Discursive Challenges in Relational Maintenance:
A Study of Talk in On-Again/Off-Again Relationships

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Auburn, Alabama
August 6, 2011

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Abstract

      This study takes a qualitative approach to the study of on-again/off-again romantic

relationships as it analyzes partners' talking to each other about their relationship. It focuses

on the discursive practices partners enact to construct and deal with the challenging nature of

their relationship. My launching point for the study comes from Dailey and colleagues'

initial examination of on/off relationships where they are presented as romantic relationships

rife with challenges. After collecting and transcribing the data of three on-again/off-again

couples, my analysis follows Tracy's (1995, 2005) method of discourse analysis known as

Action-Implicative Discourse Analysis (AIDA), which aims to reconstruct issues within a

social context for the benefit of that context. The central argument for my thesis is that on-

again/off-again partners together reconstruct their relationship as vulnerable. Analysis is

conducted in two parts. The first part describes areas in which partners reveal reconstructed

vulnerabilities. The second chapter of analysis then describes three main strategies partners

use to manage these vulnerabilities. One is partners' searching in relational description.

Another is their playful accounting for problematic issues in the relationship. The third is

partners' joint performance of events that have shaped their relationship. My discussion

chapter reflects on the limitations and implications of studying the discursive practices of on-

again/off-again relationships.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost I offer my sincerest gratitude to my advisor, mentor, and friend, Dr. Robert R. Agne, who has supported me in all parts of this thesis with his patience and knowledge whilst allowing me to figure out many things on my own. Without his efforts and insight, thesis would not have been completed or written. I also thank the members of my graduate committee, Dr. Susan L. Brinson and Dr. Mary Helen Brown for their guidance and suggestions. I acknowledge my friends and colleagues in the Auburn University Department of Communication for their support and for making the past two years a really good experience. For those couples that participated in this study, I wish them the best and I appreciate their support. Finally, I would like to thank my family members for supporting and encouraging me to pursue this degree.

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I. Introduction

The "real world" is not "real" beyond the social practices that construct and maintain it as

such (Potter, 1996, p. 41).

The reality Potter (1996) mentions in this opening quotation pertains to the

relationships in our lives. All relationships come with their own problems and challenges

about which a social constructionist point of view could be particularly insightful. In this

thesis I focus on relationships known as on-again/off-again relationships (on/off

relationships from here on out) (Dailey, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009) because the name that

labels them refers to the relationship as a problematic one, fraught with challenge.

Examining on/off relationships from a social constructionist point of view

naturally invites a qualitative methodology that remains relatively rare in the area of

interpersonal communication research. In the introduction to their collection of studies

on personal relationships in public places, Morrill and Snow (2005) point out that most

research in interpersonal communication has used surveys and other measuring

techniques in examining durable, private relationships. Morrill and Snow expand the

horizons of interpersonal communication research by featuring research that employs

ethnographic methods. The common challenge all the studies address is the clashing

goals that come from the expectations of each partner in the privacy of the relationship

and the expectations of the public on the relationship that resides in it. Studies used

ethnographic methods to tackle specific challenges such as understanding the emotion

labor exotic dancers experience before, during, and after table dances in a strip club (Massey & Hope, 2005); the purposes for teenagers "hanging out" in public places such as malls and fast food restaurants (Harrison & Morgan, 2005); or the ways men and women initiate personal relationships at the gym (Stern, Callister, & Jones, 2005).

On/off relationships are personal relationships in private settings, making an ethnographic approach difficult, perhaps prohibitively so. However, a qualitative approach can still be conducted on personal relationships in the form of open-ended interviewing. One example is a study of on/off relationships in which Dailey et al. (2009) aim to explain their cyclical nature. Others include how dating relationships manage dialectical goals (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) and how friends give and receive advice while minimizing face threat (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997).

In following this trend, this thesis also takes a qualitative approach to the on/off relationship. It focuses on the talk of the relational partners together as a social construction. In other words, along with Cameron's (2001) discussion of discourse and discourse analysis, the meaning of the relationship is intersubjective, making the relationship a communicative accomplishment through the talk between partners.

By examining the on/off relationship as a discursive achievement, I argue that partners reconstruct their relationship as vulnerable rather than simply sharing their individual feelings as uncertain. I also argue that they come to terms with vulnerability to help them make sense of the current status of their relationship. Analyzing partners' discourse allows me to make claims about these partner's and their relationships in a way that treats the relationship as its own entity—not as the product of two partners' individual interpretations.

This thesis begins with a theoretical discussion, explaining discourse as talk-in-interaction and how analyzing it can be tailored for studying on/off relationships. Following this discussion, I review research on literature that defines on/off relationships and then use it to speculate on the relational maintenance challenges on/off relationships are likely to experience. I also review the research on discourse in the context of relationships, highlighting studies which aim specifically at combining discourse analytic techniques with traditional concerns in interpersonal relationships. After asking a specific research question about the discourse of on/off relationships, the methods section lays out the logistics of conducting the proposed study, including interview questions to initiate partners' talk. The analysis consists of two tasks. First, I look at partners' descriptions of on/off relationships that reveal them as challenging and tenuous. Then I describe specific interactional practices partners use to manage the vulnerabilities that characterize their relationship. Finally, in the discussion, I describe the findings of this study and discuss implications, limitations, and future research that can be done combining on/off relationships and discourse.

II. Theoretical Background

Most research on romantic relationships is dominated by a socio-psychological perspective using quantitative methods of analysis (Morrill & Snow, 2005). This type of research method typically derives (perhaps dictates) the type of data collected. In this study, the data for analysis and the method for analyzing data were chosen in tandem. As I had an initial interest in the social construction of talk and on/off relationships, capturing the latter in terms of the former seemed to make sense both in theory and practice. To me, this meant recording on/off couples together as they talk about the status of their relationships. Discourse analysis is largely an interpretive endeavor that assumes talk constructs our social realities and, in this study, our relationships. This chapter proceeds first by briefly explaining the nature of discourse and how I treat it in this study, including the specific discourse analytic method. Then I review theories and models of on/off relationships, followed by a review of research on relational maintenance, relational challenges, and finally discourse studies on relationships. The chapter concludes with a two-part research question that guides the rest of the study.

Discourse and Discourse Analysis

Though my study examines spoken discourse exclusively, discourse can also mean communication that is written, signed (e.g., American Sign Language), or graphically represented (Cameron, 2001). The term reaches across many disciplines, so it might be helpful to discuss "discourse" in terms of two broad categories. Gee (1999) describes these two categories as "big D" Discourse and "little d" discourse. The

difference between these two forms lies in the fact that discourse with a "Big D" involves broad cultural patterns of symbolic (both linguistic and non-linguistic) elements that combine to "produce, reproduce, sustain and transform a given 'form of life' that describe ongoing societal discussions on issues such as poverty, race, gender, education, healthcare, or politics (Gee, 1999, p. 7). Conversely, "little d" discourse focuses on language-in-use, that is the everyday occurring talk that goes on in our social lives – conversations we have at home, school, or work with family, friends, co-workers, etc. In short, a nationwide formal discussion over religion would be considered Discourse with a "big D," where as the talk with a friend over where to go to dinner would be considered discourse with a "little d."

