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The Role of Intimacy in the Production and Perception of Relationship Talk Within Courtship

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The authors define relationship talk as content messages that reference the nature of the relationship between people. They seek to contribute to the literature by (a) conceptualizing relationship talk in ways that attend to its nuances, and (b) evaluating how intimacy predicts the production and perception of relationship talk. They conducted an observational study of conversations between 120 dating couples. Length of romantic interest, compared to intimacy, was the more proximal predictor of the prominence, explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk. In general, relationship talk was positively associated with people's perceptions of the relational impact of conversation, but intimacy was unrelated to relational impact. The prominence of relationship talk noted by third-party judges was positively associated with relational impact when intimacy was low but not high. The authors discuss how their findings illuminate content messages about relationships.

Keywords: intimacy; relationship talk; conversation; courtship

A guiding principle within the field of interpersonal communication is that both a content message and a relational message are embedded in every utterance. A content message is the denotative meaning of an utterance, and a relational message is the information an utterance provides about the nature of the relationship between interactants (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). All relational messages convey information about the relationship between people, even when the corresponding content messages are virtually equivalent (cf. "Please pass the salt." "Give me the salt." "Is there any salt left for me?"). Not all content messages reference the nature of the relationship ("Close the door."), but content messages can allude to the relationship with varying degrees of specificity ("Thanks for being a good friend." "Our relationship has been tense lately." "Will you marry me?").

Whereas relational messages have garnered more than three decades of theorizing and research (Dillard, Solomon, & Palmer, 1999), content messages about relationships,

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labeled relationship talk, have been largely ignored by communication scholars (Acitelli, 1988, 2002). This disparity is unfortunate because relationship talk may be tied to the well-being of individuals and the vitality of relationships. For example, Acitelli (1992) found that the amount of relationship talk husbands enacted was positively correlated with wives' reports of contentment with their lives and satisfaction with their marriage. Acitelli and Clair (unpublished raw data cited in Acitelli, 2002) observed that the amount of relationship talk in which spouses engaged was negatively correlated with their reports of depression and positively correlated with their reports of equity in their marriage. Thus, relationship talk merits study because it may be linked to people's mental health and their relationship satisfaction.

We seek to advance the literature on relationship talk in two ways. Our first objective is to shed light on gradations in relationship talk. Previous research has privileged the quantity of relationship talk over the quality of those messages (Acitelli, 2001), so we consider ways relationship talk may vary beyond prominence. Our second objective is to examine how intimacy provides a backdrop for relationship talk. Intimacy, broadly defined as people's perceptions of connectedness, closeness, and bondedness within a relationship (Sternberg, 1986), exerts a substantial influence over both message production and message processing (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Although intimacy is a strong force shaping interpersonal communication, we lack an understanding of the role of intimacy in relationship talk.

We begin by theorizing about ways relationship talk may vary. Next, we advance hypotheses about how intimacy may predict both the production and perception of relationship talk in conversations between dating partners. Courtship furnishes the context for our article because the process of mate selection requires dating partners to negotiate fluctuating intimacy (Surra & Hughes, 1997) and to generate a shared understanding of their relationship (Baxter, 1987). Hence, intimacy and relationship talk are particularly salient concerns within courtship. We then report the method and results of a study in which 120 dating couples engaged in videotaped conversations. Finally, we discuss the implications of our data for understanding both intimacy and relationship talk.

The Nature of Relationship Talk

Although scholars have long speculated that relationship talk is a vehicle for sustaining romantic relationships (Baxter, 1987; Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993), empirical research is limited. The few studies that have measured relationship talk have focused on the amount people enact. Some investigations have evaluated how the presence or absence of relationship talk corresponds with events such as turning points (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis et al., 1993) and information acquisition episodes ("secret tests"; Bell & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1990). Other research has manipulated whether the presence or absence of relationship talk in hypothetical scenarios affects how people perceive marriage (Acitelli, 1988). A third approach has employed

joint interviews to gauge how much relationship talk couples engage in (Acitelli, 1992). Although this work has shed light on important issues, it does not address how relationship talk may vary beyond presence/absence or amount (e.g., Acitelli, 2001).

We believe scholarship on relationship talk would benefit from a more fine-grained analysis. Baxter and Bullis (1986) laid a foundation for our thinking when they surmised that relationship talk messages "might differ in quantity, content, context, strategies, and outcomes" (p. 488), but two decades later, their comments are still speculative. We identify possible gradations of relationship talk by considering dimensions that index variation in interpersonal communication more generally. The three constructs we cull from theories of interpersonal communication are not exhaustive of the ways to distinguish relationship talk, but we offer them as a first step in complementing the existing focus on the quantity of relationship talk.

Explicitness is a first dimension likely to index variation in relationship talk. Explicitness, identified by politeness theory as a fundamental dimension along which interpersonal communication varies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), refers to the directness, candor, and clarity of a message (Blum-Kulka, 1987). Explicit messages convey meaning through surface information rather than abstract inference (cf. "Come over for dinner on Saturday." "Will you be around this evening?"). With respect to relationship talk, explicitness denotes the degree to which messages reference the relationship directly, clearly, and precisely (e.g., Knapp & Taylor, 1994).

Depth may also distinguish nuances in relationship talk. Depth, which emerges from theoretical traditions focused on self-disclosure and privacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Petronio, 2002), is the extent to which messages convey private disclosures. Relationship talk messages can be arrayed along a continuum anchored on one end by intimate references to the relationship ("Are we ready to become sexually active?") and anchored on the other end by superficial references to the relationship ("Can you believe that we have known each other for over a year?"). Hence, depth differentiates the public versus private nature of relationship talk.

Negative valence is a third dimension that may reveal gradations in relationship talk. Negative valence, the degree to which messages are negative versus positive in tone, is emphasized as a basic element of interpersonal communication by work focused on conflict management (van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994) and responses to dissatisfying partner behavior (Drigotas, Whitney, & Rusbult, 1995). Negative valence captures messages that range from very destructive in tone ("You're a lazy, worthless husband. I don't know why I married you.") to very constructive in tone ("You're such a good husband. I'm glad I'm married to you."). Thus, negative valence discriminates unpleasant, hostile messages from pleasant, agreeable messages.

To this point, we have emphasized the importance of attending to variation in both the quality and quantity of relationship talk. We reviewed theories of interpersonal communication to identify explicitness, depth, and negative valence as features of messages that may index its gradations. We next consider how intimacy may predict these dimensions of relationship talk.

Intimacy and Producing Relationship Talk

Relationship talk may be a risky endeavor. If people articulate definitions of the relationship that differ radically, they may lose face (e.g., Kunkel, Wilson, Olufowote, & Robson, 2003), endanger the status quo under which they have been operating (e.g., Baxter, 1987), or damage their relationship beyond repair (e.g., Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Perhaps because of these risks, people nominate talking about relationships as a taboo topic (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). They may actively avoid discussing their relationship when they feel uncertain about its status (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004) or when they suspect they will uncover face-threatening information (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Hence, relationship talk may furnish substantial challenges for romantic partners.

We expect that intimacy may attenuate the risks of engaging in relationship talk. If intimacy facilitates open communication about sensitive topics (Altman & Taylor, 1973), then it may dampen the threatening nature of relationship talk. Participants in intimate relationships may be better able to craft messages that are sensitive to their partner's goals (Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994), to anticipate their partner's response (Berger & Bradac, 1982), and to maintain confidence in their partner's commitment to the relationship (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). Thus, we posit that intimacy may afford people a measure of protection from the vulnerability inherent in relationship talk (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a).

