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Conditions That Determine the Fate of Friendships After Unrequited Romantic Disclosures

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When one discloses romantic feelings to another and the partner reciprocates, there is the presumed potential for a blissful relationship. But what if one discloses romantic inclinations that are not mutually felt? If the disclosing partner views the situation as “all or nothing,” the relationship most likely dissolves. But if the partners wish to maintain the relationship much as it was before the unrequited disclosure, the outcome is much less certain. Usually, the friendship dissolves shortly thereafter (Werking, 1997). But not always.

Thus it should be worthwhile to discover the factors that account for the subsequent fate of the relationship. This is especially so if some of these are factors that can be controlled via communication behaviors of the partners themselves in order to facilitate a satisfactory outcome. The present study is an initial investigation of the factors by which partners may affect the fate of their friendship after an unrequited romantic disclosure.

The pervasion of unrequited romance episodes is suggested by our cultural lore as well as by the limited formal research on the subject (e.g., Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). And it seems likely that these episodes will increase in frequency within contemporary society. Male/female friendships are becoming more common as men and women interact more frequently via gender

heterogeneity in college classes, social activities, and work settings and as marriage is taking place at later ages. And what begins as friendship sometimes comes to feel romantic to at least one partner. Indeed, it may be expected that romantic or sexual attraction by at least one partner will develop in at least 10% to 40% of cross-sex friendships (e.g., Monsour, Harris, & Kurzwell, 1994) and that the attraction will be one-way in many of these cases (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1993).

It is clear also that the discovery of unrequited romantic attraction within friendships is problematic. Indeed, the decision of whether and how to disclose romantic feelings in an ostensibly platonic friendship is among the most common "serious communication dilemmas" reported by college students (Motley, 1992).

Presumably, one of the reasons that it is often difficult to discuss one's feelings within an evolving relationship is that we recognize the possibility and potential awkwardness of asymmetry. And this is almost certainly the case when romantic feelings develop within a friendship. The romantically inclined partner may recognize that, should the feelings not be mutual, rejection by a friend could be even more unpleasant than usual. Similarly, while rejecting another's romantic feelings is usually unpleasant, it should be especially so when rejecting a friend (e.g., Kenny & Nasby, 1980). Of course, another way in which unrequited romantic attraction is even more problematic within friendships than otherwise is that the awkwardness of the disclosure and rejection threatens the friendship. Indeed, many who have experienced these episodes consider the loss of the friendship to have been more unfortunate than the rejection of romantic feelings (Baumeister et al., 1993).

But while unrequited romantic disclosures within friendships usually ruin the friendship (Werking, 1997), this outcome need not be automatic. It should be possible, if both partners so desire, to return—albeit perhaps after a short period of awkwardness—to some variation of the friendship that existed before the disclosure. In the case of unrequited romance that emerges from satisfactory friendships, one would think that reestablishing and continuing the friendship usually would be desirable. It is curious, therefore, that the outcome is usually negative. Certainly, it could be valuable to discover what factors account for the exceptions where friendships are maintained.

An observation by Baumeister et al. (1993) may partially explain the negative outcomes in these situations and at the same time suggests another likely reason for the reluctance to disclose romantic feelings when symmetry is uncertain: while films, novels, and songs provide many examples of "scripts" for how to enact mutual love, there are few available scripts or templates for how to behave in unrequited romance situations. Granted, Baumeister et al. show a few scripts to be available for the rejected would-be lover, but a close inspection of their examples reveals all of these to be of the negative variety of relationship dissolution. It appears that no scripts are available to help the

unrequited lover who may want to repair or maintain an earlier form of the relationship. And in the case of the rejector, again there are virtually no models or scripts of any kind—relationship repair or otherwise (Baumeister et al., 1993). Given the absence of relevant scripts and socialization, it is not surprising that romantic disclosures within friendships are approached with trepidation nor surprising that they often destroy the friendship.

In summary, unrequited romantic attraction within ostensible friendships is common and becoming more so. And it is problematic, both before the disclosure and after, largely because of potential damage to the friendship. A dissolved friendship is indeed the most common outcome, probably due largely to the absence of scripts or other socializations for handling these inherently awkward episodes. But the fact that some friendships do survive unrequited romantic attraction suggests that some partners are able to improvise effective repair and maintenance behaviors. If it happens that partners within friendships that last employ different communication strategies and behaviors than partners within friendships that dissolve, then those differences could provide a foundation for relevant friendship-maintenance scripts in unrequited romance situations. Thus, it should be worthwhile to ask the following:

Research Question: What behaviors differentiate friendships that dissolve after unrequited romantic disclosures from those that survive?

We will be examining friendships wherein *romantic attraction has developed* in one partner, *is disclosed*, and *is not reciprocated*. And within this unrequited-romantic-disclosure context, we will compare friendships that *dissolve* with those that *last* after the asymmetry is discovered.

The study is driven in large part by a pragmatic, applied interest in the common problem of unrequited romantic attraction within ostensible friendships. That is to say, from the perspective of friendship partners, the study ideally would answer the question of how best to enact communication and other relational behaviors in order to maintain a friendship after an unrequited-romantic-disclosure episode. That is, the study might begin to fill the void of viable scripts or guidelines for unrequited-romantic-disclosure situations. Similarly, from the perspective of relationship researchers, the study attempts to determine the factors that affect the fate of friendships within the specific context of unrequited romantic attraction. We would expect that some of these may parallel general friendship repair behaviors, while others may be unique to the unrequited-romantic-attraction situation. The study intentionally explores the latter possibility, eschewing a priori predictions from research on more general relational or friendship repair contexts, per the assumption that applied-communication problems usually demand context-specific research (e.g., Motley, 1997) and per observations that relational maintenance strategies vary situationally (Jaesub, 1998).

The typical procedure in friendship maintenance/repair studies is to ask participants what they would do, hypothetically, to maintain or repair a friendship under various independent-variable conditions, with participants' selection of a priori strategies as the dependent variable. The present study draws instead on participants' actual experience with their own naturally generated strategies or behaviors. Our assumption was that if relational maintenance strategies are often context-specific, then the unrequited-romantic-disclosure context may be sufficiently unique to warrant a more exploratory approach. Moreover, while it is common in studies of scripts to ignore efficacy as a primary concern (e.g., Battaglia, Richard, Datteri, & Lord, 1998; Rose & Frieze, 1993), the present study attempts to determine whether promising scripts can be generated by identifying behaviors reported to have been effective within real-life situations.

