic partners. Discourses of seclusion, mistrust, differentiating, ambiguity, nonexpression, and individualism were most often discussed as ways to define "off" by participants. Feelings of "off" were often invoked by participants due to a partner's verbal ambiguity in defining a relationship, controlling behavior, need for independence often brought on by relocation and lack of rational discourse. True to relational dialectics theory, discourses surrounding "on" and "off" intersected within emergent adults' construction of their relationship creating interplay of competing discourses that is discussed below.

However, it is important to note that there is no finite set of contradictions in romantic relationships (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998). While at times I discuss "binary pairs," that were highlighted in the on-off relational themes, it is difficult to discuss one

specific theme without relating to another. Dominant discourses are juxtaposed with countervailing discourses that work to form a knot of "functional and interdependent contradictions" which, if separated, fail to elucidate the dialogic view of socially situated contradictions (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 157). For that purpose, the discussion below is not separated and categorized by theme, nor discourse. Instead, the discussion is used to guide the reader into a what I argue is a vivid picture of ongoing tensions that occur at different points during on-off relationships both between and across on-off partners as they work to construct meaning in their relationships.

CORE FINDINGS

The construction of relational identity during a turning point provided a fruitful site of struggle to understand the discursive interplays during reconciliation. Examining the discourses of participants at this site provided an understanding of how individuals went about reconstructing their relationship, or for some, returning to the previous relational status quo after reconciliation. It was apparent from the data that those who were still dating reported "working" on their relationships while on a "break," and in contrast, participants that failed at reconciliation seemed to revert back to "old" patterns as they did not use the time apart to work on prior relational problems. Dailey, McCracken, *et* al., (2013) labeled the former group of individuals, the *capitalized-on-transition* type. Here, Daily and colleagues suggested individuals' use strategically planned breaks to reexamine relationships, and find ways to improve the dynamic of that relationship.

While the data in the present study supports this finding, participants who fell into this category also noted that the "break" was simply a stepping-stone to work out prior relational problems. That is, participants certainly used the time apart to work on both individual and relational problems, but moreover, during reconciliation participants noted that they needed to implement these relational strategies and reinvent their relationship in order for it to be successful. It was not enough to simply work out problems during a break, but instead suggested a need to produce a new, successful relationship from that break.

The discursive binary pair of "production-reproduction" exemplifies this process. Baxter (2011) states, "The potential for production, not just reproduction, is present in every new encounter between relationship partners; parties continue to construct the meaning of their relationship and through their adaptations in meaning, they construct new relationship identities" (p. 93). Thus, from a dialogic viewpoint the focus on how partners "capitalize on transitions" should concentrate on the systems of meaning, rather than the utterances stated by partners. What is unique to this process is the new relational meaning given by partners is always going to bump into the countervailing identity of a past relationship; as Baxter suggests, producing a new relational identity is an unfinalizable process.

This finding also brings a shift to the meaning of relational maintenance. Prior scholarly research has positioned relational maintenance as something that must be maintained, fixed, or at a minimum, a strategy to keep a relationship at some specified state of steadiness (Dindia, 2003). Further, maintenance thwarts change and discontinuity as a threat to the status quo. However, from a dialogic stance, change is flipped from

possessing a negative connotation to a question posed as to how partners can enact positive change to restructure the meaning of one's relational identity. Partners must decide together what to bring from the past into the present and work to understand that "change" is not the desired outcome, but a means to produce a new, unfinalizable relationship identity.

The current data supports the idea of production, as successful reconciliation participants all reported working towards new relational meaning with their partners. In contrast, participants that were unsuccessful at reconciliation reported attempts of rekindling the beginning of their relationship. That is, unsuccessful reconciliation participants fantasized about the successful beginnings of their relationships, ignoring later problems, and reported attempting to revert back to their "old self". In doing so, unsuccessful participants seemingly ignored aspects of individual growth and change. However, successful participants reported acknowledging the individual growth and change, and felt as though a shift in their relational identity could provide partners with a "fresh start". This came in the form of celebrating new anniversary dates, changing how the relationship is negotiated in public-private spheres, and engaging in joint activities and social networks. These changes seemed to suggest helping participants create a supportive bond, reinforce similarity, and integrate and connect autonomous social ties.