Although our logic suggests that intimacy may facilitate relationship talk, we recognize the need to distinguish the effects of intimacy from the mere passage of time. Intimacy and length of romantic interest typically unfold together as courtships progress, but people's subjective perceptions of intimacy are both conceptually and empirically distinct from developmental markers of time (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). But like intimacy, length of romantic interest may be positively associated with relationship talk. People who have been romantically interested in each other for a longer period of time may have more of a shared history to discuss (e.g., Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994). Second, the passage of time may create normative pressure for individuals to talk about their relationship (e.g., Honeycutt, Cantrill, & Greene, 1989). Third, longevity may prompt people to be more emotionally invested in their relationship, which, in turn, may spark more relationship talk (e.g., Berscheid, 1983). This logic leads us to suspect that length of romantic interest may be positively associated with the prominence, explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk in conversation.

But is intimacy or length of romantic interest the more proximal predictor of relationship talk? If time, shared history, and relaxing social norms are the prerequisites of relationship talk, then any positive correlation between intimacy and relationship talk would be spurious. On the other hand, individuals may enact more relationship talk as courtships progress because their perceptions of intimacy make them more secure about the stability of their relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). In that

case, any positive correlation between length of romantic interest and relationship talk would be an artifact of the overlap they share with intimacy. Distinguishing between the two predictors is important for understanding the extent to which relationship talk is tied to subjective perceptions of closeness and/or time-based social norms. Consequently, we offer the following hypotheses and research questions:

> *Hypothesis 1 (H1):* Intimacy (H1a) and length of romantic interest (H1b) are positively associated with the prominence of relationship talk in conversation.
>
> *Research Question 1 (RQ1):* Is intimacy or length of romantic interest the more proximal predictor of the prominence of relationship talk in conversation?
>
> *Hypothesis 2 (H2):* Intimacy (H2a) and length of romantic interest (H2b) are positively associated with the explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk in conversation.
>
> *Research Question 2 (RQ2):* Is intimacy or length of romantic interest the more proximal predictor of the explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk in conversation?

Intimacy and Perceiving Relationship Talk

A next step is to consider how intimacy may shape the relational impact of conversations containing relationship talk. We define relational impact as people's perceptions of the significance of conversations for their relationship. A prerequisite for investigating relational impact is deciding how to index it. We are not aware of any empirical investigations that have documented the relational impact of conversations involving relationship talk, but scholars have speculated about two constructs that may be relevant. We draw on their theorizing to distinguish dimensions that may gauge the relational impact of conversations containing relationship talk.

First, scholars have implied that the presence of relationship talk heightens the importance of the conversation within the relationship (e.g., Acitelli, 2002). Relationship talk provides a vehicle for escalating, maintaining, or diminishing the closeness between partners (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Hence, relationship talk may increase the relational importance of conversation because it can spark such major consequences (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1984, 1985). Second, researchers have speculated that conversations containing relationship talk influence people's definition of their relationship (e.g., Baxter, 1987; Wilmot, 1980). Relationship talk can hone people's understanding of their relationship by clarifying how committed, invested, and attached partners are (e.g., Knapp & Taylor, 1994). Thus, relationship talk may influence people's definition of their relationship by providing insight into its nature.

We expect that relationship talk heightens people's perceptions of the relational impact of interaction. More prominent relationship talk is likely to be more consequential for relationships (e.g., Acitelli, 2002; Baxter, 1987). Similarly, explicit arguments usually have greater strength (e.g., Dillard, Wilson, Tusing, & Kinney, 1997), in-depth

messages generally convey greater closeness (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973), and negatively valenced utterances tend to be more salient within interaction (e.g., Kellermann, 1989). Accordingly, we propose that people are likely to attach more relational significance to conversations that contain more prominent, explicit, in-depth, and negatively valenced relationship talk. Formally stated:

> *Hypothesis 3 (H3):* The prominence of relationship talk in conversation is positively associated with people's perceptions of the relational impact of the conversation.
> *Hypothesis 4 (H4):* The explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk in conversation are positively associated with people's perceptions of the relational impact of the conversation.

Whereas relationship talk should amplify the relational impact of conversation, intimacy should have the opposite effect. At low levels of intimacy, individuals are motivated to gain personalized information about the nature of the relationship (Berger & Bradac, 1982) and to accurately forecast how rewarding the relationship could be in the future (Sunnafrank, 1986). Conversely, at high levels of intimacy, people have established mutually beneficial and interdependent routines (Berscheid, 1983), they are knowledgeable about their partner's attitudes (Berger & Bradac, 1982), and they are committed to maintaining the relationship into the future (Rusbult et al., 2001). Hence, a conversation should have less relational impact in an intimate association because people have a well-formed definition of the relationship already in place.

We anticipate that the association between people's subjective appraisals of intimacy and their perceptions of a conversation should persist beyond the effects of a more objective marker of progression such as length of romantic interest. Intimacy and time are unique indicators of relationship progression (Berscheid et al., 1989), and intimacy develops more slowly in some courtships than others (Cate, Huston, & Nesselroade, 1986). Our logic suggests that when intimacy is low, information conveyed by relationship talk should be relationally significant. At low levels of intimacy, even when individuals have been romantically interested in each other for a long time, relationship talk may signal a potential redefinition of the courtship. Conversely, at high levels of intimacy, information embedded in relationship talk should carry less weight because people are already secure in their perceptions of the relationship. We propose that the effect of people's subjective perceptions of intimacy should hold regardless of whether the courtship has developed quickly or slowly. Because we expect length of romantic interest to share a bivariate association with relationship talk (H1b, H2b), we include it as a covariate in our prediction about intimacy and people's perceptions of conversation:

> *Hypothesis 5 (H5):* Controlling for length of romantic interest, intimacy is negatively associated with people's perceptions of the relational impact of conversation.

A final issue is whether relationship talk corresponds differently with the relational impact of conversation across levels of intimacy. We predicted that relationship talk is positively associated (H3, H4) and intimacy is negatively associated (H5) with the relational impact of conversation. By extension, we anticipate that relationship talk may be more positively correlated with people's perceptions of the relational impact of conversation when intimacy is low rather than high. At low levels of intimacy, relationship talk may occur with less prominence, explicitness, depth, and negative valence (H1a, H2a), but a conversation involving relationship talk may be very valuable for understanding the nature of the relationship. Conversely, at high levels of intimacy, relationship talk may occur with more prominence, explicitness, depth, and negative valence (H1a, H2a), but a conversation containing relationship talk may not be especially consequential within the relationship. We advance two final hypotheses to evaluate an interaction between intimacy and relationship talk:

> *Hypothesis 6 (H6):* The prominence of relationship talk in conversation is more positively associated with people's perceptions of the relational impact of the conversation when intimacy is low rather than high.
>
> *Hypothesis 7 (H7):* The explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk in conversation are more positively associated with people's perceptions of the relational impact of the conversation when intimacy is low rather than high.

Method

We conducted an observational study of conversations between dating partners and operationalized the prominence of relationship talk using both self-report and coding techniques. A self-report measure is useful for gauging participants' own perceptions, but it may be clouded by people's appraisals of the dyadic climate. In contrast, a coded measure is helpful for assessing relationship talk apparent to independent observers, but it may be less sensitive to the nuances that are meaningful to insiders. We employed both measurement strategies to capitalize on their strengths while evaluating their differences. We operationalized the explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk using coding procedures because those variables required judgments on a turn-by-turn basis. We describe our investigation in the following subsections.[2]

Sample and Procedures

Students enrolled in communication courses at a midwestern university earned extra course credit for participating with a romantic partner. The sample contained 120 heterosexual dyads (120 males, 120 females) in which at least 1 person reported being romantically interested in his or her partner (range = 17-30 years of age, $M = 20.55$, $SD = 1.54$, $Mdn = 20$).