Method

OVERVIEW

The study is reported in two main parts. Part I was a preliminary examination, via open-ended questionnaire, of the factors that participants considered to have been crucial to the fate of the friendship after a recent unrequited-romantic-disclosure episode. From participants' responses, several conditions were identified as perceived "causes" of the friendships having lasted or dissolved. These conditions became the basis for Part II (in three subparts), wherein new participants reported on a past unrequited-romantic-disclosure episode within an ostensibly platonic friendship. In Part II.A, participants reported on the relative presence of the conditions generated by Part I. Part II.B sought the same participants' impressions of the relative importance of the conditions' presence or absence in determining the eventual fate of the friendship. Part II.C used open-ended items to seek the same participants' identification of specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors by which the various conditions were manifested.

In all parts of the study, participants reported via questionnaire on various characteristics of a single recent relationship—an ostensibly platonic male/female friendship¹ wherein one partner disclosed romantic inclinations that were not mutual for the other partner. We were interested from the outset, of course, in contrasts between behaviors within friendships that lasted after the unrequited disclosure versus behaviors within friendships that did not. But we were interested also in separating the behaviors of the romantically inclined versus platonically inclined partners, on the assumption that their perspectives might not agree. Thus each participant reported on a recent relationship for one of the following target situations:

1. *Participant disclosed* romantic inclinations; partner's feelings were platonic; friendship *lasted*.
2. Partner disclosed romantic inclinations; *participant's feelings were platonic*; friendship *lasted*.
3. *Participant disclosed* romantic inclinations; partner's feelings were platonic; friendship *dissolved*.
4. Partner disclosed romantic inclinations; *participant's feelings were platonic*; friendship *dissolved*.

PART I

Part I was an exploratory effort to identify the behaviors critical to the fate (lasted/dissolved) of the friendships, so that these could be used as a priori variables in Part II. A simple questionnaire asked participants ($N = 90$ college students similar to those described below) to recall a single recent instance of one of the four target situations and to explain in open-ended fashion the main factors they believed to have been responsible for the friendship having lasted or dissolved after the unrequited disclosure. Participants who had experienced none of the target situations were dismissed. Those who had experienced more than one situation reported on only one—this selected by the experimenters to ensure roughly equivalent representation across the four situations.

Participants offered 153 explanations of factors responsible for the fates of their friendships. These were coded into various common groups or categories, using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open-coding procedure, and the usable categories were employed in Part II as potential variables or conditions for more direct comparisons across the four target situations.²

While the study is especially interested in verbal and nonverbal *behaviors* critical to the fate of these postdisclosure friendships, Part I unexpectedly yielded virtually no specific behaviors as explanations for the fate of the friendships. Instead, explanations were in the form of what we will call *conditions*, or features, of the experience—for example, the presence or absence of perceived pressure to change one's feelings after the disclosures or the perception that the partner could (or could not) handle the asymmetry. Seventeen conditions emerged from the coding process. A complete list of these is presented below within the report on Part II. Related *behaviors* are pursued in Part II as well.

PART II

Participants

Participants in Part II were 140 native-English-speaking students of various communication courses (all levels) at the University of California,

Davis. Participants were assigned to groups corresponding to one of the four target situations on the basis of a simple screening questionnaire asking, yes/no, whether the participant had experienced any of the four target situations within the past 3 years. Those who could not identify with any of the situations were dismissed. Participants who identified with only one situation were assigned to the corresponding group. Those who identified with more than one situation were assigned randomly to one of the relevant groups. Group *n*'s were as follows: (a) participant *romantically inclined*, friendship *lasted*, $n = 32$; (b) participant *platonic*, friendship *lasted*, $n = 37$; (c) participant *romantic*, friendship *dissolved*, $n = 23$; (d) participant *platonic*, friendship *dissolved*, $n = 48$.³

Questionnaire

Participants completed questionnaires that were identical across groups except for minor editing to fit the four target situations.⁴ Primary questionnaire items investigated three matters:

Subpart A. Questions sought perceptions of the relative presence or absence of the various conditions identified by Part I as being central to the fate of friendships in unrequited-romantic-disclosure situations. Seventeen potential conditions were investigated. For example, "After your partner's disclosure, did you *feel pressured to act or feel differently than before?*" (Remaining condition items are presented in Table 2.1.) Responses were via 7-point, *definitely-no/definitely-yes* scales.

Subpart B. Each of these questions had a companion item to assess the following: "How big a role did this play in the fact that the friendship [*lasted/dissolved?*]" Responses were via a 7-point scale—*definitely [did NOT/DID] play a role.*

Subpart C. Each of these sets included one or more open-ended items asking what verbal or nonverbal behaviors promoted or manifested the presence or absence of the condition, for example, "Regardless of your answer to [Part A], can you recall anything in particular that your partner said or did (or didn't say or do) that made you feel any pressure to change? If so, please describe it here." And "... that reduced any pressure for you to change."

Analysis—Part II

For Part II.A the question was, in effect, which conditions would be identified as present or absent when participants were asked to consider all of them as a priori items, and for which conditions there was a difference between lasted or dissolved outcomes or between romantic or platonic partners' perspectives. Thus, a two-way ANOVA (Outcome \times Viewpoint) was performed on the relative presence reported for each condition.

Results and Discussion—Part II.A

The conditions alluded to above are listed in Table 2.1, along with results of their ANOVA comparisons. Notice first that for most of these variables, the main effect on the outcome variable was statistically significant. That is to say, for most cases, the presence or absence of the condition was significantly different between the friendship-*lasted* and the friendship-*dissolved* situations. For the perspective variable—that is, responses by romantically versus platonically inclined partners—significant main effects were observed for a few conditions, as well.

Conditions that are significantly more prominent when the postdisclosure friendships *lasted* than when they dissolved include the following: (a) the platonic partner actively pursued the friendship after the unrequited disclosure; (b) likewise for the romantically inclined partner; (c) the platonic partner truly wanted to remain friends despite the asymmetry; (d) likewise for the romantic; (e) the relationship had a solid foundation of openness and honesty prior to the disclosure; (f) the friendship was solid or long established prior to the disclosure; and (g) the romantically inclined partner was able to accept (i.e., could “handle it”) that the romantic feelings were not mutual.