Here sets the stage to emphasize how a relational dialectics lens posits romantic relationships as a process, rather than predetermined set stages and exemplifies why on-off relationships must be labeled as such. Communication scholars have marginalized on-off relationships, as they do not "fit" the previously defined developmental course of typical relational development and disengagement stages. The idea that the relational

stages of coming together and coming apart simply are at odds with each other during times of disengagement limits the understanding of what is actually being said between partners. To assume that on-off relationships can simply be "reproduced" by maintenance of the previous relational status quo is to give privilege to one pole in the ever going tension of stability and change as well as past and present.

In addition, the term "blended relationship" has been coined to describe the prevalence of relationships that are "a structural combination of role-based and intimacy-based elements" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p.74). Although this definition places emphasis on personal, private relationships among coworkers and romantic partners or close family members, the underlying theme, that is, relationship formation weaved between personal and non-personal relationships, can be seen in on-off partners. In this instance, the non-personal relationship is partners being "off". In this study, participants reported being "off" for upwards of two years and during that time apart they dated other partners. Thus, beginning reconciliation with that old partner would certainly qualify as a "non-personal" relationship, despite having known that person in the past.

However, a stage-based approach would assume differently, glossing over the intricate details that occur, for example, during re-acquaintance-ship. The idea of "progress" in a stage-based approach assumes a relational "destination"; that partners are racing to a "finish" line, such as every partnership working towards marriage where then they will have "won," and simply maintain that "finalized" relationship. But, in reality, each stage is so much more. Thus, viewing the relationship as a process gives importance to each encountered-interplay along the way. The monologue of progress presupposes the idea of acquaintanceship as an immature, preliminary stage. But, it holds much more

value as does each subsequent dialogic complexity that partners have and will be faced with in the future. As there is no end (unless permanent disengagement does occur), relationships are floating in a beginning and middle space where partners handle dialogic complexities as they come—and at least among emerging adults, floating is "OK."

Another prevalent theme worth noting was ambiguity, and it was heard throughout participant dialogue. The theme of ambiguity combined the discourses associated with talking about the uncertainty of the relationship status, the on-going cyclical pattern, and the threatening of ones' relationship and individual identity. Baxter (2011) suggested that ambiguity in discourse functions either directly or indirectly with regards to their centripetal-centrifugal struggle. Within the data, ambiguity of speech was directly used as a way to avoid the direct interplay of competing discourses. Participants used phrases such as "together, but not together", "not together, together", "dating, but not official" to describe romantic partnerships after an initial break but prior to full recommitment.

A study by Chronet Roses (2006) illustrated the ambiguity surrounding the term "dating" by emergent adult college students (as cited in Baxter, 2011). "The semantic openness of the term potentially allowed dating partners to celebrate the discourse of romance/commitment and the discourse of individualism (Baxter, 2011, p.135)". Similar to Chronet Roses, within the current study it was found that participants often defined their relationships in ambiguous terms for self-protection, or as a "safety-net" (as cited in Baxter, 2011, p. 135). Participants often spoke in ambiguous terms regarding the status of their relationship during a reconciliation attempt in order to test the waters. Participants reported that attempted reconciliation while "unofficially" dating had no

need to deescalate the relationship if recommitment failed. The idea of a trial run support the findings of Dailey, Rossetto, *et* al., (2012) where they reported partners in on-off relationships used an "open door" following relational dissolution to express the temporal or malleable nature of the transition.

Achieving relational stability, satisfaction, and closeness is dependent on competent, direct communication (Rodrigues *et* al., 2006). However, in the current study participants often voiced high levels of indirect communication with romantic partners leading to uncertainty and ambiguity regarding their relationship identity. The ambiguity surrounding partner disengagement often led to confusion when participants were contemplating reconciliation. Participants noted that often times during heated arguments one partner would scream, "This is over, we are done!" However, partners would then continue to communicate and interact, swiping this seemingly direct quote and discourse of "off" under the preverbal rug.