This study treats discourse with a "little d," though it too is a focus of research found across many disciplines, including anthropology, linguistics, and sociology (Cameron, 2001). Even in communication studies, discourse analysis is pluralistic, found in the forms known as interactional sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, discursive psychology, and ethnography of communication. However, all of these strands of research that make up what is known as research on language and social interaction have similar features. LeBaron, Madelbaum, and Glenn (2003) argue that the various strands of discourse analysis have four features in common. They all move beyond the traditional sender receiver model of communication. They seek to re-examine cognitive or theoretical constructs from a social-constructionist point of view. Their analyses bring together verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. They also appreciate the poetics of language.

Tracy (2001a) describes the central features of discourse analysis in a different

way. For Tracy, common features are that talk is valued over text, talk is designed for and impacted by a speaker(s) audience (e.g., a single conversational partner, small group, large public), problematic communication situations are deemed the most interesting, discourse is written with an argumentative tone rather than general description, and talk is viewed as practical and moral action used to accomplish certain goals.

In short, discourse, for this study is seen as talk-in-interaction. Meanings are joint creations within the interaction such that they may remain incomplete and subject to modification (LeBaron et al., 2003). Discourse analysis provides researchers in communication a tool to study the presentation of self, identity management, and the inner workings of interactional processes (Tracy, 2001a).

The specific framework for discourse I use for my study is known as Action-Implicative Discourse Analysis (AIDA), a method of discourse analysis that looks at talk within a social context (Tracy, 1995), often for the sake of that social context. AIDA is concerned with cultivating practice in a social context rather than scientifically discovering, predicting, and controlling it. In other words, AIDA is not concerned with "what is," rather, it seeks to describe and reconstruct communicative issues so that reflection of wiser communicative practices can be further discussed for that specific context (Tracy, 1995, 2005). AIDA can be used to accomplish one or more of three goals. First, it can uncover interactional problems participants are unaware they experience. It can also reveal conversational moves and strategies that arise from trying to manage those problems. Third, it can be useful in understanding the ideal outcome of problematic situations as the participants imply it in their interaction (Agne, 2008; Tracy, 1995, 2005). In helping communicators reflect on what they do in interaction and how they manage

interactional challenges they face or potentially face, AIDA aims to provide insight for working towards the ideal situation.

As a discourse analytic endeavor, AIDA's reconstructive purpose focuses on communication as a practice. Some communicative practices that have been studied using AIDA include 911 telephone calls (e.g., Tracy, 1997; Tracy & Tracy, 1998), decision-making practices in school-board meetings (e.g., Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001), cosmetic surgery consultation (e.g., Mirivel, 2008), and crisis negotiation (e.g., Agne, 2007). In the study of 911 telephone calls for instance, Tracy and Tracy (1998) use AIDA to examine how and under what conditions 911 telephone operators are rude to callers. Tracy and Ashcraft (2001) use it to examine how a school board made decisions about their policy on diversity. Mirivel (2008) uses AIDA to show how cosmetic surgeons manage duel roles of both salesperson and healthcare provider. Agne (2007) argues that reframing practices, contrary to the popular literature on bargaining and negotiation, can be quite problematic in crisis negotiation. As an inductive process that uses transcribed data from audio recordings, for this study of on/off relationships AIDA can help to shed light not only on how the communicators address problems in their relationship but also how the ideals in romantic relational communication are implied. As AIDA tends to focus on problematic communication, the multiple challenges that characterize relational maintenance and are presumably amplified in on/off relationships make AIDA an appropriate method of analysis. It is also an approach to the study of close personal relationships never used before.

Theories and Models of On-Again/Off-Again Relationships

The research that has explicitly attended to on/off relationships is relatively scarce, comprised mainly of studies by Dailey and colleagues (Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010; Dailey, Pfiester et al., 2009; Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). This body of research provides a necessary conceptual foundation to this study by helping to define on/off relationships (also called cyclical relationships) as they compare to traditional noncyclical relationships. These studies are comprised of the research that has looked at how relationships are formed, maintained, and understood by those involved in them. As Dailey, Pfiester et al. (2009) indicate, the fluctuation of on/off relationships are interesting to researchers of relational stability because they defy the held assumption that a relationship is something that is either intact or not (terminated) (Karney, Bradbury, & Johnson, 1999). In examining on/off relationships, all phases of relational development become relevant – escalation, maintenance, dissolution, in addition to renewal. (Dailey, Pfiester et al., 2009; Dailey, Rossetto et al., 2009).

Relational escalation in on/off relationships begins similarly to that of noncyclical relationships. Factors such as physical attractiveness and the similarity between partners play large roles (Dailey, Rossetto et al., 2009; Sprecher, 1989). Models of relationship development define the progression of a relationship as having increasing levels of self-disclosure, intimacy, and personal communication (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Dailey, Rossetto et al., 2009). Partners in on/off relationships report positive factors in relational development (e.g., ease of communication) less than those in noncyclical relationships. On/off partners cite relational uncertainty more negatively than noncyclical partners in regards to time spent together and distance between partners (Dailey, Rossetto et al.,

2009). Not only do many on/off partners exhibit more instances of negativity in regard to their relationships but much of this negativity - and in turn mental anguish - in relational de-escalation causes a breakdown in communication, leaving the relational status to be undefined (Dailey, Rossetto et al., 2009).

Initial examinations of on/off relationships have been done using a series of well-accepted frameworks including predictors of relational stability, notably interdependence theory (Dailey, Pfiester et al., 2009a). Interdependence theory states that relationships are made up of the ongoing interactions of relational partners and that partners' outcomes are interdependent (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). The behavior of the participants is then coordinated to achieve mutually rewarding outcomes of relational satisfaction and perceived quality of alternatives. From these outcomes, partners make an evaluation of their relationship and decide whether it is rewarding enough. Other factors involved in the structure of the relationship (e.g., a partner's relational history) can also play a large role in how relational partners move in and out of on/off relationships (Bevan, Cameron, & Dillow, 2003). Outcomes are evaluated on what partners expect in relationships and what they perceive as alternatives (Dailey, Pfiester et al., 2009; Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). In this respect, interdependence theory is effective for predicting the stability of a relationship, including on/off relationships.

Interdependence theory can also help explain how partners evaluate their relationship, weigh whether it should be maintained or terminated, and decide on reconciliation if it has already been terminated (Dailey, Pfiester et al., 2009). Research on relationship de-escalation has shown that most dissolutions are unilateral and come about due to relational problems that are incremental or sudden (Cupach & Metts, 1986;

Sprecher, 1994). Dailey, Pfiester et al. (2009) found that in regards to breakups of on/off relationships, features of interdependence theory, including relational satisfaction and the perceived quality of alternatives, help explain why partners felt costs outweighed the rewards.

An offshoot model of interdependence theory, the investment model (Rusbult, 1980), takes decision-making in regards to commitment to another level. The investment model suggests that feelings of relational commitment emerge as a consequence of increased dependence on the relational partner or the relationship (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). In addition to satisfaction level and quality of alternatives, investment size is a third factor of dependence in the investment model. Investment size refers to the number, magnitude and importance of the resources that are attached with the relationship and would be lost if the relationship was terminated (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). For example, if partners in a romantic relationship were married and had children, the investment size would be much larger than a couple that had only been casually dating one another for a few months. As a result, the level of dependence according to the investment model would be increased, and thus so would commitment.

However, if those involved in a relationship do reach the point where they feel termination is inevitable, the type of relationship can affect how termination occurs and its lingering effects. For example, unlike the dissolution of most noncyclical relationships, the dissolution of on/off relationships often involves strategies that redefine the relationship (i.e. "lets be friends"), which can leave the possibility of romantic renewal open (Baxter, 1985; Dailey, Rossetto et al., 2009).