Conditions that are significantly more prominent in friendships that *dissolved* include the following: (a) the platonic partner felt embarrassed or awkward around the other; (b) likewise for the romantic partner; (c) the romantically inclined partner was hurt that the feelings were not mutual; and (d) the platonic partner felt pressured to act differently after the disclosure than before.

In short, this phase of the study confirmed a number of differences between postdisclosure friendships that last and those that dissolve with respect to the relative presence of the target conditions. For most of these conditions, the difference is significant across *lasted* and *dissolved* friendships on the whole, and that was the primary question. In a few cases, moreover, the relative presence of the condition varies according to the partner’s perspective or according to viewpoint/outcome interactions, and some of these differences shed additional light on contrasts between postdisclosure friendships that last and those that dissolve.

Part II.B

The fact that conditions differ between postdisclosure friendships that last and those that dissolve does not necessarily mean that the differences are indeed responsible for the fate of the friendship. While it would be very difficult to test directly whether these conditions *cause* postdisclosure friendships to last or dissolve, it is feasible to at least examine participants’ impressions of the effects. This was the objective in the next phase of the study, Part II.B.

Table 2.1 ANOVA Results and Correlations Between Relative Presence of Condition and Its Perceived Role in the Fate of Friendship

Condition	F(1, 118)				Correlations			
	Outcome		Viewpoint		Dissolved Friendships		Lasted Friendships	
	D > L	L > D	R > P	P > R	R-D (df = 21)	P-D (df = 46)	R-L (df = 30)	P-L (df = 35)
1. P actively pursued the friendship after the episode		**			-.69**	-.67**	.80**	.52**
2. P honestly wanted to remain friends after the episode		**			-.29	-.72**	.77**	.70**
3. P later felt uncomfortable, embarrassed, or awkward around R	**				.80**	.69**	-.41*	-.46**
4. R actively pursued the friendship after the episode		**			-.02	-.43**	.72**	.66**
5. R honestly wanted to remain friends after the episode		**			-.50**	-.49**	.61**	.87**
6. The relationship had a solid foundation of openness and honesty prior to R's disclosure		**			-.26	-.39**	.62**	.68**
7. R later felt uncomfortable, embarrassed, or awkward around P	**				.93**	.34*	-.38*	-.45**
8. R accepted that it wasn't mutual; could "handle it"		**	**		-.52**	-.58**	.10	.49**
9. After the disclosure, P felt pressured to act or feel differently than before	**			**	.84**	.74**	-.33*	-.44**
10. The friendship was strong, solid, or long established before R's disclosure		**			-.19	-.39**	.72**	.79**

Condition	F(1, 118)				Correlations			
	Outcome		Viewpoint		Dissolved Friendships		Lasted Friendships	
	D > L	L > D	R > P	P > R	R-D (df = 21)	P-D (df = 46)	R-L (df = 30)	P-L (df = 35)
11. R was hurt to discover that the feelings were not mutual	*				.50**	.52**	-.54**	-.49**
12. P had "led R on" before the disclosure			**		.38*	.43**	.05	-.30*
13. P accepted it; could "handle it"			*		-.42*	-.31*	.50**	.46**
14. After the episode, R still pursued a romantic relationship					.47*	.61**	-.36*	-.41*
15. P "led R on" after the disclosure					.78**	.30*	.35*	-.11
16. R continued to hope that P would develop mutual romantic feelings					.11	.43**	-.04	-.24
17. There was frequent contact between P and R via mutual friends, work, and so on					.45*	-.16	.69**	.50**

NOTE: Most ANOVA means were in the 3.9-5.6 range (7-point scale; 1 = *definitely no*, 7 = *definitely yes*). Means available upon request. P = platonically inclined partner; R = romantically inclined partner; D = dissolved friendship; L = lasted friendship. (Positive correlation indicates perception of larger role in L or D fate when condition is *present*; negative correlation indicates perception of larger role when condition is *absent*.)

Correlations via Pearson r , * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Analysis—Part II.B

Recall that after asking whether the above conditions were present or absent, the questionnaire asked the participants' impressions of the role this played in determining the fate of the friendship. For example, the questionnaire item "After your partner's disclosure, did you feel pressured to act or feel differently than before? [1–7 scale]" was followed immediately by "How big a role do you think this . . . played in the fact that the friendship [lasted/dissolved]? [1–7 scale]." The idea was to examine correlations between these two items for each of the conditions. Strong positive correlations would correspond to a condition being perceived as playing a larger role when present; negative correlations would correspond to a larger role when absent.

Results and Discussion—Part II.B

Correlation results are presented in Table 2.1. Notice that for every condition that yielded a significant outcome main effect earlier (Table 2.1, ##1–11), significant correlations are found in at least three of the four target situations, and with the expected polarities. That is to say, these conditions were perceived as having influenced the fate of the friendship, and in all cases the direction of the influence is as would be expected. For example, we saw earlier that the platonic partner's active pursuit of the friendship was fairly strong in friendships that lasted, and we see now that the strong pursuit is perceived to have played a large role in that outcome (i.e., via the positive correlations for Table 2.1, #1). In dissolved friendships, however, the platonic partners' pursuit of the friendship apparently was relatively weak, and this weak pursuit was perceived to have been influential for the friendship dissolving (i.e., negative correlations for Table 2.1, #1). And so on for at least conditions 1–11 of Table 2.1.

To summarize these results, the following conditions are perceived as having a "positive" effect on the fate of friendships after unrequited romantic disclosures (i.e., both their relative *presence in lasting friendships* and their relative *absence in dissolved friendships* are perceived as having played a large role in those outcomes): the romantically inclined partner (a) actively pursued the friendship, (b) honestly wanted to remain friends, and (c) accepted that the feelings were not mutual; the platonically inclined partner (d) actively pursued the friendship, (e) honestly wanted to remain friends, and (f) was able to accept the asymmetry; and the friendship itself (g) had been solid and (h) had been open before the episode (namely, Table 2.1, ##4, 5, 8, 1, 2, 13, 10, and 6, respectively).