Data collection commenced in four phases. First, partners individually completed a questionnaire containing measures of intimacy and length of romantic interest. Second, couples engaged in a 5-minute warm-up conversation. During a third phase, couples were assigned 1 of 3 topics (see Table 1) chosen in a pretest to this study.[3] To ensure a balanced distribution of intimacy, partners were assigned a topic based on a chance of marriage score (Lloyd, Cate, & Henton, 1984) they reported in the initial questionnaire. Individuals circled a percentage in response to the question, "At the current time, what is the likelihood that you will marry your partner?" (range = 0%-100%, $M = 46.95\%$, $SD = 34.31\%$, $Mdn = 50\%$). In a final phase, participants received instruction cards describing their assigned topic, engaged in a 10-minute videotaped interaction (40 dyads = positive talk, 41 dyads = negative talk, 39 dyads = surprising event talk), and individually completed a follow-up questionnaire containing measures of relationship talk and relational impact. On average, couples completed the study in 65 minutes.

Measures

Intimacy. We chose Rubin's (1970) measure to operationalize intimacy for both conceptual and empirical reasons. On a conceptual level, the scale privileges people's subjective perceptions of intimacy (Solomon, 1997; Sternberg, 1987). Whereas other measures assess interdependent activities (Berscheid et al., 1989), shared time between partners (Schaefer & Olson, 1981), or commitment to maintaining a relationship into the future (Rusbult, 1983), Rubin's measure asks respondents to indicate their feelings of closeness toward a romantic partner. Consequently, Rubin's scale allowed us to parse subjective perceptions of intimacy from the more objective marker of length of romantic interest. On an empirical level, the measure shows evidence of both convergent and divergent validity (Cloven & Roloff, 1994; Rubin, 1970; Solomon, 1997). Thus, we were guided by both conceptual reasoning and empirical findings in selecting Rubin's measure to operationalize intimacy.[4]

Participants indicated their agreement with nine items (1 = *not at all true*, 9 = *definitely true*): (a) "I feel that I can confide in this person about virtually everything"; (b) "I would do anything for this person"; (c) "If I could never be with this person, I would feel miserable"; (d) "If I were lonely, my first thought would be to seek this person out"; (e) "One of my primary concerns is this person's welfare"; (f) "I would forgive this person for practically anything"; (g) "I feel responsible for this person's well-being"; (h) "I would greatly enjoy being confided in by this person"; and (i) "It would be hard for me to get along without this person" (range = 1.89-9.00, $M = 6.81$, $SD = 1.75$, $\alpha = .93$).

Length of romantic interest. Participants indicated the length of time they had been romantically interested in their partner (range = 1 week to 6 years, $M = 11.21$ months,

Table 1
Topics of Conversation

Positive talk

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

Negative talk

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

Surprising event talk

   At this time, we would like you and your partner to talk about a recent and unexpected event that caused you to be more or less certain about some aspect of your relationship. You may want to talk about a surprising event that caused you to be more sure about the nature of your relationship. Perhaps you want to talk about an unexpected behavior that made you question some aspect of your relationship. The recent event that you discuss may be either positive or negative in nature, but it should have changed the level of certainty you had about your relationship.

Note: Topics were selected in a pretest to the study.

$SD = 12.29$ months, $Mdn = 7$ months). Like many measures of time, this variable was positively skewed, so we performed a square root transformation to pull in the tail (as per Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). We used the transformed variable in all of our analyses ($M = 2.84$ months, $SD = 1.78$ months, $Mdn = 2.65$ months).

Covariates. The follow-up questionnaire included closed-ended items measuring the realism and ease of the interaction (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). Confirmatory factor analytic (CFA; Hunter & Gerbing, 1982) results indicated that four items formed a unidimensional measure of realism: (a) "This interaction was realistic in my relationship"; (b) "This interaction was typical in my relationship"; (c) "This kind of interaction was unnatural in my relationship" (reverse scored); and (d) "This kind of interaction happens often in my relationship" ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.22$, $\alpha = .88$). Four unidimensional items operationalized the ease of the task: (a) "I felt uncomfortable having this interaction" (reverse scored); (b) "I was able to be myself in this interaction"; (c) "I was not able to express myself fully in this interaction" (reverse scored); and (d) "I found it easy to have this interaction with my partner" ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.11$, $\alpha = .73$).

Self-reported relationship talk. To measure this variable, we wrote items that appeared in the follow-up questionnaire. Participants recorded their agreement with statements completing the stem, "This interaction was . . ." (1 = *strongly disagree*,

6 = *strongly agree*). Then, we conducted CFA to verify the unidimensionality of the items. CFA results identified four items that formed a unidimensional scale: (a) "focused on our relationship"; (b) "not concentrated on the nature of our relationship" (reverse scored); (c) "focused on the nature of the relationship between us"; and (d) "concentrated on our relationship" ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.56$, $\alpha = .93$).

Coded relationship talk. We trained two independent judges to code the relationship talk in which participants engaged. Judges watched the videotaped interactions while reading transcripts of the conversations, and they recorded the speaking turns in which couples referred to their relationship either implicitly or explicitly. They indicated their decisions using the prompt, "Did this speaking turn reference the relationship between participants?"

Judges coded speaking turns for 15 couples independently, met to recalibrate their standards, and repeated the process until they had evaluated all of the data. Across the 18,040 speaking turns uttered during the interactions, κ was .72. We resolved disagreements using a decision rule that maximized the inclusivity of the measure. Namely, we selected the choice made by the judge who recorded the most speaking turns of relationship talk for the sample ($n = 5,175$ speaking turns). In total, 214 of the 240 participants (89%) engaged in at least one speaking turn of relationship talk (range = 0-105 speaking turns, $M = 21.56$, $SD = 19.92$).

Finally, we calculated a proportion for each individual as the number of speaking turns of coded relationship talk divided by the total number of his or her speaking turns (range = 0.00-1.00, $M = 0.30$, $SD = 0.28$). We used this proportion to index the prominence of relationship talk noted by outside observers (see the appendix for examples of coded relationship talk).

Explicitness of relationship talk. To generate precise boundaries for judging variation in explicitness, depth, and negative valence, we trained a judge to unitize the speaking turns of relationship talk into acts (as per Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Redmond, 1983). We evaluated reliability by asking a second judge to unitize 32 conversations (30% of the couples who engaged in relationship talk). The two judges agreed on 95% of the boundaries of the 1,242 acts they evaluated in common (Guetzkow's $U = .02$).

Next, we trained three new judges to rate the explicitness of each act using the prompt, "This act explicitly referenced the relationship" (1 = *disagree strongly*, 5 = *agree strongly*). Because the speaking turns initially coded as relationship talk had subsequently been unitized into acts, judges also employed a *not applicable* category to classify acts that did not constitute relationship talk. If all three judges agreed that an act was not relationship talk, we dismissed the act, and we adjusted participants' coded relationship talk scores accordingly. We calculated the variable by averaging the three judges' ratings across the acts ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.53$, $\alpha = .88$).

Depth of relationship talk. Three new judges rated the degree to which each act focused on private relationship issues. Judges recorded their response to the item,

"During this act, the participant discussed intimate topics about the relationship" (1 = *not at all deep*, 5 = *very deep*). Judges met for a training session, worked alone to rate 30 conversations, and then repeated the process of training and rating until they had evaluated the full set ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.76$, $\alpha = .74$).

