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Disciplines

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College students responded to a survey of on the communication behaviors and information sharing expected in male-female relationships labeled friends, hanging-out, talking, casual dating, dating, boyfriend/girlfriend, and romantic relationship. Results show specific relationship differences and suggest expectations fall into three relational categories: **nonromantic** (friend), **preromantic** (talking, hanging-out, and casual dating), and **romantic** (dating, boyfriend/girlfriend, and romantic relationship). Ambiguity about the expectations for sharing information was high for the relationships in the preromantic category and low for the romantic.

Male–Female Relationship Labels, Information Sharing (Disclosures), and Expectations

Studies on male–female relationships often examine the qualities of those relationships relative to the level of intimacy rather than how the participants label their relationship. The studies provide insights into how such qualities as commitment, affection, or self-disclosure increase as the level of intimacy increases. Although these studies are primarily concerned with the sexual nature of those relationships, how relationships are labeled is important for the participants because the label is associated with a set of expectations. When a relationship label evokes similar expectations between partners, it provides clarity and direction. When the label is ambiguous, partners are more likely to struggle with conflicting expectations resulting in confusion and relational conflicts.

But how a relationship is labeled can indicate both sexual and intimacy issues. For example, Howard, Debnam, Cham, et al. (2015) interviewed high school girls and found a strong use of specific relationship labels linked to sexual activity, such as "hooking up" and "friends with benefits." Despite having these labels, these relationships were still the most prone to ambiguity and lack of consensus as to their meaning and sexual nature. They were considered preromantic, whereas, more serious relationships were labeled as "in a relationship" and "boyfriend/girlfriend". Labeling male–female relationships plays an important social role for high schoolers because the labels "provide identity, connote status, and resolve ambiguity" (p.197).

Men and women in a relationship are often asked to label their relationship as a way of quickly communicating its nature to others. While having a label provides a quick answer to friends and family who inquire about the relationship, it's even more important for the individuals in the relationship. This study examined the meanings behind labels frequently used to describe the male–female relationships of college students, including friends, hanging-out, talking, casual dating, dating, boyfriend/girlfriend, and romantic relationship. The study was specifically designed to better understand differences in the perception of communication behaviors, qualities, activities, and personal disclosures associated with each labeled relationship. This paper reports only on the portion of the study addressing and personal disclosures.

Relational Expectations, Schemata, and Roles

Several terms have been used to describe social cognitive structuring that occurs during our interactions with others—expectations, schemata, roles, and scripts. The cognitive process that underlies such structuring serves as the foundation for sets of expectations associated with different types of relationships and consequently their labels. These labels in turn provide a quickly accessed framework of expectations related to the communication and disclosures appropriate to each. The expectations associated with relationship labels are likely to develop or be learned in the same ways that other relational schemata develop. Anderson (1993) identified six influences on the development of relational schemata: cultures, media, future encounters, influence of others, observed in others, and intervals between interactions. These six influences are similarly applicable to the development of relationship label expectations (a type of schemata):

1. Cultures define some of the expectations associated with certain relationship labels.

2. Media portrayal of labeled relationships influences people's relationship label expectations.

3. Experiences in labeled relationships create expectations for future relationships that are similarly labeled.

4. Others provide and influence expectations associated with a relationship label.

5. Observing other people's labeled relationships provides a source for forming relational expectations.

6. People retrospectively form and reshape expectations associated with a relationship labels.

Labels represent socially constructed relational schemata and people are likely to communicate in a manner consistent with those schemata and interpret their partner's communication from that perspective. When partners agree to a particular label, it provides a framework for interpreting each other's behaviors—particularly those that might be ambiguous. Ambiguity about appropriateness of disclosures in a given relationship presents an area with the highest probability of creating confusion and potential contention between partners.

Evidence of expectations associated with male–female relationships can be inferred from a study that examined a specific type of male–female interaction—the first date. Mongeau, Jacobsen, and Donnerstein

(2007) found that college students held and shared expectations about the qualities, goals, activities, communication, and feelings associated with a date. The authors were interested in the students' perceptions of how going on a date differed from going out with a friend; thus, indirectly studying the expectations that distinguished a dating relationship from a male–female friendship. Reducing uncertainty was identified as one particular goal that differentiated a date from going out with a friend. This finding suggests that seeking and sharing personal information to reduce uncertainty will occur more frequently in romantic relationships than in friendships or other nonromantic relationships. Thus, in the my study, greater self-disclosure should be found in relationships labeled romantic as compared to those labeled friends.