The following conditions appear to have a "negative" effect on the fate of postdisclosure friendships (i.e., both their relative *presence in dissolved friendships* and their relative *absence in continued friendships* were perceived to have played a large role in those outcomes): the platonically inclined partner (a) was embarrassed or awkward after the disclosure, (b) felt pressured to change after the episode, and (c) seemed to have "led on" his or her partner before the

disclosure; the romantically inclined partner (d) was embarrassed or uncomfortable after the episode, (e) was hurt that the feelings were not mutual, (f) appeared to have continued to push for a romantic relationship, and (g) continued to hope that his or her partner would develop romantic feelings (Table 2.1, ##3, 9, 12, 7, 11, 14, and 16, respectively).

Curiously, there are two conditions whose presence is positively correlated both to friendships having dissolved and to friendships having lasted: first, for the romantically inclined partner to have been led on *after* the disclosure/rejection episode is perceived to have affected the outcome of both continued and dissolved friendships (data in subsequent phases of the study will account for this by suggesting that partners were led on in different ways for the lasted and dissolved situations), and second, involuntary contact between the partners was perceived to have contributed to the outcome by participants in both outcome groups. Probably the involuntary contact itself plays more a supporting role than a primary role, exacerbating the awkwardness or facilitating the repair, depending upon how the other conditions are played out.

The perceived causal conditions of Table 2.1 are not necessarily true causal conditions, of course. Indeed, the attributions may be suspect in a few cases. One might postulate, for example, that when partners truly want to remain friends after unrequited romantic disclosures, this does indeed help the friendship to survive the event (e.g., Table 2.1, ##2 and 5). But one may just as easily explain the correlation by speculating that participants who look back on failed friendships might be inclined to rationalize, post hoc, that a desire for friendship was weak on their part or their partner's and to assign a major outcome role to what might be a false recollection.

Moreover, even when the attributed causal conditions are intuitively sensible, there are sometimes competing interpretations. For example, let us assume that participants are accurate in having perceived a causal link between a well-established and solid predisclosure friendship and its postdisclosure endurance (e.g., Table 2.1, #10). We may wonder whether this is because relational foundation and history help a friendship to weather an uncomfortable unrequited disclosure episode, or whether it makes the episode less uncomfortable, or whether it makes the platonically inclined partner more likely to anticipate and prepare for the disclosure, or any combination of these and perhaps other possibilities.

In most cases, however, the causal attributions of Table 2.1 seem to be fairly unambiguous. It stands to reason, for example, that active postdisclosure pursuit of the friendship would be recalled with reasonable clarity and that it would indeed help to repair or sustain the friendship (i.e., Table 2.1, ##1 and 4). Most of the causal attributions appear to be similarly straightforward.

The results reflect participants' perceptions of reality rather than experimenter-manipulated or experimenter-observed reality, of course. Certainly, however, there is a sense in which participants' perceptions of the corresponding conditions are almost certainly critical to the fate of the friendship. For example,

one's *perception* of how well the partner is accepting the asymmetry situation may be at least as important as his or her *true* coping abilities, which is also the case for perceptions of the partner's postdisclosure discomfort, pressure to change toward symmetry, and so on.

Thus far, the study identifies conditions perceived to have positive and negative influences on friendships after unrequited romantic disclosure episodes. But this provides only part of the answer to either the researcher who wants to understand friendship repair within the unrequited romantic disclosure context or to the individual who finds himself or herself in a corresponding real-life situation.

It is not uncommon for practical implications of communication research to operate at the level of conditions, attitudes, general objectives, and so forth. And sometimes that may be necessary and appropriate. But within the present study, it is one thing to know which *conditions* have positive and negative effects but quite another to know how these conditions are *manifested* between partners. For example, when we find ourselves in a real-life unrequited-romantic-disclosure situation, it may be comforting to know that we are indeed able to handle the situation, do indeed wish to retain the friendship, and so forth. According to Part II.B, all of these conditions are thought to be helpful if the friendship is to be repaired and maintained.

But the simple presence of these conditions may not be enough to affect the outcome. Presumably, these conditions need to be communicated to, or least manifested to, our partner. And presumably this is done not via mere internalization of the conditions but rather via overt *behaviors* of some sort. The next phase of the study tries to identify those behaviors.

Part II.C

As suggested earlier, although we were seeking critical behaviors in Part I, participants reported conditions instead. Parts II.A and II.B have examined the extent to which those conditions appear to be critical. Part II.C attempts to identify the specific verbal and nonverbal *behaviors* by which the critical conditions are promoted, manifested, and communicated between partners in unrequited-romantic-attraction episodes.

Analysis—Part II.C

Recall that the questionnaire included open-ended items seeking information on how each condition is manifested and communicated. Most of the items were designed to be completed independently of participants' responses on companion parts. For example, "[Regardless of your answer to the companion items] can you recall anything in particular that your partner said or did (or didn't say or do) that made you feel any pressure to change? If so, please

describe it here” and “Likewise, can you recall anything in particular . . . that reduced any pressure for you to change? If so, please describe it here.” The strategy was to collect relevant behavioral manifestations from participants regardless of their presence or absence or role responses.

In all, the questionnaire asked for behaviors associated with 26 conditions—the 17 conditions of Table 2.1, plus variations.⁵ (These will be presented via Table 2.3.) The 141 participants provided a total of 1,750 comments describing or identifying relevant behaviors.⁶ These were coded by one of the coauthors into 33 categories using Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) open-coding procedure and verified by another coauthor with 98% agreement (41 codings challenged). The coders reached agreement on revised codings for all but eight of the challenged items, and a third coder resolved these. The resulting behavior categories are presented in Table 2.2, along with examples and total frequencies of occurrence (e.g., frequencies across all conditions and situations).