Partners who wish to continue the relationship after dissolution often employ unilateral strategies to reconcile it (Buchanan, O'Hair, & Becker, 2006; Cupach & Metts, 2002). Strategies include partners attempting to highlight positive aspects of the relationship, remaining in contact, and using the dissolution to offer beneficial change to the relationship. Also, in line with interdependence theory, partners may wish to reconcile the relationship due to lack of better alternatives to those their former partners offered (Dailey, Pfiester et al., 2009).

In sum thus far, central issues in defining and modeling on/off relationships are relational satisfaction, transitions from on to off and off to on stages in the relationship, and partners' investment in the relationship. These are important relational issues suggesting that in the fluctuation, even turbulence of a relationship, the partners' stakes in the relationship remain. It is unclear, and perhaps irrelevant, whether the stakes generate the fluctuation or the fluctuation generates the stakes; either way, partners face challenges in maintaining their relationships, whether that means maintaining its level of intimacy or redefining it.

Relational Maintenance

Relational maintenance refers to the efforts and actions of those in relationships to keep them in a certain position (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Relational characteristics such as the length of time partners have been together and the quality and quantity of shared experiences differ with each romantic dyad. As such, the maintenance that occurs in one relationship will not necessarily translate into another, even if the relationship type is similar (friendship, family, romantic, etc.). These characteristics are important in terms of maintenance and serve to indicate what needs to be done to address different relational

factors (Goodboy & Myers, 2008). Further research has also shown that in addition to keeping a relationship in a stable position, relational maintenance can work to escalate or de-escalate relationships (Dailey et al., 2010; Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnick, 1993). In terms of on/off relationships, relational maintenance can serve all these goals. It can serve to keep the relationship in a position of flux, escalate the relationship's romance, or deescalate the romance back to an off position.

Stafford and Canary (1991) identify and employ five maintenance techniques to analyze three relational variables. The relational variables are commitment, liking, and the extent to which partners negotiate the levels of power between them (what they call "control mutuality"). The maintenance techniques include positivity (cheerfulness and cooperation in interaction), openness (disclosing needs and discussing relational quality), assurances (showing commitment and affection to partner), engaging in social networks (spending time with friends and family), and sharing tasks (helping one another and sharing joint responsibility). All five techniques positively correlated with the three variables (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Furthermore, relational maintenance is dynamic in that the same type of maintenance can serve different goals within the relationship (Dindia, 1994). In their examination of cross-sex friendships, Guerrero and Chavez (2005) explained, for example, that "positivity can be used as an impression management strategy in the beginning stages of a relationship, as a routine maintenance behavior in established relationships, and as a repair strategy after a conflict or relationship problem has occurred" (p. 341).

Dailey et al. (2010) note that relational maintenance in relationships that are intact is relatively straightforward. These tactics continue to stabilize the relationship or take it

to a more intimate level. Partners in on/off relationships engage in fewer relational maintenance strategies than those in noncyclical relationships. These strategies include what Dailey et al. (2010) call "transformed" relational maintenance strategies, which function to neither stabilize nor advance the relationship. Rather, a transformed relational maintenance strategy can serve another goal such as redefining the terms of the relationship (Dailey et al., 2010).

In cross-sex friendships, Guerrero and Chavez (2005) found relational maintenance to be an important factor that helped shine light on whether opposite-sex friendships have intentions to keep the relationship platonic or move it in a romantic direction. Relational maintenance is also important and somewhat more complicated in cross-sex friends who engage in sexual activities but do not define their relationship as romantic – what Goodboy and Myers (2008) call "friends with benefits." These "friends with benefits" relationships can be complex because they exhibit traits of both a friendship and a romantic relationship but also because the flux of the relational status makes the use of relational maintenance strategies difficult. In the dissolution stages of on/off relationships, the degree to which partners actively redefine the relationship (i.e., stay friends, spend time together, etc.) increases the predictability of the amount of relational maintenance that will take place (Dailey et al., 2010). As such, the use and degree of relational maintenance in on/off relationships may prove to be a vital factor in how relational partners view their relationship and how they negotiate it with each other.

Relational maintenance plays an important role in on/off relationships, perhaps a more interesting role than in noncyclical relationships. Examining relational maintenance techniques has been shown to help distinguish on/off relationships from noncyclical ones,

but it also invites a review of some challenges that make maintenance unique for on/off relationships. Considering the relative uncertainty in the ultimate outcome of on/off relationships, it makes sense to address challenges that make, break, redefine, or repair a romantic relationship.

Challenges in Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships are never perfect unproblematic unions. During the course of these relationships, there are moments when tensions build up and conflict occurs. Kellett (2007) notes that these conflicts can serve as moments to work through these tensions that occur over the course of a normal, healthy relationship. For instance, a conflict surrounding the problem of loving one's husband and having to negotiate his time with an unbearable mother-in-law can add tension to the relationship. The way these conflicts are negotiated will indicate how the relationship progresses. A couples' first big fight can serve as a template for how future conflicts are handled in the relationship (Seigert & Stamp, 1994). Below I highlight challenges with conflict potential that stand out in the vast body of research on romantic relationships.

Jealousy.

Jealousy in a romantic relationship is a frequent occurrence (Bevan, 2008; Guerrero & Affifi, 1999). White and Mullen (1989) define romantic jealousy as "a complex of thoughts, emotions, and actions that follows loss of or threat to self-esteem and/or existence or quality of the romantic relationship" (p. 9). Similarly, Bevan (2008) identifies jealousy as harmful to a romantic relationship because of the emotional responses it elicits but that it can also be constructive in the relationship. Unless the

jealousy in some way is communicated and acknowledged within the relationship, resulting outcomes are hard to address.

While jealousy occurs in many types of relationships, it can come from more than one source in romantic ones. It can be caused by the threat of the relationship between one partner and a third party, feeling neglected by one's romantic partner (i.e., not enough time spent together), or the threat of outside factors infringing on the relationship (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998). Also, jealousy differs among types of romantic relationships. For instance, romantic relationships between younger, casual dating partners have shown more instances of jealousy than older, married couples (Andersen, Eloy, Guerrero, & Spitzberg, 1995). As this present study is focused on relationships that involve a lesser degree of certainty even compared to a casual noncyclical relationship, jealousy may very well become a topic of talk.

Relational uncertainty.

Another challenge that can plague relationships over their course is uncertainty. Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) was first formulated to explain the first few stages in relational development, such as two strangers meeting and there is a lack of information about each other (Berger, 1986; Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988). In line with relational maintenance, URT essentially states that for a relationship to be maintained, partners need to constantly update their knowledge about each other and the relationship as a whole. Uncertainty, in other words, is in flux throughout the course of relationships (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Dainton & Aylor, 2001).

Relational uncertainty is uncertainty in regards to the perception of the status of the relationship's future, comprising and adding to the uncertainty about the self or the

partner (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Knobloch and Solomon (1999) identify four areas of relational uncertainty: 1) norms about behavior (what can and can not be done in the relationship); 2) the mutuality of feelings (do both partners feel the same way about one another); 3) the definition of the relationship (is the relationship at the state partners want it); and 4) the future of the relationship (will the partners stay together).