Negative valence of relationship talk. Three judges rated each act of relationship talk for its tone by answering the question, "What is the tone of this act of relationship talk?" (1 = *very negative*, 4 = *neutral*, 7 = *very positive*). Judges worked alone to rate sets of 30 conversations while watching the videotapes and reading the transcripts, and they met after each round of rating to recalibrate their standards. We reverse scored the item and computed a negative valence score by averaging the judges' ratings across the acts ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.63$, $\alpha = .78$).

Relational impact. We measured people's perceptions of relational impact in the follow-up questionnaire (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). A four-item measure adapted from Afifi and Metts (1998) assessed the importance of the conversation within the relationship: (a) "This interaction was an important event within my relationship"; (b) "This interaction made me think about my relationship"; (c) "This was a minor event within my relationship" (reverse scored); and (d) "This was a major occurrence within my relationship." CFA procedures verified the unidimensionality of the scale at the first-order level ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.42$, $\alpha = .87$).

We crafted new items to measure the influence of the conversation over people's definition of their relationship: (a) "This interaction changed the way I think about my relationship"; (b) "This interaction influenced my understanding of my relationship"; and (c) "My definition of this relationship has changed because of this interaction." Again, CFA results indicated that the scale was unidimensional at the first-order level ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.24$, $\alpha = .81$).

We then examined the second-order factor structure of the measures of importance and influence. The two variables were positively correlated ($r = .66$, $p < .001$), and results of a second-order CFA test showed that the measures were unidimensional at the second-order level. Accordingly, we computed a relational impact score by averaging each participant's scores for importance and influence ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.21$, $\alpha = .79$). We used this composite variable in our analyses for the sake of parsimony.

Results

We employed an α level of .05 and two-tailed tests of statistical significance for all analyses. For the hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) strategy we used to test our hypotheses ($N = 240$ individuals nested within $N = 120$ conversations), a conservative estimate of power is .92 to detect medium effects and .99 to detect large effects (Cohen, 1988).

Bivariate Correlations

We began by computing bivariate correlations among the independent variables and covariates (see Table 2). Intimacy was positively correlated with length of romantic interest. Moreover, as preliminary evidence in favor of H1, intimacy and length of romantic interest were positively associated with both self-reported relationship talk and coded relationship talk. The measures of relationship talk generally shared positive correlations. Results for the covariates revealed that people's perceptions of the realism and ease of conversation were positively correlated. Ease was positively associated with intimacy, but it was negatively associated with coded relationship talk and the negative valence of relationship talk. These latter findings show the importance of controlling for realism and ease in the tests of our hypotheses.

Data Analytic Strategy for Hypotheses Tests

Statistical dependence was present in our data because we collected observations from both partners,[5] so we used HLM for our substantive analyses (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). HLM allowed us to accommodate the statistical dependence by treating individuals as nested within conversations. HLM employs the general linear model with maximum likelihood estimation to estimate the intercept, gradients of the predictors, and variance components of random factors. Our HLM analyses evaluated two individuals nested within one conversation; accordingly, enough degrees of freedom were available within the dyads to treat one variable as a random factor in estimating the variance components. We designated intimacy as the random factor because it was the primary independent variable under investigation, and we treated the other variables and the intercept as fixed factors.

We conducted our analyses using a two-level hierarchical model. We treated individual-level variables as Level 1 predictors (intimacy, length of romantic interest, self-reported relationship talk, coded relationship talk, features of relationship talk, and relational impact). We treated topic assignment as a Level 2 predictor. We converted all of the variables to z scores so we could compare the effect sizes of the predictors in a common metric.

In all of our analyses, we covaried (a) people's perceptions of the realism and ease of the conversation, and (b) the topic of conversation to which they were assigned. We included these covariates to control for external sources of variation in the conversations.

Intimacy, Length of Romantic Interest, and Relationship Talk (H1, H2, RQ1, RQ2)

We tested our first set of hypotheses by examining intimacy and length of romantic interest as predictors of relationship talk in separate analyses. We included four covariates: participants' perceptions of the realism and ease of the conversation, and

Table 2
Bivariate Correlations Among the Independent Variables and Covariates

	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9
V1: Intimacy	—								
V2: Length of romantic interest	.55***	—							
V3: Self-reported relationship talk	.19**	.23**	—						
V4: Coded relationship talk	.14*	.21**	.55***	—					
V5: Explicitness of relationship talk	.09	.17*	.16*	.11	—				
V6: Depth of relationship talk	.08	.23**	.29***	.50***	.28***	—			
V7: Negative valence of relationship talk	–.04	.14	.16*	.40***	.18*	.46***	—		
V8: Realism	.11	.00	.04	–.08	–.06	–.11	.01	—	
V9: Ease	.20**	.11	.03	–.13*	.02	–.08	–.17*	.43***	—

Note: $N = 240$ individuals for intimacy, length of romantic interest, self-reported relationship talk, coded relationship talk, realism, and ease. $N = 214$ individuals for the explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

two variables dummy coded to represent the three conversation topics. Consistent with H1a and H1b, intimacy and length of romantic interest were positively associated with self-reported relationship talk and coded relationship talk (see the top and middle panels of Table 3). With respect to H2a, intimacy was positively correlated with the explicitness of relationship talk but not the depth or negative valence of relationship talk. Mixed findings were also apparent for H2b: Length of romantic interest was positively associated with the depth of relationship talk, but it was unrelated to the explicitness or negative valence of relationship talk.

We evaluated RQ1 and RQ2 by including intimacy and length of romantic interest as predictors in the same analysis (see the bottom panel of Table 3). Across all five models, length of romantic interest was a statistically significant predictor of the relationship talk variables, but intimacy was not.[6] These findings imply that length of romantic interest, compared to intimacy, is the more proximal predictor of relationship talk.[7]

Relationship Talk and Perceptions of Conversation (H3, H4)

We examined H3 and H4 by constructing models in which relational impact was predicted by one measure of relationship talk, realism, ease, and the two dummy-

Table 3
Relationship Talk Predicted by Intimacy, Length
of Romantic Interest, and Covariates

	Self-Reported Relationship Talk	Coded Relationship Talk	Explicitness	Depth	Negative Valence
Intimacy	.20**	.18*	.29**	.12	.04
Realism	.07	.04	−.06	−.05	.14*
Ease	−.03	−.16**	−.06	−.06	−.22**
Dummy 1	−.31***	−.57***	−.03	−.62**	−.80***
Dummy 2	−.28**	−.48***	.31**	.05	.02
Length of romantic interest	.24**	.26**	.22	.23*	.12
Realism	.09	−.05	−.01	−.10	.09
Ease	−.02	−.08	−.04	−.05	−.17*
Dummy 1	−.34***	−.60***	−.19	−.64**	−.52*
Dummy 2	−.33***	−.51***	.21	−.01	.04
Intimacy	.11	.04	.14	−.09	−.11
Length of romantic interest	.17*	.25**	.27***	.37***	.29*
Realism	.08	.06	−.06	−.03	.15*
Ease	−.03	−.16**	−.07	−.07	−.23**
Dummy 1	−.32***	−.59***	−.02	−.64***	−.83***
Dummy 2	−.29***	−.48***	.29*	−.01	−.01

Note: $N = 240$ individuals for self-reported relationship talk and coded relationship talk. $N = 214$ individuals for the explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk. Cell entries for intimacy, length of romantic interest, realism, and ease are slopes predicting relationship talk. Cell entries for Dummy 1 (positive talk conversation) and Dummy 2 (negative talk conversation) specify the change in the intercept.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

coded terms representing topic assignment (see Table 4). Consistent with H3, self-reported and coded relationship talk were positively correlated with relational impact. H4 was partially supported: The explicitness of relationship talk was not associated with relational impact, but the depth and negative valence of relationship talk were positively correlated with relational impact.