Creating this kind of uncertainty during arguments led to confusion during what participants referred to as an actual breakup. Disengagee's reported being unsure of their relational status, which has been deemed a prominent factor in regards to relational quality in on-off relationships (Dailey, Jin, *et* al., 2011; Dailey, Rossetto, *et* al., 2009, 2010). Due to the uncertainty regarding the status of one's relationship, the disengagee would continue to try and contact the other partner. This often led to hostile arguments, and to some extent, one partner holding all the power especially once the disengager decided they wanted to move forward with reconciliation. Tactics such as these are considered manipulative, and identified by Dailey, McCracken, *et* al., (2013) as *"controlling"*. In the current study, participants noted a power struggle when beginning

reconciliation. Often, the disengagee would attempt to begin communication with the disengager, sometimes numerous times. However, as time progressed disengagee's begin to decrease their time spent attempting communication and it was only then that the opposite partner, the disengager, would begin to try and contact the disengagee.

Indirect communication was most cited, unsurprisingly, from participants that reported unsuccessful reconciliation attempts. It seemed from the data that indirect break-ups and a lack of explicitness regarding relational status led to uncertainty when trying to reestablish communication. Participants reported not knowing why the relationship had terminated. They were able to recall specific problems that they had felt were present in their past relationships, but could not pinpoint what tipped the break. Thus, these participants seemingly skipped over communicating problems in an attempt to quickly reproduce the past relationship.

The problem that lies within indirect transitions from a dialogic viewpoint is that certainty-uncertainty is not formed at the individual level, but is constructed through partners. Through partner dialogue, certainty of trust, identity, and stability is constructed. Reconciled relationships, as stated previously, are in a constant state of flux where partners are working towards producing a new identity. Partner trust that is built through certainty allows partners to embrace new experiences moving them forward and away from stagnation.

In addition, past research has provided ample evidence supporting the claim that social network support aids in relational stability (Agnew, Loving, & Drigotas, 2001) and greater relational certainty (Dailey, Brody, et al., 2013). In the current study, participants voiced a struggle between public and private when discussing relational identity and

social network support. Due to the uncertain nature of participants' relationships, many high-cycling participants reported they were unwilling to disclose their relational status to friends and family. These participants expressed a loss of social support as cycles accumulated, and expressed the need to save face. A decrease in network support in high-cycling relationships is not uncommon. Dailey, Pfiester, *et* al., (2009) noted that a loss in network support was common in on-off relationships, especially among high cyclers and as such, is identified as a salient characteristic found in on-off relationships (Dailey, Jin, *et* al., 2013). Participants seemed to internally label their relationship as normal despite outside participants defining their relationship as atypical. For example, one participant noted the embarrassment she felt when her grandmother stated she was nothing to her long time on-off boyfriend but a "friend with benefits" who had little to no respect for her. In spite of lacking social support, participants continued to renew relationships.

Outside participation is often voiced through cultural discourses. Societal constructs of romantic relationships have long been spoken in western society, and they often favor certainty over uncertainty, connection over autonomy, and stability over change. Even when on-off partners are "on", there romantic partnership may still not be defined as culturally normative. The data supported the idea that as cycles accumulated; partners had to work harder to manage the tension of normal-atypical, both internally and externally. Once social network support entered into the dialogue, it often caused new tensions that were not present during the prior relationship.

While prior research regarding on-off relationships is made up primarily of college-aged students, the characteristics of this demographic are not taken into account

as potential variables regarding on-off characteristics, typologies, and dimensions. However, this study focused on emergent adults to examine how specific variables affect the meaning they give to their relational identities. For example, participants (n=6) that noted a particular high number of cycles did express characteristics expressed in past findings such as high levels of uncertainty, decrease of interest regarding their partner and relationship, lingering feelings, and continuing to reinitiate a relationship out of convenience and lack of better options as well as the potential for external factors (i.e. school, work, long distance) to play a key role in reconciliation or permanent dissolution. However, the data revealed that while external factors were a factor for temporary dissolution, often times partners reconciled in spite of eliminating the tension. That is, for example, multiple participants reported breaking up due to partners going away to different schools or both partners taking job offers in different cities.

After time apart, lingering feelings played a role in reinitiating communication, but ultimately partners had to work to reshape the identity of their relationship and produce new meaning. In doing so, partners were able to flip the centrifugal-centripetal struggle between the distal already-spoken discourse of normative and atypical romanticism. Partners had three culturally influenced assumptions: they would be unable to make a long distance relationship work, they needed to experience the said "new chapter" they were experiencing, and partners in committed relationships must reside in one city. Further, they had outside participation from social network's supporting the culturally shaped ideology on romanticism. Despite the lack of support for their atypical relationship, participants reported working with their partners to create a new normal for their relationship. Thus, while it is imperative to understand the characteristics of

romantic partner relationships, it is equally as important to understand how partners overcome internal and external stressors by constructing meaning and identity.