Relational uncertainty is negatively related to the degree of relational maintenance in a relationship (Dailey et al., 2010). In other words, the more uncertain a partner or partners are about their relationship, the less likely they are to try to maintain it. Relational uncertainty in on/off relationships is important to mention because uncertainty is "a fundamental attribute of the relational experience" (Dainton & Aylor, 2001, p. 173). Also, the cyclical nature of on/off relationships leaves room for uncertainty about the future progression of the relationship. One reason for this is that relational uncertainty has been negatively linked with commitment in relationships (Dailey et al, 2010). However, Knobloch (2008) found that while relational uncertainty was thought to be more prevalent in dating couples, it also exists in marriage. But the uncertainty in married couples did not come from partners' uncertainty about themselves or their partners but rather from external factors such as children and finances. Moreover, different relational emotions and factors have been linked to higher levels of uncertainty. Affifi and Richert (1996) found that those experiencing jealousy in a relationship were more likely to have higher degrees of relational uncertainty than those not experiencing jealousy. In addition, a decrease in relational trust was found to increase levels of relational uncertainty (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985).

Distance.

Dealing with distance that can separate romantic partners has become more sophisticated in our world of ever increasing computer-mediated communication. While many long-distance dating relationships (LDDR) can be successful and fulfilling, the geographical separation between partners can still lead to problems (Sahlstein, 2006). Anywhere from 25-40% of college relationships are LDDRs (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). LDDRs can have a large impact on the lives of those involved in them, including psychological stress and poor academic performance (Macguire & Kinney, 2010). This finding was especially so for female college students involved in LDDRs who were found to exhibit more psychological stress than their male counterparts (Helgeson, 1994; Macguire & Kinney, 2010).

In addition, Dainton & Aylor (2001) note that unlike geographically close relationships, the distance involved in LDDRs adds to the degree of relational uncertainty, which can negatively affect the maintenance of the relationship. Time spent in the LDDR can also influence uncertainty and satisfaction levels. Partners in LDDRs lasting six months show less satisfaction and intimacy than those who have been in relationships less than six months (Holt & Stone, 1988). Other issues that can strain LDDRs are the pressure to make quality time when partners are together, the reliance on meta-communication (i.e., talking about when partners are going to talk), the feelings of living separate lives, and anti-climactic reunions. (Sahlstein, 2004, 2006).

Competing relational goals.

Another challenge in the maintenance of intimate relationships is that of competing relational goals, which could involve partners competing with each other or

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the relationship as a whole experiencing competing multiple goals. This challenge is primarily packaged in the theory of relational dialectics (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) say about competing goals in relationships, "social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary and opposing tendencies" (p. 3). Baxter and Braithwaite (2010) expand on Bakhtin's (1981) premise that language is full of contradictions and tensions in looking at competing discourses within everyday life, each discourse representing a different worldview or system of meaning. These contradicting discourses can be conceived as the co-existence of centripetal (dominant) and centrifugal (countervailing) forces such as certainty and novelty in a relationship (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998). For example, while predictability and certainty in a relationship may be comfortable, it could also lead to feelings of monotony and stagnation within the relationship (Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Further, while prediction and novelty are competing goals for the relationship as a whole, individuals may experience these goals in ways that compete with their partner. One partner may need predictability while another may need spontaneity.

Two other common relational dialectics are connectedness-separateness and openness-privacy. The connectedness-separateness struggle can be seen in many forms such as connection-autonomy, interdependence-independence, and intimacy-autonomy (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). The struggle between wanting to spend time with a partner and also wanting time alone with oneself could be an example of this struggle. Openness-privacy, also known as openness-closedness, candor-discretion, and disclosure-privacy, could appear in the form of a partner wanting to share some things while not mentioning

others out of personal privacy. Relational dialectics can provide insight into the conflict that can occur in a relationship out of the negotiation of these competing discourses. It is valuable to this study because on/off partners' interactions may signal some sort of contradiction that could lead to insight about their on/off relationship.

Arguments and bickering.

In any relationship, disagreement on a point of view or frustration on the part of a relational partner can lead to conflict and an ensuing argument. Conversation analysts have focused on the organization of arguing and its intrinsic structure, including how these arguments begin, how they are sequenced, and how oppositional moves are formed (C. Goodwin & M.H. Goodwin, 1990; M. H. Goodwin & C. Goodwin, 1987). In addition to the organization of argument, many scholars of conversation have claimed that in conversation there exists a preference for agreement, a claim backed up by researched aspects of conversational turns and sequencing (Dersley & Wootton, 2000). Scholars who study argument within conversation have shaped much of their research around what is known about agreement and alignment in the structure of conversation, indicating that argument sequences favor disagreement rather than agreement (Dersley & Wootton, 2000; Gruber, 1998). The trigger for many arguments is a complaint made by one person to another, followed almost instantly by some sort of denial reply (Dersley & Wootton, 2000). The exchange of diverging views on the topic then leads to a conflict exchange.

Some ways to resolve conflict according to Eder (1990) are to compromise, suggest ways to work towards a solution, and provide reasons why the conflict exists. However, many arguments do not resolve the conflict. Rather, the conflict ends when one of the parties in the dispute breaks the argument frame by producing a new action such as

introducing a new topic (changing the subject) (Dersley & Wootton, 2001; Goodwin, 1990). Regardless of resolution, conflict exchanges can accomplish relational goals such as displaying verbal skills or showing status (Goodwin, 1982). For example, an argument may arise out of the frustration one partner has about a competing relational goal (e.g. spending enough time together) or a problem about one partner making more decisions than the other. The argument may serve only as a venue to voice such frustration.

Relational transgressions and forgiveness.

During the course of many romantic partnerships, a more serious form of relational disruption, a relational transgression, may occur, causing harm to the relationship. Transgressions challenge one or both partners in the relationship to face its effects and consequences. The most common relational transgressions involve instances of sexual infidelity, dating or flirting with someone outside the relationship, and deception about a significant matter (Guerrero & Bachman, 2008; Metts, 1994). Research indicates that nearly 30-40% of relationships involve some sort of sexual infidelity and nearly 90% of partners in relationships reported lying to their partner about an important matter (Guerrero & Bachman, 2008). While research has shown that many relational partners break up after a serious transgression occurs, some relationships stay together after addressing their problems (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Guerrero & Bachman, 2008; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985).

In partners' discussion of a transgression, complaints are often utilized to bring about the misconduct. In focusing on how these complaints are structured in interaction, Drew (1998) argues that social conduct is brought about through the moral dimensions of language. In this regard, making a complaint about relational transgression or misconduct,

one almost always does moral work by evaluating the rightness or wrongness of the other's actions in terms of the normative standard of the partnership (Drew, 1998). For instance, if a partner accuses his or her significant other of infidelity, one may remark, "How could you do this to me? You are a terrible person and you have hurt me deeply." In making such a remark, the partner who has been cheated on is practicing moral work through citing the partner's behavior as wrong, and as a violation of the normative behaviors expected in a monogamous relationship.

If the relationship is maintained and repaired, forgiveness plays a large role (Fincham & Beach, 2002; Guerrero & Bachman, 2010). Relational forgiveness can be hard to define because of its complex aspects that vary by type and degree. Even so, Waldron and Kelley's (2008) working definition of forgiveness includes three important factors that help to identify it as a communication process. First, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the hurtful event or transgression by one or both partners. Second, there is a decision to extend mercy. Finally, emotional transformation must occur. Communication, both verbal and non-verbal, between partners is crucial in negotiating the forgiveness (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Also important is that the victim no longer feels the need to seek revenge for the transgression (Guerrero & Bachman, 2010). This lack of seeking revenge or restitution is important because it also can constitute an attitude towards whether forgiveness is conditional or unconditional. Because many arguments and transgressions are often without clear resolution, conditional forgiveness is linked with relationship deterioration. Unconditional forgiveness on the other hand, also called explicit forgiveness, is positivity linked with relationship recovery (Guerrero & Bachman, 2010; Waldron & Kelley, 2005).