Intimacy and Perceptions of Conversation (H5)

We tested H5 by specifying a model in which intimacy predicted relational impact with length of romantic interest partialled. We included five additional covariates: (a) self-reported relationship talk, to control for people's perceptions of how much the conversation focused on their relationship, (b) people's judgments of the realism and ease of the conversation, and (c) two dummy-coded terms to account

Table 4
Relational Impact Predicted by Relationship Talk and Covariates

	Self-Reported Relationship Talk	Coded Relationship Talk	Explicitness	Depth	Negative Valence
Relationship talk variable	.43***	.24**	.07	.17*	.21*
Realism	−.06	−.04	−.03	−.03	−.08
Ease	−.24***	−.18**	−.23***	−.22**	−.17*
Dummy 1	−.16*	−.16	−.58***	−.50**	−.43*
Dummy 2	−.07	−.12	−.44**	−.52**	−.51**

Note: $N = 240$ individuals for self-reported relationship talk and coded relationship talk. $N = 214$ individuals for the explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk. Cell entries for relationship talk, realism, and ease are slopes predicting relational impact. Cell entries for Dummy 1 (positive talk conversation) and Dummy 2 (negative talk conversation) specify the change in the intercept.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

for the three conversation topics. Results revealed that neither intimacy nor length of romantic interest were statistically significant predictors of relational impact (see Table 5). H5 was not supported.

Intimacy, Prominence of Relationship Talk, and Perceptions of Conversation (H6)

We then constructed models in which relational impact was predicted by intimacy, length of romantic interest, and self-reported or coded relationship talk. We tested H6 by including an interaction term calculated as the product of intimacy and the relationship talk variable. We also entered realism, ease, and the dummy-coded topic variables as covariates (see Table 6).

Results diverged for the two measures of relationship talk. No interaction was apparent between intimacy and self-reported relationship talk, but an interaction was evident between intimacy and coded relationship talk. We followed guidelines recommended by Aiken and West (1991, chap. 3) to probe the interaction by calculating the slopes for coded relationship talk at one standard deviation below the mean of intimacy, at the mean of intimacy, and at one standard deviation above the mean of intimacy.

Coded relationship talk was positively associated with relational impact at low (slope = .52, $p < .001$) and average (slope = .35, $p < .001$) levels of intimacy, but it was unrelated to relational impact at high levels of intimacy (slope = .18, *ns*). The positive association between coded relationship talk and relational impact was strongest at low levels of intimacy (see Figure 1). Thus, H6 was supported for coded relationship talk but not for self-reported relationship talk.

Table 5
Relational Impact Predicted by Intimacy, Length of Romantic Interest, Self-Reported Relationship Talk, and Covariates

	Relational Impact
Intimacy	−.09
Length of romantic interest	−.12
Self-reported relationship talk	.48***
Realism	−.07
Ease	−.20***
Dummy 1	−.14*
Dummy 2	−.06

Note: $N = 240$ individuals. Cell entries for intimacy, length of romantic interest, self-reported relationship talk, realism, and ease are slopes predicting relational impact. Cell entries for Dummy 1 (positive talk conversation) and Dummy 2 (negative talk conversation) specify the change in the intercept.
*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

Intimacy, Features of Relationship Talk, and Perceptions of Conversation (H7)

To evaluate H7, we computed models in which relational impact was predicted by (a) intimacy, (b) length of romantic interest, (c) the explicitness, depth, or negative valence of relationship talk, and (d) the product of intimacy and the relationship talk variable. We added self-reported relationship talk as a covariate to hold constant the quantity of relationship talk that individuals perceived in the conversation. We also controlled for (a) people's perceptions of realism and ease, and (b) the topic of conversation (see Table 7).

Results depended on the measure of relationship talk we examined. Intimacy did not interact with the explicitness or depth of relationship talk to predict relational impact, but an interaction between intimacy and the negative valence of relationship talk was evident. We again used procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991) to compute the slopes for the negative valence of relationship talk at one standard deviation below the mean of intimacy, at the mean of intimacy, and at one standard deviation above the mean of intimacy. The direction of the effect was opposite of H7: The negative valence of relationship talk was positively correlated with relational impact at high (slope = .26, $p < .01$) and average (slope = .14, $p < .05$) levels of intimacy, but it was unrelated to relational impact at low levels of intimacy (slope = .08, ns). Figure 2 illustrates the interaction. Hence, H7 was not supported.[8]

Discussion

We sought to advance the literature on relationship talk in two ways. First, we offered a more nuanced conceptualization of relationship talk by considering variation

Table 6
Relational Impact Predicted by Intimacy, Length of Romantic Interest, Self-Reported or Coded Relationship Talk, the Interaction of Intimacy and Relationship Talk, and Covariates

	Self-Reported Relationship Talk	Coded Relationship Talk
Intimacy	−.09	−.08
Length of romantic interest	−.12	−.12
Relationship talk variable	.48***	.35***
Realism	−.07	−.06
Ease	−.20***	−.15*
Dummy 1	−.14*	−.23
Dummy 2	−.06	−.08
Intimacy × relationship talk variable	−.02	−.17**

Note: $N = 240$ individuals. Cell entries for intimacy, length of romantic interest, relationship talk, realism, ease, and the interaction term are slopes predicting relational impact. Cell entries for Dummy 1 (positive talk conversation) and Dummy 2 (negative talk conversation) specify the change in the intercept. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

in the quality as well as the quantity of messages. We reviewed theories of interpersonal communication to identify explicitness, depth, and negative valence as dimensions that may capture gradations in relationship talk. Second, we documented how intimacy coincides with relationship talk. We deduced hypotheses about how intimacy may predict the production and perception of relationship talk, and we evaluated our predictions by conducting a study of conversations between dating partners. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings.

Intimacy and the Production of Relationship Talk (H1, H2, RQ1, RQ2)

We first considered how intimacy predicts the production of relationship talk. As we expected, both intimacy (H1a) and length of romantic interest (H1b) were positively associated with the prominence of relationship talk in conversation. Our findings for the features of relationship talk were more mixed: Intimacy was positively associated with only the explicitness of relationship talk (H2a), and length of romantic interest was positively associated with only the depth of relationship talk (H2b). When we examined the independent variables simultaneously, we observed that length of romantic interest was the more proximal predictor of relationship talk (RQ1, RQ2). These findings imply that the positive association between intimacy and relationship talk stems from the variance they both share with length of romantic interest.