Of course, it goes without saying that this process may be vastly different for young, middle, older adults as well as individuals that are dealing with divorce reconciliation. Thus, taking into account the lifespan tenants may help shape how partners make meaning of reconciliation. Because of this, a lifespan perspective framework is discussed below in future research.

Lastly, although the focus of this study was on the construction of meaning between partners during reconciliation, the data offered insights as to what on-off partners may consider to be "tipping points", that is, factors that may lead to permanent separation. In general, high cycling relationships that continually ignore the importance of communication prior to recommitting seemed to be a prominent reason as to why relationships permanently terminated. Second, unsuccessful participants often reported using these relationships as a learning experience, which makes sense as Arnett (2000) found that emergent adult romantic relationships are a time of exploration to not only find out who the emergent adult is, but also to compare their identity to those of others in an attempt to figure out what and who they might want in a lifelong partner. Interestingly, despite some participants reporting very disturbing relational behavior (i.e., stalking, infidelity) it was not these factors per say that partners felt they couldn't resolve. The data suggests that a lack of communication regarding emotional and psychical needs played the largest part in leading to permanent dissolution.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are certain limitations of this study that should be noted and considered in future research. Relational Dialectics Theory suggests that each developmental point in a relationship holds immense value, and thus each site should be examined as such. While this thesis particularly examined partner reconciliation, it also took on partner disengagement subsequently not giving full focus to reconciliation. However, disengagement is an important stepping stone to understand partner reconciliation. Thus, future research can benefit from a multiple case study method that specifically examines disengagement through a dialogic lens, and then examine the site of reconciliation.

Participants gave recollections of their relational accounts, progressions, and experiences. However, the limitation to this kind of research is that participants relational status (i.e., current, past, on break) may shape the ways in which participants recall past information. In order to eliminate this potential bias, longitudinal research examining these kinds of relationships should be pursued. Also, I made inferences regarding couple communication, yet it is extremely important to note that only one partner was interviewed. The on-off literature would greatly benefit from dyadic interviewing, or taped conversations between couples.

In addition, although I defined an on-off relationship as a romantic partnership where partners terminate a relationship and later reconcile with the same partner, I made a methodological decision to allow each participant to set the parameters of what they believed to be "on" and "off". That is, there was no set time period for which romantic partners had to be considered "off" in order to participate. Future research should better define the term "off" and include this criterion when recruiting potential participants.

Future research should seek to understand the effects of time apart on reconciliation attempts. However this ambiguity also suggests the potential need for a more precise definition of on-off relationships. With continued research uncovering nuanced understandings of how romantic partners define and manage these turbulent relationships, a more clear definition should emerge.

Although the point of saturation was determined to have been reached at participant 12, I continued with data collection to ensure additional categories did not emerge. However, this is still a relatively small sample size. Hence, additional research with a larger sample size is necessary, which may alter or add additional themes that did not emerge in the current study.

During the time this research study was conducted, two separate studies were published establishing on-off typologies (Dailey, McCracken, *et* al., 2013) and their respective dimensional characteristics (Dailey, Jin, *et* al., 2013). This nuanced understanding of on-off relationship types, and their dimensions should be more thoroughly tied into future research. While the current study acknowledged the typologies, as they were published after data collection had begun, they were not taken into account prior to data collection. Future research should take into account the various typologies that could help uncover new reconciliation themes and potentially identify new typologies as well.

As emergent adult's reconciliation strategies did not seem to differ between sexes, it could be helpful to incorporate a life course perspective lens in conjunction with relational dialectics theory that may reveal gender differences. According to Bengston and Allen (1993), time, context, agency, linked lives, process, meaning and diversity

comprise the seven tenets of the life course perspective. Applying this framework to the current study's initiative could bring greater clarity and organization to understanding to relational reconciliation across the life course. Further in using this approach, it would be necessary to evaluate participants at different stages of the life course, which could potentially reveal gender differences.