This inventory of relational challenges – jealousy, relational uncertainty, distance, competing relational goals, arguing, and transgression and forgiveness—is admittedly incomplete. Those discussed in this review stand out as receiving the most attention in the research on romantic relationships. Certainly, many others exist such as boredom, incompatibility with partners' social network and family, religious differences, sexual incompatibility, to name only a few.

The purpose of this study is not to monitor, count, or compare these challenges. Rather it is to examine how challenges such as those indentified in this review are raised and discussed between partners. Most of the current research on relational maintenance and challenges is largely quantitative, employing statistical methods to make claims. One exception is the research on arguments and bickering. Goodwin's (1982, 1990) and Dersley and Wootton's (2000, 2001) work is conversation analytic, though much other work exists on argumentativeness in interpersonal communication as an individual trait (for a review see Kotowski, Levine, Baker, & Bolt, 2009). Be that as it may, given the purpose of my study, it makes sense to review research on romantic relationships that has been investigated using discourse analytic methods.

Discourse and Relationships

The purpose of most research dealing with discourse and relationships has primarily focused on the conversation rather than the relationship itself. According to Mandelbaum (2003) the difficulty of documenting and associating talk with the relevance of the relationship has resulted in conversation analysts being "reluctant to address issues of [the] relationship, using instead such terms as alignment and affiliation" (p. 209). In addition, Stokoe (2010) remarks that the research dealing with relationships also fails to

focus on the actual interaction that constitutes relationship initiation and development. Stokoe refers to this interaction as the "black box" of romantic relationships, the discourse that is actually done *in* relationships where partners discuss, evaluate, and negotiate relational factors into relational outcomes. The "black box" is extremely difficult to access because most, if not all of this talk happens spontaneously and privately.

The relative incompatibility of discourse analysis and the study of relational development explains why most discourse research studies dealing with relationships are in such journals as *Research on Language and Social Interaction* and *Discourse Studies* rather than in relationship journals such as *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. The news of such articles is about the discourse in relationships rather than the relationship's discourse. However, the findings of discourse research can prove valuable to understanding how talk can work to initiate and construct relationships (Mandelbaum, 2003). For example, Pomerantz and Mandelbaum (2005) focus on the relevance and uses of relationship categories in interaction (e.g., mother, father, friend, etc.) and how conversation analysts should approach their uses. Their study shows that relationship categories can influence what partners talk about and how they speak to one another.

Research has also been conducted on discourse and non-romantic intimate relationships such as friendship relationships and family relationships. For example, Holt (1996) looked at friends sharing stories with one another, which involve offering an assessment of the partner's story while in the same breath restating the story in another way. Similarly, Traverso (2009) looked at the interactions between friends who complain

about a non-present third party. This research looked at how the friend would respond to the complaint by accepting, disagreeing, or developing it further in the conversation.

Goodwin (2007) examined conversational practices that occur among family members. While the parent/child relationship itself is not the focus of the study, it is interesting to note how this relationship directs the structure of the interaction. For example, in parent/child sequences, the parent does most of the questioning, aiming to gain a certain response from a child. Focusing less on family interaction and more on relationships in general, Mandelbaum (2003) argues that the management of conversational problems is collaborative and an important part of relational development.

Romantic Relationships and Discourse

Some research has examined discourse explicitly in the context of romantic relationships and may be informative in a study of the talk between on/off relational partners. Edwards (1995) for instance, examined talk about relational troubles, arguing that couples use scripts as cognitive constructs – or in Edwards' words "descriptions of actions and events that characterize them as having a recurring, predictable, sequential pattern" (p. 319) – that is influenced by interactional rather than psychological patterns. In addition, a series of articles by Staske (1996, 1998, 1999) examined how relational partners constructed and normalized their own emotions in videotaped face-to-face interaction. For example, Staske (1999) looks specifically at partners' construction of jealousy in their relationship. Staske's and Edward's work yield an important implication in studying discourse in romantic relationships. The communication between romantic partners creates the psychological value individuals place on the relationship. In other words, partners co-construct meaning in the relationship.

The co-construction of emotions is an important implication for these studies of on/off relationships for two reasons. The first and most obvious reason is that emotions in on/off relationships likely run higher than those in noncyclical relationships because on/off relationships are more complex (Dailey, Rossetto, et al., 2009; Staske, 1999). The second is that it highlights the necessity to study the actual communication of romantic partners together, contrary to the dominant research on romantic relationships that usually uses surveys to examine individuals' assessments of their relationships.

Two studies explicitly work to bridge the gap between the study of discourse and the study of romantic relationships. One is Staske's (2002) article on claiming individualized knowledge of a conversational relationship partner. This study argues that relational partners in conversation with each other understand their relationship through interaction and that getting to know each other is something that is interactionally accomplished. The second is Stokoe's (2010) study of speed-dating which examined how partners elicited each other's relational history, how questions about relational histories were designed, and how some relational histories were problematized more than others.

The thesis project aligns with Stokoe's (2010) value on the "black box" of relationships and thus asks the following research question about talk and the maintenance of on/off relationships. What challenges do on/off partners reveal through their interaction and what interaction practices serve to deal with and manage the status of their relationship?

III. Method

Acquiring data from what Stokoe (2010) refers to as the "black box" of romantic relationships is difficult because the nature of romantic relationships is characterized by their privacy and the spontaneity of the partners' talk. I gathered data for this study with the aim of getting as close to the "black box" as possible. Therefore, I recorded interviews with on/off relational partners together while they talked about their relationships in a loosely structured format.

Interviews from three on/off couples were utilized in this study. These couples were recruited from various classes in the Communication department at a large southeastern university with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.[i] A recruitment script was used to find students in these classes who had been or were still in on/off relationships. In addition these participants were offered a gift card to a local restaurant as incentive to participate in the study. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes. Each couple was given details of what to expect in the interview and also given the ability to withdraw at any point.

An interview schedule featuring questions related to participants' involvement in on/off relationships was used to guide the interview. The schedule consisted of three different categories of questions. The first category involved questions related to the participants' relational background and history, including the degree to which the relationship had a cyclical element (e.g., how many times had the couple broken up and gotten back together, how long on/off stages lasted, etc). The second category of

questions related to the status of the relationship, including what the couple likes to do together, what they talk about when they are together, and what they like most about their relationship. The third category of questions asked participants their thoughts about relationships in general, including what qualities they saw as important in a romantic partner (see Appendix II for complete interview schedule).

Data gathering occurred through a process known as active interviewing in which the researcher and participants come together to construct the meaning of the interaction based upon the questions prompted by the interviewer (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This process allows for the researcher to adjust the questions and the discussion based on the conversation, thus not interrupting the natural flow of interaction that is valuable to the analysis. In activating the narrative production of the respondents, active interviewing helps the researcher to offer pertinent ways of conceptualizing and connecting issues and topics that help the interview to remain ongoing (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Recorded interviews were transcribed using a modified version of the Jeffersonian transcription system adopted from Atkinson and Heritage (1984) (see also Psathas, 1995). Transcription includes exact words of participants, false starts and vocal fillers (e.g., uhm, uh), intonation and stress, and overlapping speech. A list of symbols used in the Jeffersonian system is available in Appendix I.

All three couples were Caucasian, heterosexual, from the southeastern United States, and in their early twenties. Couples differed in how long they had been involved with one another, ranging from being together for just over eighteen months to having been involved for over five years. On/off cycles also differed among the couples, ranging from having broken up only once to having broken up and gotten back together five times.