Figure 1
Relational Impact Predicted by the Interaction
Between Intimacy and Coded Relationship Talk
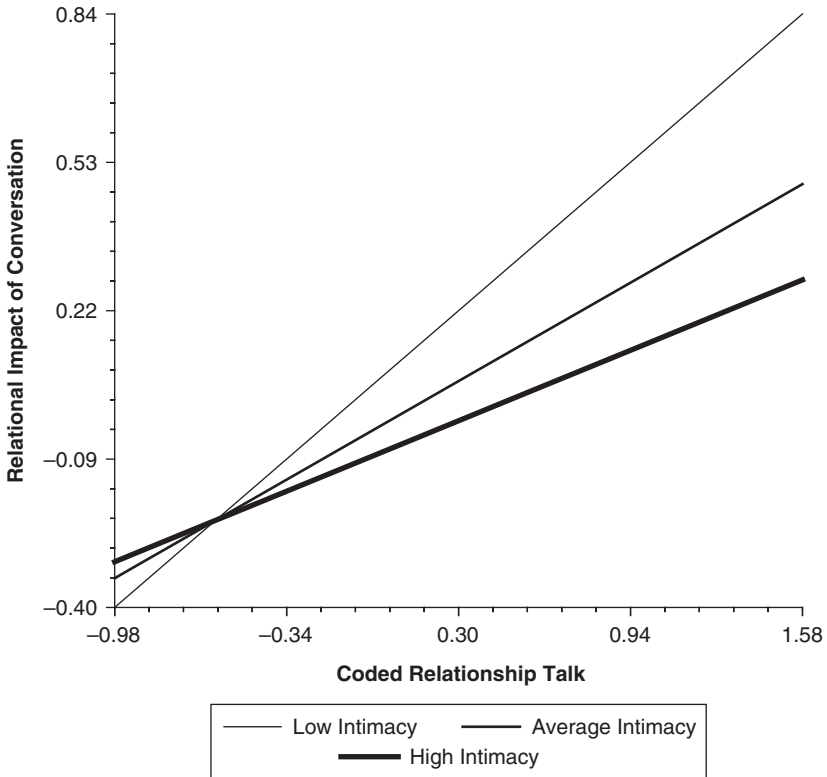
Note: Coded relationship talk and relational impact were calculated in the metric of z scores.

Scholars often consider intimacy and time as interchangeable facets of relation-ship development, but our data suggest that length of romantic interest may be the more proximal predictor of relationship talk. Early in the development of courtship, social norms prohibiting personal disclosures may discourage individuals from talk-ing about their relationships (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973). As time passes, social norms promoting openness may encourage people to engage in relationship talk (e.g., Honeycutt, Cantrill, Kelly, & Lambkin, 1998). Two pieces of empirical evi-dence support this reasoning. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) found that one reason people avoid relationship talk is because their relationships are not sufficiently

Table 7
Relational Impact Predicted by Intimacy, Length of
Romantic Interest, Self-Reported Relationship Talk,
Features of Relationship Talk, the Interaction of Intimacy
and Features of Relationship Talk, and Covariates

	Explicitness	Depth	Negative Valence
Intimacy	−.14*	−.13	−.11
Length of romantic interest	−.09	−.11	−.11
Self-reported relationship talk	.48***	.46***	.48***
Feature of relationship talk	.08	.13	.14*
Realism	−.08	−.07	−.11
Ease	−.22***	−.21***	−.19**
Dummy 1	−.30*	−.26	−.17
Dummy 2	−.20	−.21	−.16
Intimacy × feature of relationship talk	−.02	−.02	.09*

Note: $N = 214$ individuals. Cell entries for intimacy, length of romantic interest, self-reported relationship talk, features of relationship talk, realism, ease, and the interaction term are slopes predicting relational impact. Cell entries for Dummy 1 (positive talk conversation) and Dummy 2 (negative talk conversation) specify the change in the intercept.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

developed. Similarly, Cloven and Roloff (1994) observed that individuals involved in courtships of shorter duration withhold more complaints from their partner. Our results, coupled with this previous work, imply that social norms governing relationship talk may shift with the passage of time.

Relationship Talk and Perceptions of Conversation (H3, H4)

We then turned our focus from message production to message processing. Consistent with logic that conversations containing relationship talk are more important to the relationship and more influential in shaping the definition of the relationship (Acitelli, 2002; Baxter, 1987), we documented a positive association between the prominence of relationship talk in conversation and people's perceptions of the relational impact of conversation (H3). We also found that the depth and negative valence of relationship talk, but not the explicitness of relationship talk, are positively associated with people's judgments of relational impact (H4). These results imply that the prominence, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk make conversations more consequential within relationships.

Figure 2
Relational Impact Predicted by the Interaction Between
Intimacy and the Negative Valence of Relationship Talk
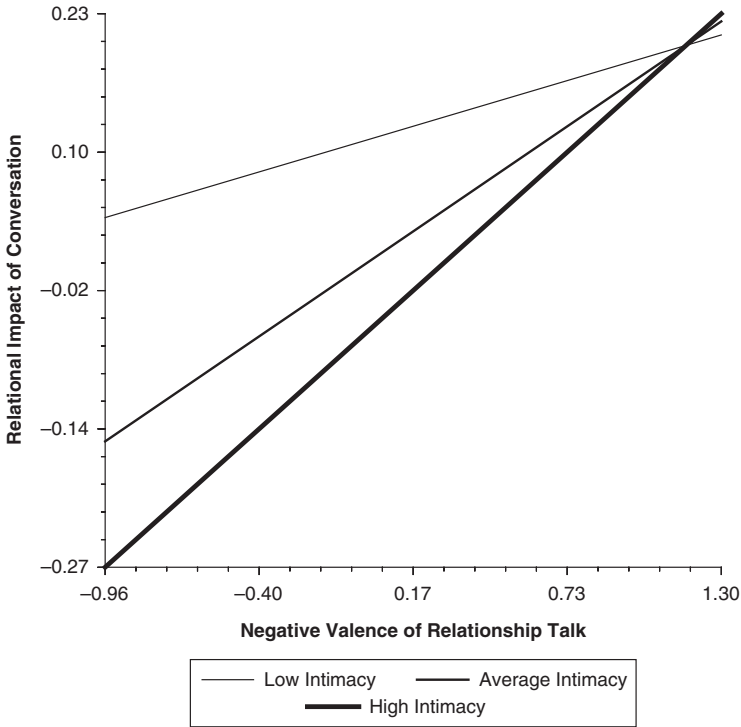
Note: The negative valence of relationship talk and relational impact were calculated in the metric of
z scores.

Viewed at a higher level of abstraction, our findings suggest a profile of message characteristics that may amplify or attenuate the relational impact of conversation in other domains. Do the prominence, depth, and negative valence of messages predict the relational impact of conversation when people engage in conflict (e.g., Roloff & Soule, 2002), offer comfort (e.g., Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), request advice (MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, & Budarz, 2004), or seek compliance (e.g., Dillard, Anderson, & Knobloch, 2002)? Of course, relationship talk could be pressed into service to accomplish all of these communicative goals, so the message characteristics we identified may provide a starting point for documenting the relational impact of conversation in allied domains.

Intimacy and Perceptions of Conversation (H5)

We reasoned that the relational significance of any one conversation may be limited when people possess the security afforded by high levels of intimacy, but intimacy was unrelated to relational impact (H5). Perhaps participants in courtships at high levels of intimacy encounter different dyadic parameters that still make conversation meaningful. Indeed, the sizable investments individuals devote to courtships at high levels of intimacy may make interaction a high-stakes venture (e.g., Rusbult et al., 2001). If our interpretation is correct, then intimacy may be too distal a predictor of the relational impact of conversation. Rather, intimacy may provide a backdrop against which features of conversation become more or less consequential. This logic implies that our decision to examine intimacy in conjunction with features of relationship talk messages was prudent: Certain qualities of messages may be more or less noteworthy at different levels of intimacy. We consider this point next.

Intimacy, Relationship Talk, and Perceptions of Conversation (H6, H7)

Our final hypotheses predicted that intimacy interacts with the prominence (H6) and explicitness, depth, and negative valence (H7) of relationship talk to predict people's perceptions of relational impact. Our findings varied across the five facets of relationship talk we measured. For H6, we documented an interaction for coded but not self-reported relationship talk. As we predicted, coded relationship talk was positively associated with relational impact at low but not high levels of intimacy. For H7, we observed an interaction for negative valence but not explicitness or depth. The direction of the effect was opposite of our prediction: Negative valence was positively associated with relational impact at high but not low levels of intimacy. Although the inconsistent interaction effect requires cautious interpretation, the coded prominence and negativity of relationship talk may vary in relational impact across levels of intimacy.