Method

Participants

Participants in thi4s study were college students, who were recruited through announcements made in classes. approximately 80% of the respondents were students at Iowa State University, and the remainder were from colleges in other states. Given the study's focus on young adults' expectations, the 24 respondents over the age of 24 and the 43 who did not report their age were excluded from the analyses. The average age of those respondents was 20.2 years ($sd = 1.46$, $n = 464$). The 464 respondents included in the study, 300 (64.7%) were female, 153 (33%) by males, and 11 (2.4%) did not report their sex. Respondents identified themselves as White/Caucasian (378, 81.5%). Black/African-American (27, 5.8%), Asian (27, 5.8%), Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin (16, 3.4%), American Indian/Alaska Native (3, 0.6%), other (12, 2.6%), and 1 (0.2 %) did not report.

Procedures

Per approval of the Institutional Review Board, this study utilized implicit consent and anonymous responses to a survey hosted on Qualtrics. Instructors informed students about the survey and e-mailed or posted a brief description of the study with a link to the survey.

The survey was set up so that when one student completed a survey form on a given type of relationship, the next logged on student received the next relationship type, and so on, through all the relationship types.

The survey consisted of five sections of which only two are reported in this paper: demographic information and information shared (conversational topics and personal disclosures). Items regarding sharing information/personal disclosures were designed to reflect a wide spectrum of topics that might be discussed or disclosed in a given relationship. If respondents felt unsure about what was appropriate, they were to use their own sense of whether they would share such information in that type of relationship. Since the items included topics of conversation, existing measures of self-disclosure were deemed inappropriate; however, many of the items reflected the kinds of information often reflected in such measures. Respondents received the following instructions: "Select each piece of INFORMATION that you see as appropriate for partners to share when they are in a male-female relationship that is described as: (one of the seven labels appeared here). If you are unsure, use your own sense of whether you would share the information in such a relationship."

Results

The results indicate that the seven male–female relationship labels can be placed into three distinct categories: *nonromantic* (friend), *preromantic* (talking, hanging-out, and casual dating), and *romantic* (dating, boyfriend/girlfriend, and romantic relationship). These categories are incorporated in the results discussion because they are meaningful and concise. But results related to differences among the individual relationship types are still reported when appropriate.

Analysis of Shared Information (Disclosures).

Rather than individually examining each of the possible paired comparisons, I focus instead on presenting a larger, more intuitive picture of the expectations for sharing information associated with each relationship type, and on making broad comparisons to the other relationships. All reported differences listed on the label below, are significant at the $p < .01$ level.

I conducted a binomial test to compare the percentage of respondents agreeing on a specific item's association with the designated relationship to a test proportion of 50%. Most items on which 70% or more of the respondents agreed were significantly different ($p < .001$) from the test proportion and thus accepted as a shared expectation among the respondents. The items on shared information with significant agreement are listed in the table as percentages of respondents who checked the item for each relationship label. The table also includes the items that a significant number of respondents agreed were not associated with a given relationship (displayed as a negative percentage in parentheses). Finally, the table lists the percentages (in brackets) for items deemed ambiguous because they failed to reach significant difference from the 50% test proportion with significance levels of .10 or lower. Items with values above $p < .001$ and below $p > .10$ were not considered either a definitive expectation nor ambiguous were left blank.

Participants evaluated 35 topics for each item's appropriateness to be shared in a given relationship type. Pearson Chi Square computed for on each topic across the relationship labels. Pairwise comparisons were also computed between the seven relationship labels for each topic by using a z-test with a Bonferroni correction. Twenty-five of the topics significantly differed ($p < .01$) across the relationship labels (see table). Of the 10 topics that did not differ, six had significant agreement (70% or higher) among the respondents across all seven relationship labels. Topics identified as appropriate for sharing in all relationships included personal but low intimacy topics such as *common interests*, *daily activities*, and *current coursework and classroom experiences*. But some impersonal topics were not seen as appropriate in more intimate relationships possibly because such topics were discussed earlier in the relationship. The topic of *work experience* was significant only for friend, casual dating, and boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, while *sports* was significant for friend, hanging-out, and casual dating relationships.