Below I give more specific background of each couple.

Participants

Carl and Migs.

Carl and Migs have known each other for almost three years. Migs is a 21 year old junior in college and Carl is a 20 year old sophomore. They met during an orientation for an extracurricular club where Migs was an orientation leader and Carl was a student. After the orientation ended, they became romantically involved. After dating for a few weeks, they broke up because Migs felt that they had moved into a relationship too fast. After this breakup, they got back together within a few weeks and have been dating for almost two years.

John and Anne.

John and Anne have known each other for almost four years. They both are 22 years old and are seniors in college. They met through a mutual friend while out to dinner before a sorority event. They did not immediately become romantically involved until almost a year after meeting one another. John and Anne have broken up and reunited five times over the course of three years due to escalated arguments, feelings of inattentiveness, and the lack of communication about each others' feelings. At present they have been together for over a year.

Phil and Lisa.

Lisa and Phil have known each other for almost six years. Lisa is a 24 year old second-year graduate student and Phil is a 23 year old certified public accountant. They met as freshmen in college at a diner after a fraternity event. Phil and Lisa did not begin dating until almost a year after they met. They dated for three years until both graduated

college and Lisa went off to graduate school in a different state and they broke up. Lisa and Phil then reconciled and got back together only to break up again after four months. Months after the second breakup, they again reconciled the relationship and at present have been together five months.

One distinction of this study from those interviews that Holstein and Gubrium (1995) describe is that the "interviewee" is a couple. The aim for my data collection is to encourage talk between partners as a cross between an interviewer and focus group leader who guides but does not participate in the discussion (Morgan, 1997). Further, analysis focused not just on topics and conversational content but more importantly on conversational practices, moves, and styles. Attention to these features in the interview treats the process more as a communicative event (Mishler, 1986), consisting of speech acts as they function in the interviewee-relationship.

There were some specific challenges involved in this collection of data. First and foremost, I had to be as objective and non-intrusive as possible in the interview in order to maximize the naturalness of the discourse. As such, I had to avoid prodding the participants into discussing things that may be interesting to the discourse but too artificially created, thus moving too far away from Stokoe's (2010) metaphorical "black box" of the relationship. As mentioned before, the inner workings and talk of these participants' relationships are inaccessible to the researcher because they exist in regions that are off limits to those outside the relationship. Admittedly, these data could only edge the surface of the "black box" to find relational discourse that gives insight to on/off relationships.

The following discourse analysis unpacks relational challenges and how couples

managed them. By repeatedly and carefully examining recordings and transcripts, I come to describe ways in which partners talked out happenings in their relationship. In the analysis, I name and describe the moments which partners' reveal relational problems in their talk. I then proceed to describe the practices partners' used to manage these problems and explain how these affect relational balance and stability.

IV. Analysis I: Revealing Relational Vulnerabilities

This chapter provides an overview of partners' descriptions of their on/off relationships as a way of answering the first part of the research question, "what challenges do partners reveal through their interactions with each other." Rather than detecting or measuring aspects of on/off relationships attended to in previous research, I examine the participants' talk as it revealed challenges in the relationship. Thus, instead of describing themes that depict individuals' problems, uncertainties, and decision points in the relationship, I describe interactional moments in a play-by-play fashion that stand out as depicting the relationship as vulnerable to termination (either permanently or as another phase in the relationship).

Analysis shows that the discourse of on/off partners revealed three main vulnerabilities to the relationship, where I take "relational vulnerability" to mean a state in which the relationship is in a delicate position and has the potential to succumb to problems that arise and lean towards termination. The first of these vulnerabilities is the inexperience partners report having in romantic relationships, which extended to one or both partners in the relationship. The second is the hindering influence of social networks. This vulnerability deals with the imposition of friends, family, and past romantic interests on the relationship. The final vulnerability I describe is the problems that come with meeting or not meeting personal and cultural expectations of each partner.

These vulnerabilities are particularly problematic to on/off relationships because as relational termination is something that has occurred over the course of the

relationship already, the prospect of partners succumbing to vulnerability is ever present. Thus, the revelation of these vulnerabilities is an important part of managing them.

Vulnerability 1: Inexperience in Romantic Relationships

Partners with little previous experience in romantic relationships are often left searching for answers to guide them through awkward or troublesome situations. This was the case for the participants in this study. For these on/off partners, talk of this inexperience in relationships is one topic of discussion that revealed itself as a vulnerability. Numerous times in the interviews, participants revealed instances of inexperience, which occurred during their descriptions of all stages of their relationship (e.g., development, progression, termination). This vulnerability involved one partner talking about his or her own inexperience (or his or her partner's inexperience) and both partners talking about each other's.

Inexperience of one partner.

Carl, for example, talks about his inexperience in explaining that he did not know how to take the step from a friendship relationship he had with Migs to a romantic one:

Excerpt IV.1

101	Carl:	We:ll it was just it was it happen like I I wasn't picking up on
102		anything I would I was just like (.) hanging out with her hoping
103		that I don't know I don't know what I was think[ing
104	Migs:	[I would just
105		all of a sudden fall in love with you and just make out with
106		you?
107	Carl:	Basically.
108	Migs:	HAH HAH HA.H
109	Carl:	Uh:h (clears throat) and s:o none of that was happening and I
110		was like okay well she's not she doesn't feel the same way
101		

Throughout this example, Carl's inexperience is evident and it is bolstered by Migs' presumption of what Carl was hoping would happen. Carl's confirmation that he hoped Migs "would all of a sudden fall in love with [him] and just make out with [him]" (line 104-106), frames him as naïve, a mark of his inexperience. This naivety is also evident in Carl's belief that a relationship would develop on its own and that Migs would pick up on Carl's implied feelings and show him she was interested. While relationships develop differently for all people, Carl's turn in lines 109 and 110, "I was like okay well…she doesn't feel the same way," gives in to the fact that his fantasy was not coming true. He shows no evidence of relational experience to make anything happen so he let the relationship go its own way. Doing so leaves the relationship vulnerable, up to chance that it may or may not develop.

One partner's inexperience further into the relationship was seen as cause for conflict. In this case, certain actions were evidence of immaturity, and as John describes in Excerpt 2, these aspects of inexperience can lead to unease in the mind of his partner:

Excerpt IV.2

```
187     John:   I mean we we we have always had a pretty good
188             relationship um usually it's my problems like she said
189             you know I just need to get out of a high school
190             relationship was really what I was putting her through
191             cause I haven't really had up until now I hadn't really had
192             you know a good relationship like a mature relationship.
```

Of note is John's description of his realization and acceptance of his inexperience and how they amounted to instances where he has put Anne through difficult times. John does not make an excuse or justify his behavior, rather he owns up to it as his own problem (see line 188). This admission is significant because understanding that inexperience in relationships can be a cause for problems is important in solving them. It

is also interesting how John constructs his involvement within his relationship as a "high school relationship" (lines 189 and 190) as opposed to a "good relationship like a mature relationship" (line 192). He implies here that a high school relationship is bad and immature and one that has caused problems in his relationship with Anne. This choice of words allows John to identify the problematic nature of his inexperience in order to lessen his current relationship to its exposure. His explanation of his experience as high school level and immature is prompted by the following exchange in which he and Anne talk about one of the many breakups in their relationship:

Excerpt IV.3

130   Anne: Why did you break up with me again?

131   John: U:m

132   (2.5 sec.)