Table 2.2 Behavior Manifestation Categories and Examples

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|--|
| <p>A. Disclosure re past relationships ($f = 9$). <i>We were very candid and open about things like past lovers.</i></p> <p>B. Spent a lot of time together ($f = 12$). <i>We had spent quite a bit of time together up to that point.</i></p> <p>C. Honesty, high disclosure (personal disclosure), open re “everything,” feelings, personal things, etc. ($f = 40$). <i>We’d tell each other everything.</i></p> <p>D. The rejection itself (P said there was/would be no romantic feelings) ($f = 93$). <i>That I told him that I wanted to just be friends./I told him I appreciated his roses and stuff but I wasn’t interested.</i></p> <p>E. Partners treated one another as very good friends do: special favors, supported each other, made sacrifices, etc. ($f = 68$). <i>He had concern for my well-being./Just him being there for me.</i></p> <p>G. Knew each other only briefly/slightly ($f = 31$). <i>I hadn’t known him for long./We were still getting to know each other.</i></p> <p>I. One avoided, ignored, or reduced contact with other ($f = 166$). <i>I didn’t initiate contact as much./She stopped coming by.</i></p> <p>J. Had known each other/been friends for a long time ($f = 17$). <i>We had known each other for 4 years./We were friends for almost 2 years before.</i></p> <p>K. P blamed absence of romantic feelings on self (or on something other than R) or blamed self for R’s misperception ($f = 26$). <i>He said that he takes part of the blame./Placed blame on myself and said I wasn’t ready for a relationship.</i></p> <p>L. Not open, didn’t discuss feelings ($f = 13$). <i>We talked about casual things, not about feelings./We never talked about our feelings.</i></p> <p>M. Told others about R’s disclosure, R’s feelings ($f = 14$). <i>Told everyone what happened./He told his friends of his interest.</i></p> |
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(Continued)

Table 2.2 (Continued)

N.	Other/I acted embarrassed, awkward ($f = 17$). <i>He was awkward around me, which led me to be awkward around him./She was obviously uncomfortable.</i>
O.	(Re)affirmed friendship, told each other we were friends, that the friendship was important, etc. ($f = 152$). <i>I told him that I still wanted to be friends./After he disclosed his "crush" to me I said, "We're still buddies, right?"/I told her I would always have feelings for her and that it would hurt me more to not have her as a friend than as a girlfriend.</i>
P.	Disclosure/acceptance re present relationships/started dating others/suggested partner start seeing others ($f = 108$). <i>Every time either of us would have problems with the opposite sex, we could talk to each other.</i>
R.	Acted like it never happened, dropped it, went on as before, didn't pressure ($f = 148$). <i>Pretended it didn't happen./We completely dropped the matter./Friendly, acted as though nothing changed in friendship.</i>
S.	P indicated romantic feelings may develop later ($f = 24$). <i>I just said, "You never know, maybe in the future my feelings will change."</i>
T.	Acted friendly ($f = 61$). <i>Acted friendly toward her—invited her along on group activities./I also attended his games and tried to talk to him more.</i>
U.	R kept pressuring, pursuing romance, didn't drop it, kept hoping, didn't give up ($f = 96$). <i>He continued to try to touch me./He kept coming on to me.</i>
V.	The disclosure itself ($f = 13$). <i>Maybe that I disclosed my affection toward him.</i>
W.	Said it was okay (that feelings weren't mutual)/talked about it openly ($f = 98$). <i>Said I understood./She did say that she was okay with the way things were./He would reassure me that he didn't care that I wasn't in love with him and would love me anyway./He stated that it would be hard, but he could bring himself to accept it.</i>
X.	Called, got together, maintained contact ($f = 208$). <i>He called and came by and tried to keep contact./Pursued conversations and interactions.</i>
Y.	Said did not want to be friends ($f = 12$). <i>He asserted that he would not be interested in me as a friend./He said he couldn't handle being friends anymore.</i>
AA.	Sexual behaviors, overtures, suggestions, flirting, affectionate behaviors ($f = 72$). <i>I continued to flirt with her/him pursuing intimacy.</i>
CC.	Acted less close ($f = 21$). <i>She would act a lot colder and less interested./Didn't ask me out.</i>
DD.	Reduced/avoided affectionate/sexual behaviors ($f = 14$). <i>He stopped the touchy-feely things./Denied any sexual tension, treated her like a sister.</i>
EE.	Acted bothered/uncomfortable/complained ($f = 29$). <i>I was slightly sullen after he rejected me./Told me once how hard it was.</i>
FF.	P had or acknowledged romantic feelings for R in the past ($f = 11$). <i>He was aware that I was once attracted to him, but I thought we developed more of a friendship./I had become uncertain as to whether I did or didn't like him romantically.</i>

NOTE: P = platonically inclined partner, R = romantically inclined partner. Low-frequency categories irrelevant to the remaining discussion have been omitted but are available from the authors.

The primary analysis involved tabulating, separately for each of the four situation groups, the frequency with which each behavior was associated with each condition (i.e., the number of times any particular behavior was mentioned as having manifested a given condition). While these data do not lend themselves to formal comparison via statistical tests, they are rich for purposes of qualitative descriptive analysis—especially where the relative frequencies for a particular behavior differ for dissolved versus maintained friendships.

The complete data set was organized so that for each of the four target situations, frequencies were recorded for all 33 behaviors within each of the 26 conditions (i.e., $4 \times 26 \times 33$ cells). Most of these frequencies were zero, of course. Within the various situation/condition categories, the typical number of behaviors with frequencies greater than zero was about nine (thus, approximately $4 \times 26 \times 9$ cells with “hits”). Clearly, to present these entire arrays here would be cumbersome and inefficient. While our own initial analysis was performed on the entire set of arrays (i.e., $4 \times 26 \times \sim 9$ cells), often with reference back to the raw data transcribed comments, we have devised Table 2.3 to represent a summary of the primary observations. Table 2.3 includes behaviors (coded as in Table 2.2) that account for at least 10% (arbitrarily determined) of all dissolved or all lasted *behaviors* reported for a given condition. The most frequent behaviors for each condition are featured.⁷

Results—Part II.C

There are various ways in which Table 2.3 presents the dynamics of unrequited romance situations as being more complex than Table 2.1 suggests. It is apparent from the open-ended responses, for example, that even within friendships that endure unrequited romantic disclosures, the situation is not without at least temporary discomfort. For example, even in friendships that last, the disclosure and “rejection” of romantic inclinations is often embarrassing and awkward (i.e., notice the relative frequencies for Table 2.3, ##5D, 7V, and 20EE). Apparently, when a postdisclosure friendship lasts, it is not because it is so stable as to feel no noticeable effect from the “rejection” of a romantic disclosure. Rather, friendships that last apparently do so on the basis of conditions and behaviors, by both parties, that accompany or follow the inherently awkward disclosure/rejection episode.