Table: Shared Information (Disclosures) Associated with Each Relationship Label

Topics With No Significant Differences Between Relationship Labels (*p* < .01)	Relationship Label						
	Friend	**Hanging-out**	**Talking**	**Casual Dating**	**Dating**	**Boy/Girl Friend**	**Romantic Relationship**
	% (*n* = 79)	% (*n* = 79)	% (*n* = 75)	% (*n* = 78)	% (*n* = 75)	% (*n* = 70)	% (*n* = 75)
Common interests	95.5	98.5	94.1	98.5	87.1	93.9	92.6
Their interests, activities, hobbies	88.1	84.6	92.6	98.5	83.9	87.9	91.2
Daily activities	89.6	87.7	85.3	85.3	83.9	89.4	89.7
Career	82.1	73.8	75.0	79.5	77.4	92.4	94.1
News about common acquaintances/friends	77.6	80.0	73.5	85.3	74.2	78.8	79.4
Current coursework and classroom experiences	86.6	75.4	73.5	86.8	75.8	83.3	75.0
Work experience	79.1			70.6		74.2	
National and/or international news	79.1	{60.0}	{58.8}		{56.5}	{60.6}	{55.9}
Past romantic relationships	{52.2}	{44.6}	{48.5}	{47.1}	{56.5}		
Community/civic affairs	{53.7}	{47.7}	{45.6}	{48.5}	{54.6}	{56.1}	
Topics With Significant Differences Between Relationship Labels (*p* < .01)							
Their positive emotions/ feelings (happiness, pride, excitement, etc.)	83.6	***	76.5	85.3	80.6	93.9	89.7
Values and morals	83.6		73.5	75.0	88.7	95.5	95.6
Attitudes about issues that are important to them	83.6			73.5	80.6	89.4	89.7
Sports	73.1	72.3	70.6	80.9	{56.5}	{50.0}	{54.4}
Beliefs they hold that reflect who they are		{53.8}	{57.4}	73.5	85.5	90.9	85.3
What their life was like growing up	74.6				79.0	87.9	88.2
Things that are bothering them or of a concern to them	82.1	{55.4}	{52.9}	{55.9}	77.4	89.4	89.7
Feelings toward each other	-71.6	{40.0}		75.0	83.9	93.9	89.7
Personal strengths		{47.7}	{57.4}	{50.3}	77.4	92.4	89.7

	Friend	Hanging-out	Talking	Casual Dating	Dating	Boyfriend/Girlfriend	Romantic Relationship
Religious beliefs		{43.1}	{55.9}	{57.4}	74.2	83.3	77.9
Their families	71.6	{58.5}		{48.5}	74.5	92.4	88.2
Where their relationship might be going		{49.2}			72.6	90.9	89.7
Their negative emotions/feelings (sadness, fear, anxiety, etc.)	80.6	{52.3}	{48.5}	{54.4}		90.9	92.6
Personal problems	82.1	{41.5}	{45.6}			83.3	92.6
Their current romantic relationship		{36.9}	{45.6}	{51.5}		83.3	85.3
Personal weaknesses		{41.5}	{42.6}	{45.6}		92.4	86.8
Doubts and fears		{36.9}	{41.2}	{39.7}		92.4	85.3
Family activities	{58.2}	{41.5}	{47.1}			87.9	85.3
Sex/sexual concerns	-79.1	-76.9		{52.9}		87.9	80.9
Personal health issues	{50.7}		-72.1	-72.1	{54.8}	83.3	79.4
Religious background and current convictions	{46.3}	{43.1}				77.3	73.5
Family Problems	{59.7}		-76.5	-76.5	{59.7}	86.4	72.1
Social/political issues			{42.6}	{52.9}			73.5
Secrets about past	{44.8}		-76.5	-86.8	{51.6}		72.1
Interest in potential romantic partners	{58.2}	-80.0	-73.5	-75.0			
Total agreed occur	**17** (49%)	**7** (20%)	**9** (26%)	**13** (37%)	**17** (49%)	**28** (80%)	**29** (83%)
Total agreed does not occur	**2** (6%)	**2** (6%)	**4** (11%)	**4** (11%)	**0** (0%)	**0** (0%)	**0** (0%)
Total agreed (out of 35)	**19** (54%)	**9** (26%)	**12** (34%)	**17** (49%)	**17** (49%)	**28** (80%)	**29** (83%)
Ambiguous	**8** (23%)	**17** (53%)	**14** (40%)	**12** (34%)	**7** (20%)	**3** (9%)	**2** (6%)
Ratio: Agreed /Ambiguous	**2.38** to 1	**0.58** to 1	**0.86** to 1	**1.41** to 1	**2.43** to 1	**9.33** to 1	**14.50** to 1

Qualities with over 70 percent agreement are listed. Minus signs - indicate qualities significantly **not** associated with a relationship ($p < .001$). { } indicate qualities that are ambiguous ($p > .10$) with 40% to 60% identifying it. Values that fell above $p < .001$ and below $p > .10$ are not listed. Adjusted for pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni correction.