Why was an interaction apparent for the prominence of relationship talk for the coded measure but not the self-reported measure (H6)? We suspect that the divergence may stem from the strength of the association the two measures shared with relational impact. Self-reported relationship talk was more strongly associated with relational impact than was coded relationship talk (see Table 4). Perhaps people's perceptions of relational impact are so bound up in their appraisals of relationship talk that we were not able to disentangle the two across levels of intimacy. In contrast, the judgments of relationship talk made by independent observers are not confounded with people's perceptions of relational impact. This finding suggests to us the importance of employing multiple measurement strategies to avoid shared method variance.

Similar questions remain for the features of relationship talk. Why did an interaction emerge for the negative valence of relationship talk but not the explicitness or

depth of relationship talk (H7)? And why was negatively valenced relationship talk more relationally significant at high levels of intimacy? Again, we believe the answers may lie in the different associations the message features shared with relational impact (see Tables 4 and 7). Explicitness was unrelated to relational impact across all of our tests. If explicitness requires the most insider knowledge to draw accurate conclusions, then our decision to operationalize it using coders' judgments may have obscured its association with relational impact. In contrast, depth exerted a main effect on relational impact that was not qualified by an interaction with intimacy. Perhaps private, in-depth messages make conversations meaningful across all levels of intimacy (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973). Finally, negative valence was more positively associated with relational impact when intimacy was high rather than low. We had expected that negatively valenced relationship talk would be more relationally significant at low levels of intimacy because it violates norms of politeness (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987), but perhaps negatively valenced relationship talk is more meaningful at high levels of intimacy because it threatens the resources people have invested in a valued courtship (e.g., Rusbult et al., 2001). Although our findings are more complex because of the divergence among explicitness, depth, and negative valence, we see value in examining the contours of relationship talk along with its prominence.

General Implications

Beyond the conclusions provided by our specific findings, our work as a whole contributes to the literature in three ways. One innovation stems from the new measures of relationship talk we created. We attended to multifaceted features of relationship talk by creating two sets of measures: one that asked partners to report the prominence of relationship talk within interaction and one that required independent observers to judge the prominence, explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk within conversation. We believe the insider and outsider perspectives represented in our measures may prove useful for understanding relationship talk. On one hand, our self-report measure may be helpful for answering questions about how communicators interpret messages about relationships (e.g., Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Dillard et al., 1999). On the other hand, our coded measures may be useful for answering questions about how communicators perform messages about relationships (e.g., Rogers & Millar, 1988). Thus, our investigation makes progress on an empirical front by supplying measures of relationship talk that adopt insider and outsider perspectives.

Our work may also help reconcile mixed findings about the value of relationship talk. With respect to constructive outcomes, Acitelli (1992) observed that the amount of relationship talk husbands enacted was positively correlated with life satisfaction and marital satisfaction for wives. Similarly, Acitelli and Clair (cited in Acitelli, 2002) discovered that the amount of relationship talk in which spouses engaged was

negatively associated with their reports of depression and positively associated with their evaluation of marital equity. In terms of destructive outcomes, Acitelli and Clair found that husbands who engaged in more relationship talk at one time reported decreased positive relations with their wives 2 years later. We suspect our conceptualization of relationship talk may help reconcile these contradictory findings. Does the association between the amount of relationship talk and satisfaction hinge on the explicitness, depth, or negative valence of messages? We call for future work to evaluate gradations of relationship talk as possible moderators of the association between the amount individuals enact and their satisfaction with relationships.

Another contribution may emerge from how our work parallels the more established literature on relational messages. Early scholarship on relational messages focused on the dimension of control (e.g., Courtright, Millar, & Rogers-Millar, 1979). Later work added nuance to the construct by identifying 12 topoi of relational messages (Burgoon & Hale, 1984). Given the complexity of the burgeoning literature, more contemporary approaches define relational messages parsimoniously in terms of dominance and affiliation (Dillard et al., 1999), thereby bringing the relational message tradition almost full circle. If the content message tradition unfolds similarly, then our investigation may mark the beginning of a new chapter of work on relationship talk.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

We see other directions for future work that stem from weaknesses of our investigation. First, the generalizability of our study is limited by its dyadic context. We focused on courtship because the process of mate selection requires people to monitor involvement on an ongoing basis (Surra & Hughes, 1997); however, relationship talk is not unique to courtship. Relationship talk also occurs in marriage (Acitelli, 1988, 1992), friendship (Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994), and work associations (Tracy & Naughton, 2000). Moreover, relationship talk is likely to vary according to cultural norms (Fitch, 1998). Hence, we find value in work that investigates how relationship talk operates in other dyadic contexts.

Another priority involves collecting longitudinal data to verify our cross-sectional findings. Longitudinal data would advance our understanding of the link between intimacy and relationship talk in two ways. First, our logic about intimacy implies that people communicate differently as courtships progress. We recognize, however, that we cannot draw conclusions about relationship development in the absence of longitudinal data. Second, we cast intimacy as a predictor of how individuals produce and perceive relationship talk, and our research design allowed us to consider how intimacy predicts message production and message processing in a subsequent conversation. At the same time, we expect that relationship talk also guides the progression of intimacy (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis et al., 1993). Longitudinal

data would be useful for disentangling reciprocal effects. Thus, we call for future research to track how people formulate and interpret relationship talk over time.

A third objective is to integrate work on content and relational messages. Despite their inherent connection (Watzlawick et al., 1967), content and relational messages have been studied separately within the field of interpersonal communication. Our own investigation contributes to the divide by examining content messages in isolation. We encourage scholars to generate a more comprehensive understanding of interpersonal communication by examining how content and relational messages are intertwined.

Conclusion

Our goals were (a) to conceptualize relationship talk in ways that depict nuances in its variation, and (b) to document how intimacy corresponds with the production and perception of relationship talk. We investigated the link between intimacy and relationship talk by conducting a study of conversations between dating partners. Although our data did not confirm all of our predictions, we found evidence that intimacy is tied to both the production and the perception of relationship talk within courtship. We argued at the outset of this article that relationship talk is worthy of study because it may be connected to the health of individuals and the well-being of relationships. Accordingly, we are hopeful that the conceptual and empirical advances we have made will help spark additional insights about relationship talk.

Appendix
Examples of Coded Relationship Talk

Positive talk
Couple 28
    M: You always go to the [university tavern]. It's, like, your favorite bar.
    F: Does that affect our relationship? I thought we were talking about our relationship.
    M: Yeah, it kind of does.
    F: It does?
    M: No, I'm just kidding.
    F: It's making us separate?
    M: Yeah.
    F: What about the fact that you're always busy with everyone else, and I just have to sit and wait? Should we continue on that one?
    M: Okay.

Couple 38
    M: Let's talk about [our trip] last year. Because I remember it was really bad between us before we went [on vacation]. Things weren't good between us. No?

F: Mm-hm.
M: And, then what happened after we went [on vacation]?
F: We spent a lot of money.
M: Besides that?
F: We came back poor.
M: Besides that?
F: I had work to do.
M: It was fun and we were doing better.
F: You're terrible.
M: It was fun and we were doing better. That's the right answer.
F: It was fun.