As for identifying the optimal behaviors for ensuring an enduring friendship, the picture is not without ostensible contradictions, some of which are at least partially resolved upon closer inspection. For example, it is intuitively surprising to see that the pursuit of romance via sexual overtones is reported with relatively equal frequency for friendships that lasted and those that dissolved (i.e., #13AA). An examination of the raw-data participant comments sheds light on this, however: for dissolved friendships, in every case where

Table 2.3 Most Common Behaviors Within Conditions

1. HOW P OR R INDICATED THAT THE RELATIONSHIP WAS STRONG. (Σf 's = D: 48, L: 24)
 - E. Treated as Good Friends (D: 28%, L: 25%)
 - C. High Personal Disclosure (D: 16%, L: 34%)
Also B & J
2. HOW P OR R INDICATED THAT THE RELATIONSHIP WAS WEAK. (Σf 's = D: 8, L: 18)
 - G. Brief History (D: 59%, L: 100%)
3. HOW P/R DEMONSTRATED THAT THE RELATIONSHIP HAD HIGH OPENNESS/HONESTY. (Σf 's = D: 29, L: 16)
 - C. High Personal Disclosure (D: 82%, L: 21%)
 - R. Disclosure re Present Relationship (D: 0%, L: 28%)
Also A & J
4. HOW EITHER DEMONSTRATED THAT THE RELATIONSHIP HAD LOW OPENNESS/HONESTY. (Σf 's = D: 5, L: 18)
 - G. Brief History (D: 25%, L: 80%)
 - L. Low Openness (D: 51%, L: 0%)
5. WHAT P DID/SAID TO CAUSE OR INCREASE R'S EMBARRASSMENT. (Σf 's = D: 32, L: 42)
 - D. The Rejection Itself (D: 22%, L: 33%)
I. Reduced Contact (D: 29%, L: 17%)
 - P. Disclosure re Present Relationship (D: 3%, L: 27%)
Also M, N, & R
6. WHAT P DID/SAID TO PREVENT/DECREASE R'S EMBARRASSMENT. (Σf 's = D: 44, L: 37)
 - K. P Blamed Self/Not R (D: 13%, L: 15%)
O. Reaffirmed the Friendship (D: 16%, L: 39%)
 - R. Dropped It (D: 18%, L: 24%)
Also W & T
7. WHAT R DID/SAID TO CAUSE OR INCREASE P'S EMBARRASSMENT. (Σf 's = D: 28, L: 45)
 - I. Reduced Contact (D: 15%, L: 20%)
Also M, EE, & V
 - U. R Kept After Romance (D: 48%, L: 18%)
8. WHAT R DID/SAID TO PREVENT/DECREASE P'S EMBARRASSMENT. (Σf 's = D: 44, L: 27)
 - R. Dropped It (D: 8%, L: 32%)
O. Reaffirmed the Friendship (D: 8%, L: 22%)
 - W. Said It Was Okay (D: 47%, L: 23%)
Also I & T
9. HOW R COMMUNICATED THAT HE OR SHE WANTED TO REMAIN FRIENDS. (Σf 's = D: 49, L: 42)
 - O. Reaffirmed the Friendship (D: 28%, L: 47%)
Also T
 - X. Maintained Contact (D: 54%, L: 41%)

10. HOW R COMMUNICATED THAT HE OR SHE DID NOT WANT TO REMAIN FRIENDS. (Σf 's = D: 9, L: 29)
 I. Reduced Contact (D: 69%, L: 28%)
 Y. Said Didn't Want Friendship (D: 13%, L: 0%)
11. HOW P COMMUNICATED THAT HE OR SHE WANTED TO REMAIN FRIENDS. (Σf 's = D: 58, L: 33)
 O. Reaffirmed the Friendship (D: 26%, L: 34%)
 X. Maintained Contact (D: 48%, L: 45%)
 R. Dropped It (D: 5%, L: 14%)
12. HOW P COMMUNICATED THAT HE OR SHE DID NOT WANT TO REMAIN FRIENDS. (Σf 's = D: 11, L: 32)
 I. Reduced Contact (D: 76%, L: 71%)
13. HOW R INDICATED THAT HE OR SHE WAS CONTINUING TO PURSUE A ROMANCE. (Σf 's = D: 24, L: 32)
 U. R Kept After Romance (D: 34%, L: 35%)
 AA. Sexual Behavior/Overtures (D: 32%, L: 39%)
 Also X
14. HOW R INDICATED THAT HE OR SHE WAS NOT PURSUING A ROMANCE. (Σf 's = D: 29, L: 31)
 I. Reduced Contact (D: 35%, L: 3%)
 R. Dropped It (D: 12%, L: 50%)
 Also P
15. WHAT R DID/SAID THAT PRESSURED P. (Σf 's = D: 14, L: 24)
 AA. Sexual Behavior/Overtures (D: 19%, L: 6%)
 U. R Kept After Romance (D: 52%, L: 41%)
 Also N
16. WHAT R DID/SAID THAT ELIMINATED/REDUCED PRESSURE ON P. (Σf 's = D: 25, L: 24)
 R. Dropped It (D: 22%, L: 28%)
 W. Said It Was Okay (D: 28%, L: 28%)
 Also O & P
17. HOW P LED R ON. (Σf 's = D: 37, L: 47)
 AA. Sexual Behavior/Overtures (D: 42%, L: 48%)
 T. Acted Friendly (D: 27%, L: 29%)
 Also E & FF
18. HOW P INDICATED (POSTEPISODE) HE OR SHE VIEWED THE RELATIONSHIP PLATONICALLY. (Σf 's = D: 22, L: 39)
 P. Disclosure re Present Relationship (D: 16%, L: 28%)
 DD. Reduced Sexual/Romantic Behavior (D: 12%, L: 21%)
 Also D, E, & CC

(Continued)

Table 2.3 (Continued)