The relationship types are clearly delineated by what kinds of information male–female partners disclose. The most intimate relationships had the highest number of topics deemed appropriate to share. Of the 35 topics, respondents identified 29 (83%) as appropriate to share in relationships labeled romantic and 28 (80%) for those labeled boyfriend/girlfriend. A sizeable drop occurred for the next highest relationship labels, dating and friend both had 17 (49%) topics deemed appropriate to share, and casual dating had only 13 (37%). Hanging-out had seven topics (20%) which also were deemed appropriate for talking, but talking had two additional topics. Those topics, *values and morals* and *positive emotions* suggests a higher level of closeness associated with talking. Significantly fewer respondents saw the topic of *sex/sexual concerns* as appropriate for friends (20.9%), hanging-out (23.1%), and talking relationships (32.4%) than did those evaluating dating (67.7%), boyfriend/girlfriend (87.9%), or romantic relationships (80.9%).

Respondents identified information that can be considered rather personal, such as *their negative emotions/feelings*, *things bothering them*, and *personal problems,* as appropriate information to share in the male–female friend relationship. Sharing such information reflects a close relationship in which partners turn to each other for support. Fifteen of the 17 topics appropriate to share with friends were also appropriate for the boyfriend/girlfriend, leaving 13 appropriate for boyfriend/girlfriend and not for friends. The romantic relationship shared 14 of friends' 17 topics but had 15 topics that were appropriate to romantic and not friends. This nearly fifty percent overlap between friends and boyfriend/girlfriend and romantic relationship indicates a strong similarity in the level of trust and support associated with these three relationships. The topics seen as most appropriate to cross-sex friends suggests partners engage in casual, everyday kinds of conversations covering such topics as *sports* and *national and/or international news* while avoiding discussing *feelings toward each other* or *sex/sexual concerns.*

The three relationships that constitute the preromantic category shared seven topics that the respondents felt were appropriate and one topic they felt was not appropriate. But respondents identified four topics appropriate to casual dating that they did not significantly associate with hanging-out or talking: *attitudes about issues that are important to them, beliefs they hold that reflect who they are, feelings each the*

other, and *work experience*. Such topics reflect a transitional role played by casual dating as relationships move from preromantic to romantic relationship.

All 17 of the topics seen as appropriate to share in dating relationships were also seen as appropriate in boyfriend/girlfriend and romantic relationships. But boyfriend/girlfriend and romantic relationships shared an additional 10 topics that did not reach significance for dating, indicating an important distinction between dating and the other two relationship types. Boyfriend/girlfriend and romantic relationship, but not dating, were significantly higher than the preromantic relationships on 13 topics. In addition, the respondents viewed discussing *their current romantic relationship, negative emotions*, and *personal problems* as significantly less appropriate in dating than romantic relationships.

The topics seen as more appropriate for boyfriend/girlfriend and romantic relationships tend to be topics with greater risk and more intimacy than other topics. The topics fall into two categories: negatively oriented information, and intimate information. Among the negatively oriented topics are *personal problems, family problems, personal weaknesses, doubts and fears*, *personal health issues, their negative emotions/feelings (sadness, fear, anxiety, etc.),* and *things that are bothering them or of a concern to them.* Intimate topics included *religious beliefs, secrets about past, family activities, sex/sexual concerns*, *their current romantic relationship,* and *personal strengths*.

Only a few topics were negatively associated with a given relationship label, and those were only for friend and preromantic relationships. A significant number of respondents did not see sharing *feelings toward each other* as appropriate in the friend relationship and *sex/sexual concerns* was not appropriate in either friend or hanging-out relationships. A significant number of respondents viewed *personal health issues, family problems, secrets about past,* and *interest in potential romantic partners* as topics that were not appropriate in talking or casual dating relationships.

Analysis of the Ambiguity of Relationship Labels

Ambiguous responses reflect information with the highest probability of creating confusion and potential contention between partners. The romantic relationship had the lowest level of ambiguity, with only 2 topics

considered ambiguous and 6 topics lacking agreement (see table). Those two topics, *national and/or intentional news* and *sports news* (also ambiguous for dating and boyfriend/girlfriend) are not inherently connected to the intimacy associated with relationships. The topic of community/civic affairs was ambiguous for boyfriend/girlfriend (56.1%) and not ambiguous for romantic relationship; however it was not significantly agreed upon for romantic relationship (63.2%).   Dating relationships were more ambiguous than either boyfriend/girlfriend or romantic relationship with seven topics including *past romantic relationships, personal health issues*, and *family problems*. The ambiguity of the seven topics in dating relationships and not boyfriend/girlfriend or romantic relationships, suggests that these seven topics are perceived as only appropriate at the highest level of intimacy and commitment.