133   Anne: You went

134   John: I wanted to focus on my relationship with God.

135   Anne: Is that what you said for that one? <u>Hm</u>. Well then and then
136   there was another little tiff that was kind of like a break up but
137   it was only like two days wasn't it? And that was in (1.5 sec.)
138   that was on Valentine's Day [um and

139   John: [yeah.

Anne's line of questioning about her and John's many breakups contributes to the picture of John's inexperience. John shows he is thinking about an answer to the first question with, "U:m" and a 2.5 second pause. Anne saying, "you went" suggests her question has an answer she already knows. Her question in response to his justification ("is that what you said for that one. <u>Hm</u>") (see lines 134 and 135) indicates that this breakup was one of many that he initiated, that his reasons were different for each breakup, and that she may be amused by the creative nature of John's excuse for that

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particular one. Anne's response shows her treating John's breakups as numerous and flakey, which frames him as a relational partner who does not know what he wants and whose actions are not taken seriously. To further her argument, she describes other breakups that sound like she is giving an inventory of breakups. John's immaturity becomes a facet of the relationship that leaves it vulnerable to frequent (and perhaps random) disruption.

Inexperience of both partners.

Later in John and Anne's talk, there is a shift in discussion from the inexperience of one partner to the inexperience of both partners. While Excerpt 3 shows Anne contributing to the relevance of John's inexperience (by questioning his motives for breaking-up), Excerpt 4 shows Anne and John contributing to each other's inexperience:

Excerpt IV.4

793	Anne:	I mean. When is this when people say okay we're really dating
794		this is real this is serious? And that was kind of mis uh
795		conceptions about relationship kind of built in me was kind of
796		thinking like when can you think to yourself okay this is a
797		serious relationship you know what I mean?
798	INT:	Yeah.
799	Anne:	Versus okay this is who I [like to hang out with
800	John:	[You have to make it through this
801		first hump together though. She was into that like really fast
802		and I was still u:h like
803	Anne:	WELL it's not like I was like pu:shing you
804	John:	No no no you weren't you weren't pushing me you were there
805		without me and sirens were going off like OH my gosh you
806		know like I am going into this head first along with her I'm just
807		not sure.

In line 793, Anne questions the point at which couples define their relationship as serious. Though not as forthcoming with her lack of experience in mature relationships as

John in Excerpt 2, Anne reveals some inexperience in determining when a relationship is serious. As she describes her conceptions of the difference between a casual and serious relationship, John offers a thought, that couples make this decision together (lines 800 and 801). While before this, John declared himself inexperienced in romantic relationships, his statement may more aptly be considered a revelation. In saying that Anne had come to a decision about the seriousness of their relationship without him (line 802), John identifies his own unease about being left alone to make his own decision without his partner. He makes clear that the issue was not one of being pushed or pressured into the relationship (see line 804) but that he was left unsure (see line 807). In this example, then, Anne and John's attention to their inexperience in relational definition creates the possibility that the relationship, due to their inexperience, could just as easily have failed as it succeeded.

In Excerpt 5, we see further evidence of both partners' inexperience as revealing relational vulnerability. As in Excerpt 1, Carl makes clear his inexperience with relationships and the process of dating. However, Migs also shares her inexperience in the relationship. Carl begins discussing their first date at Panera, a local sandwich shop:

Excerpt IV.5

285	Carl:	It was very <u>exciting</u> [heh huh
286	Migs:	[It was really awkward and wei[rd.
287	Carl:	[<u>Really</u>?
288	Migs:	I mean I like talking to you but I felt weird being at Panera.
289	Carl:	I had no idea where to take you.
290 291	Migs:	I know you asked someone and they told [me where you take me
292	Carl:	[yeah
293 294	Migs:	there and I was like that's fine whatever I don't know it was just weird. I'm not a Panera girl but I like their food.

295   Carl: There's not a whole lot of dating places.
296   Migs: What's a dating place?
297   Carl: I have no idea
298   Migs: Exactly. They don't exist. Heh heh

Carl's emphasis on "exciting" (line 285) followed by Migs' contrasting description as "awkward and weird" (line 286) shows they both agree that the date was not exciting at all, but they negotiate what the sarcastic evaluation means. Migs' contribution clarifies that the date was not boring but rather different (i.e., "awkward and weird"), and Carl's "really" (line 287) asks for a verification of her impression of the date. As Migs explains her view, she cites the location of the date as a cause for her unease and says that she likes talking to Carl "but felt weird being at Panera" (line 288). Carl admits he had "no idea" (line 289) where to go on a date, thus showing his inexperience in dating. However, Migs says she isn't "a Panera girl" but she does like "their food" (line 294). This utterance changes the implication of her statement in line 288, indicating that if she likes Panera's food, her "weird" feeling was due to the interaction with Carl. Thus, this excerpt makes Carl's inexperience noticeable, and Migs' unclear evaluation of the date is indicative of her own inexperience.

In addition, Carl's impression that "dating places" exist but are few (see line 295) indicates that he has an idea that dates require certain locations. Migs challenges this impression by asking him "what's a dating place" (line 296), to which Carl responds that he "doesn't know." So Carl knows such places exist but cannot describe them. Migs' impression is different as she says dating places "don't exist" (line 298). Migs' question in line 296 ("what's a dating place") plays on Carl's inability to describe an acceptable dating place to prove her point that they do not exist. Migs and John both show

inexperience in romance, though Carl's shows it more straightforwardly. To Carl,

appropriate dating places may be difficult to find, but to Migs they do not exist at all.

Carl's assessment is hard on the relationship, and Migs' is even harder.

Vulnerability 2: The Hindering Influence of Social Networks

For better or for worse, relationships are undeniably connected to the social

networks of each partner. While partners' friends and family members can play

important roles in the satisfaction found in romantic relationships (Canary & Stafford,

2001), their influence in relationships also can act as an additional stressor as it creates

uncertainty. In the interviews with John and Anne, Carl and Migs, and Phil and Lisa, the

influence of friends, family, and past romantic interests was more negative than positive.

To be fair, partners did report positively on their relationship that brought partners

together. An example is in Migs' report of her friend Kristen's influence on getting Migs

and Carl together.

Excerpt IV.6

60	Migs:	U:m it took me a really long time to realize it I think someone
61		just told me that you told them.
62	Carl:	Who Kristen?
63	Migs:	Yeah.
64	Carl:	Yeah.
65	Migs:	She's such (2.0 sec) a gossip.

This type of report where Migs' friend Kristen positively influenced the

relationship was rare in the data collected for this study. Even though Kristin is cited as

the catalyst for Migs and John's relationship, Migs still calls her a "gossip." It is unclear

whether Migs' label for Kristen is a friendly jab or an insult. Either way, it is not a

glowing review. Participants had more negative reviews of their social networks.

Participants much more frequently mentioned the influence of those in their social

networks that kept partners from re-uniting (or at least coming to terms with the current

status of their relationship). I found this negative influence in partners' discussions of

their allegiance to friends, parents' views, and past romantic interests.

Allegiance to friends.

At times friends' influences centered on advice about what to do or not do in a

relationship, whether that advice was in the form of suggesting strategies or giving direct

orders (e.g., stay away). In this way, the influence of partners' social networks acted

primarily to slow the progress of their relationship.