19. HOW R INDICATED THAT HE OR SHE COULD ACCEPT IT. ($\sum f's = D: 47, L: 29$)	
R. Dropped It (D: 42%, L: 36%)	
W. Said It Was Okay (D: 41%, L: 42%)	Also P
20. HOW R INDICATED THAT HE/SHE COULD NOT ACCEPT IT. ($\sum f's = D: 19, L: 34$)	
U. R Kept After Romance (D: 40%, L: 26%)	
EE. Acted Bothered (D: 28%, L: 26%)	Also I
21. WAYS THAT P CAUSED/AMPLIFIED R'S BEING HURT. ($\sum f's = D: 28, L: 48$)	
D. The Rejection Itself (D: 40%, L: 53%)	
I. Reduced Contact (D: 27%, L: 22%)	
22. WAYS THAT P PREVENTED/REDUCED R'S BEING HURT. ($\sum f's = D: 41, L: 32$)	
O. Reaffirmed the Friendship (D: 34%, L: 25%)	
X. Maintained Contact (D: 16%, L: 14%)	Also K & W
23. HOW P INDICATED THAT HE OR SHE MIGHT DEVELOP ROMANTIC FEELINGS LATER. ($\sum f's = D: 22, L: 22$)	
S. P Hints re Future Romance (D: 47%, L: 23%)	
AA. Sexual Behavior/Overtures (D: 20%, L: 34%)	Also E & FF
24. HOW P INDICATED THAT HE OR SHE WAS UNLIKELY TO DEVELOP ROMANTIC FEELINGS. ($\sum f's = D: 26, L: 40$)	
D. The Rejection Itself (D: 36%, L: 34%)	
P. Disclosure re Present Relationship (D: 26%, L: 31%)	Also I & R
25. HOW R INDICATED (POSTEPISODE) ACTIVE PURSUIT OF THE FRIENDSHIP. ($\sum f's = D: 45, L: 35$)	
X. Maintained Contact (D: 49%, L: 54%)	
R. Dropped It (D: 15%, L: 22%)	Also I
26. HOW P INDICATED (POSTEPISODE) ACTIVE PURSUIT OF THE FRIENDSHIP. ($\sum f's = D: 40, L: 32$)	
X. Maintained Contact (D: 44%, L: 66%)	
R. Dropped It (D: 8%, L: 20%)	Also I

NOTE: P = platonically inclined, R = romantically inclined, D = dissolved, L = lasted. Table 2.3 presents only those behaviors accounting for at least 10% of behaviors reported in D or L groups for a given condition. Behavior code letters are from Table 2.2.

participants reported that the romantic partner continued pursuit via sexual overtures, the overtures described were in the form of *physical* behaviors (e.g., “She kept making out with me,” “Getting physically close,” “Trying to maneuver me into situations where physical closeness was likely”). For lasting friendships, on the other hand, all but one of the responses described sexual overtures in the form of *verbal* innuendo (e.g., “Sexual jokes and stories,” “Hypothetical statements about us getting physical,” “He would jokingly make suggestive comments about having sex”). It is thus tempting to speculate that some sort of sexual overture threshold operates in these unrequited situations whereby physical overtures are more likely to damage the friendship than are verbal flirting and innuendo.

As another example, the consequences of disclosing one’s (or accepting the partner’s) other relationships appear inconsistent across conditions. Apparently the effect is more likely to be positive for the friendship when the other relationship is acknowledged or accepted *before* or *after* the disclosure, but is more likely negative when done *at the time* of disclosure (i.e., see ##14, 16, and 18 vs. #5). Similarly, it is curious that while it is generally interpreted positively when the matter is dropped and ostensibly forgotten, the interpretation is sometimes negative (e.g., Items ##8, 14, 16, 19, 25, 6, 24, and 26 vs. Item #5R). We would speculate that dropping the matter does not supersede first reaffirming the friendship and assuring one another that the situation and asymmetry are okay.

Perhaps the most crucial feature of Table 2.3 for our purposes is that certain behaviors do seem to be more common for positive conditions and others more common to negative conditions. By collapsing these data across all positive or negative conditions, we can identify behaviors that are reported much more often in positive conditions than in negative conditions and, at the same time, more often in lasted than in dissolved friendships.⁸ These presumably “most positive” behaviors include dropping the matter, continuing as before the episode; reaffirming the friendship, explicitly reminding the partner that the friendship is important; disclosure and acceptance regarding the partner’s existing or new relationships; having known one another as friends for a long time before the disclosure; having spent a lot of time together before the disclosure; and treating one another as special friends do, including special favors and sacrifices.

Conversely, we may identify behaviors that are reported much more often for negative than for positive conditions and, at the same time, more often in dissolved than in lasting friendships. These presumably “most negative” behaviors include avoiding or reducing contact with the partner, pressure on the platonic partner to develop romantic feelings, acting friendly, being closed regarding personal matters and feelings, doing mean things, suggesting that the friendship can or should be sacrificed, and shallowness or inconsistency.

Discussion

This study sought to determine the behaviors that account for the fate of friendships wherein one partner discloses romantic attraction that is not shared by the other. Part I attempted to identify critical behaviors via open-ended reports by participants who had experienced unrequited-romantic-attraction episodes within friendships. But this phase yielded friendship maintenance conditions rather than specific behaviors. Part II used those conditions as a priori items of interest, testing for (a) their relative presence or absence in lasting versus dissolved friendships, (b) participants' perception of the conditions' importance in determining the fate of the friendship, and (c) open-ended identification of specific behaviors by which the conditions were manifested or promoted. Qualitative coding and matching of these behaviors with key conditions yielded the identification of certain "positive" and "negative" behaviors that appeared to be associated with desirable (for friendship maintenance) and undesirable conditions, respectively. The overall impression is that in virtually all cases, unrequited-romantic-attraction episodes within friendships are awkward for both partners and are at least temporarily disruptive to the friendship. Apparently, friendships survive or dissolve largely as a result of (or at least in concert with) particular behaviors and conditions established by the partners.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

If the participants in this study are typical, it is extremely common for people, by age 20 or so, to have experienced one or more episodes of unrequited romantic attraction within a friendship. In the majority of these cases, the awkwardness of the situation leads to a dissolution of the friendship, even when both partners would have preferred otherwise. Being without social scripts to guide their behaviors, partners are necessarily left to their own devices. Apparently, however, this improvisation often yields ineffective or counterproductive behaviors, and the friendship dissolves. Sometimes, however, partners improvise behaviors that save the friendship.

Assuming that this study has identified some of the conditions associated with saved and dissolved friendships, these can be highlighted to represent guidelines for friends who find themselves experiencing unrequited romance situations in the future.

Specifically, the study suggests the following guidelines if the friendship is to be maintained:

1. *Pursue the friendship and make clear that maintaining it is important to you.* This is facilitated by verbally reaffirming the friendship, by maintaining or

reestablishing earlier patterns of contact, and then by dropping the episode from further discussion.

2. *Make clear that you have accepted and can handle the asymmetry situation.* This is facilitated by (a) verbally acknowledging acceptance of the asymmetry, disclosure, and rejection and then by (b) dropping the matter.