Friend relationships had eight topics that were considered ambiguous and dating had seven, five of which were ambiguous for both. The ambiguity associated with cross-sex friends or dating partners on sharing *personal health issues*, *family problems*, and *secrets about past* indicates uncertainty about whether such partners are confidants. The large number of ambiguous topics associated with relationships in the preromantic category indicates respondents clearly had mixed expectations about whether or not such topics should be discussed. Such uncertainty is likely to be a recurring source of discomfort and stress.

The summary data at the end of the table includes a ratio of the number topics on which respondents agreed were appropriate to the number that were ambiguous. The preromantic relationships have relatively weak ratios with hanging out being the lowest with .63 items in agreement to every one item of ambiguity. The friend relationship has a better ratio than dating, indicating that male and female respondents have a clearer set of expectations about a cross-sex friend label than they do about dating. The two most romantic relationship labels, boyfriend/girlfriend and romantic relationship, show the strongest solidarity in perceptions with a high ratio of agreed items to ambiguous items. For college students in this study, the two most romantic relationships are relatively well-defined and understood.

Discussion

The complexity of male–female relationships is compounded by the variety of labels used to describe such relationships. Overall, the results reveal commonalities in the expectations of what information is shared in each of the seven relationship labels, such that the relationships can be placed in three overarching yet distinct relationship categories: friend, preromantic (hanging-out, talking, and casual dating) and romantic (dating, boyfriend/girlfriend, and romantic relationship).

A core set of 10 shared topics was found across the three relationship categories, 6 of those significantly associated with all of the relationships. In contrast to the other relationship labels, the boyfriend/girlfriend and romantic relationship labels had a large number of topics that respondents considered as appropriate for sharing in the relationship. Dating appears to be a transitional relationship between casual dating and the other two more intimate relationships. A significant number of participants identified ten topics as appropriate to discuss in boyfriend/girlfriend and romantic relationships that participants did not identify with dating. These ten topics are probably the riskiest to discuss: negative disclosures (e. g., *fears and doubts* and *personal weaknesses*); and high-intimacy disclosures (e. g., *religious background* and *sex/sexual concerns*).

When expectations in relationships are ambiguous, the chances for confusion, tension, and conflict in the relationship are increased. Respondents' assessment of what information was appropriate to share in the preromantic relationships was ambiguous with, on average, 39 percent of the topics being ambiguous. This level of ambiguity about what information to disclose is a likely source of stress, uncertainty, and worry among college students. Without shared expectations, they are likely to experience an increased in the dialectical tension associated with openness-closedness—a need to share information so the relationship will develop weighed against uncertainty about its appropriateness (Baxter, 1990). The relationships labeled dating and friend had similarly low levels of ambiguity suggesting that these relationship labels evoke similar levels of understanding among college students. While the relationships labeled boyfriend/girlfriend and romantic relationship convey a high degree of relational intimacy and an expectation for shared personal information not found in the other types of relationships.

Limitations of the study include the nature of the sample, the form of the data, and limits in what was covered by the items. While students from several universities across the United States participated in the study, the large majority were from one large Midwestern university which raises generalizability concerns, in so far as, expectations vary regionally. The categorical nature of the data limits the type of analysis that can be done. The use of interval data would allow the use of methods such as regression analysis to create a model for each relationship type and further understanding of the dynamics of each relationship. Nonetheless, the nature of the data collected does provide evidence as to the types of interactions and information disclosures that college students associate with various male–female relationships.

Despite the number of labels used to describe such relationships, the results of this study indicate three primary categories: friend, preromantic (hanging-out, talking, and casual dating), and romantic (dating, boyfriend/girlfriend, and romantic relationship). Relationships within each category carry fairly similar expectations in terms of interaction and information disclosures; however, within the preromantic category, casual dating reflects a move toward romantic that differs from the other two. Similarly, dating reflects a much less intimate relationship than do the labels boyfriend/girlfriend or romantic relationship. Dating can be viewed as a transitional relationship between the preromantic and romantic relationships.

A core set of expectations spanning all the relationship labels that can be regarded as fundamental to all male–female interpersonal relationships. Further study would be valuable on how the expectations for male-female relationships compare with expectations same-sex relationships. Understanding these expectations can help college students adapt appropriately in their relationships. The findings in this study on the variations in expectations associated with male–female relationship labels provide another piece of the puzzle for other researchers as they investigate the development of young adult romantic relationships. The results of this study represent average expectations held by the respondents. Individuals seeking to apply the results to their relationships should remember that each person has his or her own set of expectations. Whatever relationship label partners apply, discussing their expectations is an important step to developing and maintaining healthy relationships.

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