Negative talk

Couple 51

F: I don't know what I'm going to do. Like, literally, you're like one of my people that
     I just, like, go, you know, like you're a getaway person. But, it will be okay, I guess.
     I mean, I'll probably end up, like, becoming closer to, like, other people in my house
     that I haven't been as close to.
M: I don't like the idea.
F: Why not?
M: Cause then you might be taken away from me when I get back.
F: That's not true.
M: You damn well better not be.
F: That's not true. I'm going to miss you so much. You're going to come visit me over
     the summer, right?
M: Yeah.

Couple 58

M: Obviously, we've been having a lot of conversations about, you know, our friends,
     you know, and how they affect our relationship, and things like that.
F: Yeah.
M: But we discuss them so much that—you know that—
F: I know, it's very hard to want to bring it up again.
M: Yeah, and I, I don't know, like, like at this point, I, I don't care all that much either,
     because, like, I don't know. I've, like, I've, um, you know, come to grips with, you
     know, what I've been worried about a lot lately, too, you know.
F: Yeah.
M: And I feel like you have too, so I feel like we've reached some sort of like, under-
     standing. So, I don't know.
F: Yeah, I do too, I agree. I think that, I think that we've worked through a lot of the stuff
     that has been sort of bothering us, about our friends, my friends, in general, specifically.
M: Yeah. Yeah.
F: And, uh—
M: Taking as long as it did, you know, to figure this out. But—
F: That's because we're both stubborn.
M: Yeah. We're both stubborn.

Surprising event talk

Couple 15

M: What are you thinking about, Emily?

F: I don't know her name.

M: That girl I'm dating?

F: Yeah.

M: Well, I have a similar one with you.

F: Ok.

M: So, but I know his name.

F: Not my fault.

M: Oh, yeah, not your fault.

F: Well, unless you can think of something better to talk about.

M: What am I supposed to say about it? I mean, I guess another unexpected behavior would be when I came back from Michigan this summer.

F: Well, let's talk about that, because your behavior was unexpected to me, too.

M: What behavior was that? When I came back, or when I was gone?

F: Well, kind of both. When you were gone, I kind of expected that we'd be, we would make more of an effort to stay in touch, and then, based on that behavior all summer, when you came back, I didn't expect that you'd say that you still wanted to date me.

M: Yeah. I know that's how you feel about it. I tried to explain that I was just trying to see if I still cared about you, and tried to see what it was like not to be, I guess, in touch with you, or whatever. But I couldn't forget about you, and that's when I kind of realized that I still wanted to be with you. So, but I didn't tell you that, and you didn't know that, so you can read into that a different way, and you did. And then I thought that by me telling you when I got back how I felt, that it would change your mind, but it didn't. I mean, what I took away from that is that you didn't want anything to do with me then, so that's just kind of the way I took it, and I'm still trying to deal with it.

F: I just wish you would've told me over the course of the summer.

M: I thought you'd act differently, though.

Couple 31

F: I didn't really include you.

M: I know.

F: Did that make you more or less certain of our relationship?

M: Yeah. [*sarcastically*] I'm gonna lose sleep over it now.

F: No, but I mean, that I didn't ask you about [getting my hair cut]? That I just did it?

M: No, well, it's your hair. Like, you know, I'm not gonna—

F: But you don't think it was weird that I didn't call and ask you about it? That I just did it.

M: No, you did call, you did call.

F: But I agreed to do it and then I told you I was doing it.

M: Right, you didn't ask me whether you should do it or not.

F: You think I would've before?

M: Um, yeah. You think so?

F: Mm-hm. Things change, and I'm just like, well, I'm gonna do this, and I just want to see what you think about it.

Notes

1. This research is a portion of the first author's dissertation conducted under the direction of the second author. It was supported by a University of Wisconsin McCarty Dissertation Award granted to the first author and a University of Wisconsin Vilas Associate Award granted to the second author. The authors thank Carolynne Bernard, Dan Bruggeman, Anita Collins, Patricia Costello, Amanda Dobervich, Kate Emmerich, Stephanie Lundberg, Melissa Mueller, Yoonsoo Nam, Jamie Olson, Annie Richert, Nicolle Sallow, Alyssa Trussoni, and Sarah Wang for their help with data collection and coding. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Leanne K. Knobloch, Department of Speech Communication, University of Illinois, 244 Lincoln Hall, 702 S. Wright St., Urbana, IL 61801; phone: 217-333-8913; fax: 217-244-1598; e-mail: knobl@uiuc.edu.

2. We have reported results from this sample for self-reported and coded relationship talk elsewhere (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003, 2005). Intimacy, length of romantic interest, the explicitness, depth, and negative valence of relationship talk, and relational impact are unique to the current article.

3. We conducted a pretest to select topics of conversation. To ensure variation in relationship talk, our primary goal was to identify topics that participants view as important to their relationship. Our secondary goal was to choose topics that partners see as realistic and easy to enact. As a starting point, we selected six topics from Goldsmith and Baxter's (1996) typology of everyday talk. We also added a seventh topic, surprising event talk, because of its importance to relationships (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b).

We asked 53 undergraduate students to rate how important, realistic, and easy to enact they perceived the seven topics to be. Positive talk, negative talk, and surprising event talk received the highest ratings for importance, and they also demonstrated satisfactory levels of realism and ease. Consequently, we used those three topics in the main study (see Table 1).

4. Rubin's (1970) scale also showed evidence of convergent validity in this study. It was positively correlated with participants' scores for chance of marriage ($r = .71$, $p < .001$), commitment ($r = .81$, $p < .001$), and relationship satisfaction ($r = .68$, $p < .001$).

5. We computed correlations between partners' scores to document the degree of statistical dependence in our data. Findings indicated positive associations between partners' scores for intimacy ($r = .90$, $p < .001$), length of romantic interest ($r = .92$, $p < .001$), self-reported relationship talk ($r = .53$, $p < .001$), coded relationship talk ($r = .99$, $p < .001$), explicitness of relationship talk ($r = .24$, $p < .05$), depth of relationship talk ($r = .98$, $p < .001$), negative valence of relationship talk ($r = .95$, $p < .001$), realism ($r = .24$, $p < .01$), ease ($r = .34$, $p < .001$), and relational impact ($r = .51$, $p < .001$). Because notable overlap existed between partners' scores, we accommodated the statistical dependence within our substantive analyses.

6. We employed contrast coding to test whether the slopes for length of romantic interest and intimacy were different from each other. A statistically significant χ^2 value for this analysis indicates that the slope for length of romantic interest was greater than the slope for intimacy.

Results demonstrated that the slope for length of romantic interest was greater than the slope for intimacy in the models predicting the depth, $\chi^2(1) = 10.04$, $p < .01$, and negative valence, $\chi^2(1) = 6.83$, $p < .01$, of relationship talk. The difference between the two slopes approached statistical significance for the model predicting coded relationship talk, $\chi^2(1) = 2.97$, $p = .08$. In contrast, the slope for length of romantic interest was not statistically significantly different from the slope for intimacy in the models predicting self-reported relationship talk, $\chi^2(1) = 0.26$, *ns*, and the explicitness of relationship talk, $\chi^2(1) = 0.81$, *ns*. We concluded from these findings that length of romantic interest was the stronger predictor of coded relationship talk, the depth of relationship talk, and the negative valence of relationship talk.

7. For all of our hypotheses tests, we examined whether topic assignment moderated the associations between the independent variables and the dependent variables. Interactions between topic assignment and the independent variables explained a statistically significant portion of additional variance in 3 of 46 tests (6.5%). Hence, the associations between the independent variables and the dependent variables were largely consistent across the three topics.

8. Length of romantic interest did not interact with any of the measures of relationship talk to predict relational impact.

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