3. *Try not to manifest discomfort or embarrassment.* This can be facilitated by maintaining earlier contact patterns and by dropping the matter.

4. If you were the romantically inclined partner, *try to avoid your partner's perception that you are pressuring him or her toward romantic feelings.* This can be facilitated by reducing sexual overtures and flirting, by accepting the partner's subsequent romantic interest in others, and by abandoning romantic intentions.

5. Other generally inadvisable behaviors include complaining of the asymmetry, the platonic partner suggesting the possibility of future mutual attraction, and telling friends about the disclosure/rejection episode.

6. Moreover, the prognosis for a repaired friendship presumably is better if certain conditions were present before the rejection episode, namely, (a) having known one another as friends for a long time before the episode and (b) having spent a lot of time together before the episode.

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Given evidence of positive and negative roles for these behaviors within the specific context of unrequited romance, it may be worth investigating the degree to which they generalize to a wider range of friendship repair contexts. Intuitively, several seem likely to be specific to the unrequited attraction context. For example, it seems unlikely that other friendship repair contexts would call for key behaviors such as disclosure of one's subsequent interest in others, avoiding increased flirtation, suggesting future romantic feelings, and so forth.

On the other hand, some of the key behaviors noted in this study might generalize to most any friendship repair situation, and some of them have been noted elsewhere, for example, reaffirming the friendship (Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993) and continuing prior social interaction patterns (e.g., Fehr, 1996). Similarly, some of the key unrequited attraction behaviors probably have analogous behaviors in other contexts after minor contextual revision. For example, the effect of verbal reassurance that one is okay with romantic asymmetry probably is paralleled in verbal reassurance that one is okay with most any difference that accounts for disruption of a friendship, and likewise, perhaps, for dropping the matter once it has been discussed, not complaining about the situation, and so forth. In any case, the potential role of these behaviors or their analogues in other friendship repair contexts, perhaps even in other conflict contexts more generally, is worthy of further investigation.

CAVEATS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has identified several behaviors as positive (likely to help maintain the friendship) and several as negative (likely to dissolve the friendship) for unrequited romance situations within friendships. But while the data comparisons—lasted versus dissolved friendships and positive versus negative conditions—are intuitively impressive for many of these behaviors, the overall picture is incomplete. In particular, the relative frequencies tallied for the behaviors are simply the frequencies with which participants thought to report the behaviors in response to open-ended queries. While it may be that the most frequently reported behaviors are indeed those that most frequently occurred, it may be instead that the frequently reported behaviors were merely those most salient. Conversely, lower-frequency behaviors may have been experienced by many participants, though recalled or reported by few.

Thus future research on friendship maintenance and repair behaviors after unrequited romantic attraction should treat the conclusions and implied prescriptions of the present study as *a priori* hypotheses. There would be ethical problems with most true experimental tests of these hypotheses, of course. One could, however, test *a priori* predictions for “positive” and “negative” behaviors regarding their relative frequency of occurrence in lasted or dissolved friendships, or one could test predictions regarding the perceived influence of these behaviors, as *a priori* variables, upon presumably critical friendship repair conditions. These kinds of studies seem to be the appropriate extension of the findings made here.

Conclusion

This study examined unrequited romantic attraction within ostensibly platonic friendships and was interested especially in behaviors differentiating friendships that survive an unrequited-romantic-attraction episode from friendships that do not. The theoretical concern was the identification of methods, conditions, and behaviors that might inform general friendship repair research. The pragmatic motivation was to identify behaviors that can be advised for persons who experience unrequited attraction episodes and wish to maintain the friendship.

Sets of apparently advisable and inadvisable behaviors were identified. The qualitative and interpretative nature of the study demands that the advice be cautious, and additional research certainly is called for in order to offer more confident advice.

Future research notwithstanding, maintaining a friendship after an unrequited-romantic-attraction disclosure has been a relatively scriptless situation, with partners left to improvise their own responses. And in most cases this has resulted in dissolved friendships. Thus we would hope that individuals involved in real-life episodes should welcome the advice implied by the present study, tentative though it may be.

Notes

1. Questionnaires were worded to allow responses for parallel same-sex situations (namely, “*Imagine a time when you and a member of the sex that you date had developed a friendship, and where . . .*”). But demographic data on the sex of the participants and their partners indicated that all participants were describing heterosexual relationships.

2. Pilot data were coded by two of the coauthors into various categories. Seventeen functional categories emerged. Intercooder reliability was 97%. Differences were resolved via discussion.

3. The screening data are of some interest in their own right. Of 184 potential participants, 78% had experienced at least one unrequited-romantic-attraction episode within a friendship, about 70% of these more than once, with dissolution of the friendship being the more common consequence. Frequency breakdowns for each target situation are available upon request.

4. Instructions were as follows (e.g., for participant platonic/lasted, with bold type indicating edit points for the other target situations): “*You have indicated that you have experienced the following situation within the past 3 years: (a) You and a member of the sex that you date have developed a friendship; (b) It becomes more than platonic for him/her. He/she begins to develop romantic feelings for you; (c) At some point he/she discloses romantic feelings to you; (d) The feelings are not mutual. You disclose that you do not have romantic feelings for him/her; (e) The friendship continues relatively unaltered for a good while. In these situations sometimes the friendship lasts and sometimes it dissolves. We are interested in determining the factors responsible for your friendship having lasted. Please answer the following accordingly.*”

5. By asking participants for manifestations that both exacerbated and relieved certain conditions, the number of “conditions” to be analyzed is expanded from 17 in Table 2.1 to 26 in Table 2.3. For example, Table 2.1 displays a single condition regarding whether the romantic partner was embarrassed, while Table 2.3 displays data for two subconditions—*increasing* this embarrassment and *decreasing* this embarrassment. The same is true for several other conditions.

6. With 141 participants and 26 comment opportunities, there could have been as many as 3,666 total comments. The difference—that is, the “missing” comments—is overwhelmingly due to individual participants not responding on select items (presumably because they were unable to recall manifestations, especially for low-presence conditions) rather than blanket omissions of the open-ended segments by given participants.

7. Omitted percentages on less frequent behaviors are available upon request.

8. Collapsing specific behaviors across all positive and negative conditions was performed as a separate analysis. Details and specific results are available upon request.

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