The concept of emerging adulthood is a new phase, and because of this several criticisms which have yet to be addressed may have affected generalizability of this study. Arnett (2011) maintains that emergent adulthood is not homogenous or universal, but rather a set of developmentally distinctive characteristics more likely to be found among 18-29 year olds than in any other cohort. It is a time of instability which should be considered a defining characteristic, not a limitation. Like all life stages, emerging adulthood is in part defined by its heterogeneity due to the lack of institutional structure. Arnett emphasizes that the tenants and characteristics which defines the cohort is not experienced by all. However, scholars such as Kloep and Hendry (2011) view the theory as problematic as they suggest it solely applies to middle and upper class young people attending college. Further, it has been suggested that this proposed developmental theory, as so many that have come before, is biased against the lower and working subsection of this age cohort. While this study attempted to divert from the "typical" sample of college students by incorporating working participants, those that reported working had already graduated from a four year institution. Thus, future research should collect a larger sample and include participants in university as well as participants that entered the workforce after high school. In doing so, future research may uncover differences

between how individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds experience emergent adulthood as well as similarities or differences regarding romantic on-off relationships.

When collecting demographic data, this study did not ask participants to disclose race or culturally ethnicity. This was purposely done as Arnett posits that emerging adulthood is a cultural theory, "How emerging adulthood is experienced is shaped by cultural beliefs" (Arnett, 2011, p.272). However, by supporting this bias the results may be skewed due to cultural variations such as an emphasis on less individualistic characteristic development, and more so on collectivist characteristics. With this said, the underlying bias of culture homogeneity within the current understanding of emergent adulthood will not simply disappear by cross-cultural data collection. The underlying normative cultural beliefs that are central to this age cohort across the globe must be examined and discussed for a more rounded understanding of culturally distinct emergent adulthood. At best, future research can benefit from gathering demographic information regarding ethnicity and race which may help to uncover more differences than similarities regarding race demographics as it pertains to emergent adulthood in westernized cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study offers several contributions to the literature of on/off relating. Extending on recent research comparing on-off relationships, the current study focused on the unique interplays that help to construct meaning and relational identity within and between on-off partners. Overall, analyses showed that relational production-reproduction appeared to be significant to understanding how relational partners give and create meaning within their romantic reconciled relationships. Further, restructuring the

meaning of relational maintenance through a dialogic perspective is necessary in order to

better understand how on-off partners successfully navigate reconciliation. These

findings, in combination with prior on-off relational research provide a more intricate

picture of the discourses occurring within relational reconciliation.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant Identification Number: _____

1. Please tell me the story of the relationship: How did you meet? What happened along the way?

2. Relationships vary in feelings of closeness over the course of a relationship. How close would you say your romantic relationship was with this person over the course of the relationship?

3. In general, over the course of the entire relationship how happy were you?

4. Can you describe how the relationship came to a stop? What were the circumstances leading to its halting? Who wanted to stop the relationship? How did you know that the relationship was actually halted? What was said to make either yourself (or your partner) sure the relationship was not going to continue?

5. Did the way the relationship halted affect the ways you went about planning to restart the relationship? That is, did the way it ended affect what was said during the efforts to restart the relationship?

6. How did you (or your partner) go about attempting to restart communication?

7. What was said as you attempted to restart the romantic relationship?

8. Can you pinpoint specific issues within your prior romantic relationship that you felt might compromise a restarted romantic relationship if you both decided to go down that road?

9. Did you and your partner talk about these issues as you attempted to restart the relationship? What was talked about and discussed?

10. Did you and your partner express any fears or apprehensions prior to restarting your romantic relationship? What was said, to help relieve these fears?

11. Can you describe the role, if any, that your friends and family had while you and your partner were disengaged? Was there a difference of opinion between your friends, family, and yourself in terms of whether restarting the relationship was a good idea? What kind of support did your family offer? What kind of support did you friends offer? Did co-workers play a role?

Demographics:

1. Age: _____

2. Gender: _____

3. Occupation/School: _____

4. Are you reporting on a current or past relationship? _____
   a. How long was the relationship before breaking up? _____
   b. If current, how long since last break up? _____
      i. If not current? How long did the reconciliation last before the final termination? _____

5. Was the reconciliation attempt you are discussing successful? _____

6. Approximately how many times was the relationship you are discussing cycled

   _____

7. Looking back, have you been in more than one relationship that has cycled?
   a. If yes, how many? _____

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT NOTIFICATION FORM

Communication, Romantic Reconciliation, and Emerging Adulthood: A Relational
Dialectics Study

You are being asked to take part in a research study of how individuals during emerging
adulthood (ages 18-29) attempt romantic reconciliation with a previous romantic partner.
Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to
take part in the study. Contact information is provided in the even questions arise after
the fact.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to learn about the communication
tensions that are inherent during the post-dissolution stage of a relationship (time period
after breaking-up or being broken-up with a romantic partner). The researcher wishes to
better understand the tensions that individuals face, the obstacles they must over come,
and most importantly the communication that is used. You must currently be attempting
to reconciliation a romantic relationship, or have done so in the past to take part in this
study. I am conducting the study in partial fulfillment of the thesis requirements for the
Masters of Arts degree in Lifespan and Digital Communication, Department of
Communica*tion & Theatre Arts at Old Dominion University.*

What I will ask you to do: If you agree to this study, I will conduct an interview with
you. The interview will include questions about your past relationship, how you
communicated with your partner after the break-up, obstacles or tensions that arose
during discussions with your partner, and finally how you and your partner managed
these issues communicatively. The interview will take approximately 40-45 minutes to
complete.

Risks and benefits: I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other
than those encountered in day-to-day life. In the event you find some of the questions
about your relationship to be sensitive please understand that you do not need to reply to
my questions. And, should you wish to talk further with a counselor, ODU's Counseling
Services and The Women's Center contact information have been provided to you at the
end of this form.

Seeing as each participant has at some point experienced this relational turmoil, or is
experiencing it currently, the findings will help participants' to better communicatively
mange this relational stage, as well as provide participants potential strategies to use in
their relationships. All participants can obtain the results of the study after July 1st, 2014
by sending an email requesting an abbreviated copy of the study to: Ashley Poole
apool012@odul.edu.

Compensation: All participants will receive a $10 gift card to Starbucks upon competition of the interview.

Your answers are confidential: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I make public I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. The tape-recorded interview will be destroyed after it has been transcribed, which I anticipate will be within two months of its taping. The recordings will be secured on a password protected, private computer.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer and continue on with the interview. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw anytime

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this study is Ashley Poole (MA candidate, Lifespan & Digital Communication at ODU). Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Ashley Poole at apool012@odu.edu. Or, you can reach the thesis project advisor, Dr. Thomas Socha at tsocha@odu.edu.

The Women's Center

1000 Webb University Center

Norfolk, VA 23259

757-683-4109 (office)

757-683-4119 (fax)

Hours of Operation: Monday- Friday: 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

Old Dominion University Counseling Services

1526 Webb University Center

Norfolk, VA 23529

757-683-4401 (office)

757-683-3565 (fax)

Hours of Operation: Monday-Thursday: 8:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. Friday: 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

VITA

Ashley M. Poole
Old Dominion University
5115 Hampton Boulevard
Norfolk, VA 23529

Education and Training

M.A.	Old Dominion University, *Norfolk, VA* Lifespan & Digital Communication Advisor: Thomas Socha, Ph.D. (Expected August, 2014)
B.S.	Old Dominion University, *Norfolk, VA* Communication Studies December, 2011

Background

Ashley Poole is a second year graduate student at Old Dominion University. She is pursuing her Master's degree in Lifespan and Digital Communication. She is currently a graduate research assistant for The Office of Academic Affairs at Old Dominion University. Ashley's research interests rest primarily in interpersonal communication: the effects of communication skills on relationship outcomes, supportive forms of communication, and relational theories of commitment.

Selected Presentations

Poole, A. (2014, March). Resilient adults: Exploring adaptive characteristics during college-to-employment transition. Paper presented at *Graduate Research Achievement Day at Old Dominion University*.

Poole, A. (2013, December). Creating resilient adults: Social support messages during college-to-career role transitions. Paper presented *at Positive Communication Research Symposium at East Carolina University*.

Poole, A. (2013, April). Convergence culture: How participatory audiences influence corporate marketing strategies. Paper presented at *Who Put the Digital in My Humanities Conference at Old Dominion University*.