Friends, for instance, may have differing opinions about one's partner. Among

the three couples, friends' opinions threatened the relationship. Migs reflects on this sort

of problem in figuring out how the progress slowed in her relationship with Carl:

Excerpt IV.7

340	Migs:	Anyway and part of the problem was the whole time I am like
341		talking to all these gi:rls that are my friends because I live with
342		ten of them so that a lot of people to inform about what is
343		going on and they all want to know so I am having to tell the
344		story to different people and depending on who it is my story is
345		different which is something that I had to figure out about
346		myself because I feel like that was part of the problem I just
347		wanted like some people were excited and I knew they were
348		excited so I told stories differently to people who were
349		skeptical and like didn't want me to do something that I didn't
350		want to do they didn't believe me I guess when I said that I
351		liked him.

Migs shows that having to come up with different descriptions of the relationship

for different friends (depending on their view on the relationship) interfered with her

thoughts on the relationship. This problem can be difficult enough with one or two

friends, but Migs was faced with the challenge of informing all ten friends she lives with

(see line 342). She says that this became a problem and something she had to figure out

by herself (line 346). The difficultly she faced was compounded by her actions to tailor

her story – in content and tone – to those who "were excited" (line 347), and "people who

were skeptical" (lines 348 and 349). Being on and off, defense can be confusing and

challenge anyone's certainty for a relational partner.

Perhaps a more difficult challenge that relationships face is when a friend of one

partner openly and actively dislikes the other and attempts to block the relationship. In

this case, a partner is often left in a difficult position due to conflicting allegiances to both

parties. As Anne faces this challenge in Excerpt 8, she reveals the delay in publicly

announcing the continuance of her and John's relationship:

Excerpt IV.8

322	Anne:	I guess we started dating again like we kind of started hanging
323		out again in like September and didn't really start dating once
324		again until like to our friends because Cassie like hated him
325		like to the bone like with all of her feelings hated him like
326		thought he was disgusting and um
327	John:	Oh DID she?
328	Anne:	Ch-yeahh [you knew that
329	John:	[Heh heh heh. I didn't know it was that bad.
330	Anne:	And Pearl. Pearl like if she saw my phone like if she saw my
331		phone that I was talking to John she'd be like put your phone
332		down you cannot talk to him and like that kind of stuff and it
333		like was like because it was understandable because she had to
334		go through me dumping all my stuff to her you know what I
335		mean about you

Anne recounts a relational renewal between her and John, but she did not go

public with this information because of her friends' feelings. Cassie, for instance, openly

said she "hated" John, "like to the bone" (lines 324 and 325), which shows her intense

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feelings that influenced Anne to be reticent in announcing that she and John had gotten

back together. While John acts taken back by the degree of Cassie's hatred, the way Anne

says "ch-yeah" with the "ch-" before "you knew that," suggests that she believes Cassie's

open hatred for John was obvious (see line 328). In line 329 John concedes but says he

"didn't know it was that bad." All this discussion of Cassie's extreme dislike for John

shows her as a blocker.

Anne's friend Pearl makes Anne's relationship with John even more challenging,

actively preventing Anne from even talking to John. In stating that Pearl would take

physical action and "be like put your phone down you cannot talk to him" (lines 331 and

332). However, Pearl's active prevention is not the only threat to the relationship. Anne

states she understands where Pearl (line 333) was coming from because Pearl had heard

all about the numerous problems that had plagued the relationship. In this case, one can

understand that a friend would do such a thing in the name of a friend's best interest.

Anne's report on Pearl, then, not only shows Pearl's direct blocking of the relationship

but the friendship itself between Anne and Pearl. Thus, John and Anne's relationship was

placed in a vulnerable position with friends stacked against them, some perhaps more

threatening than others.

Parental pressure.

Further stress can be inflicted on a relationship by family members, especially

parents of college students, who are usually interested in their child's romantic relational

endeavors. The extent to which parents' influences are acknowledged by partners as

cause for conflict is important to the relationship (Eder, 1990). The beliefs and

experiences of participants' parents regarding a preferred relationship were seen to hinder

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participants' relationship progress and how their child made long-term decisions. In

Lisa's case, her mother and grandmother's experience in relationships guide how they

believe Lisa should act:

Excerpt IV.9

666	Lisa:	My aunt and my mom and my grandmother were uh my
667		grandmother and my aunt got married at nineteen my mom got
668		married at twenty-one even then though she's divorced she still
669		got married at that age.
670	INT:	So expectations of an ear[ly
671	Lisa:	[Ye:ah and I'm the only girl and they
672		have been talking about my wedding day since as long as I can
673		remember.
674	INT:	Do you feel pressured by that?
675	Lisa:	Yeah (2.0) Just because my mom on any given day will call me
676		and be like I found the nicest China China pattern and we need
677		to get eight more stems for your Liz Moore collection of your
678		crystal and this and this and this a:nd da da da. So my aunt and
679		my mom and my grandmother have my wedding planned they
680		just need me to complete a groom. I'm not kidding. You know
681		that's true don't you?
682	Phil:	Ye:[ah
683	Lisa:	[I'm not lying.

Lisa offers some background about her mother's and grandmother's experiences

of getting married at a young age. She explains how they use their experience to pressure

her to get married. As Lisa mentions she is the "only girl" and that her mother and

grandmother have been talking about her wedding day for as long as she can remember

(lines 671-673), she remarks on the intensity of this pressure. However, the pressure that

Lisa describes is related more to gifts and objects for wedding showers and parties than

deep relational matters. In saying that "my aunt and my mom and my grandmother have

my wedding planned they just need me to complete a groom" (lines 679 and 680), Lisa frames the dating process less as a romantic ritual and more as a recruiting process.

Parental pressure, then, is two-fold on this relationship in this exchange. First, mother and grandmother's pressure to have a wedding, regardless of who the groom is, neglects the relationship as a commitment partnership. If an on/off relationship is on shaky ground, it is unlikely that the implications of this kind of pressure would be very helpful. Second, Lisa's report is shared as news to Phil, even though he says he already knows. Saying, "I'm not lying," maintains its newsworthiness by denying any exaggeration. So the pressure is not just on Lisa but also on Phil, which could easily mean termination of the relationship, especially if the relationship is shakey as they often are in on/off relationships.

Past romantic interests.

Another area of vulnerability that was revealed in participants' talk was their experiences with another romantic threat (e.g., the "other woman"). Partners shared information pertaining to this competing influence that was previously unknown to the partner. In doing so, it allowed their partner to mutually develop their own meaning of how outside social networks have shaped their relational identity. Consider for example how Carl's description of a brief encounter with another woman is shaped and influenced by Migs' own perception:

Excerpt IV.10

```
114    Carl:   I just got pretty close with her and then we went on this
115            mission trip and spent a lot of time together there and she we
116            went to Chicago a::nd  it just kind of wh the relationship just
117            kind of developed a:nd at at one point we were just like what
118            are we doing here I was like well I guess (1.0) you know we
119            should date heh uh and heh so it just kind of happened and uh
```

120		that lasted I think like three weeks heh so and uh she ended that
121		she uh (2.0) didn't think (.) we went well together and which is
122		I guess probably true but
123	Migs:	It IS true.
124	Carl:	It is true.
125	Migs:	It is true its not probably true.
126	Carl:	ᵒ It is true ᵒ
127	Migs:	So:: just saying.

Carl discusses the brief relationship he had before dating Migs, explaining that it lasted three weeks (line 120) and goes on explain how his ex told him that she didn't think they "went well together" (line 121). As he reports her decision he adds that she was "probably" right about their incompatibility and proceeds as if he has more to say about this relationship. "I guess is probably true but" (line 122) could mean that Phil – cut off at "but" – was ready to make his own argument about how they actually could have been compatible. Migs, however, does not letting Carl explore his rebuttal. Lines 123-127 are a negotiation of this certainty and probability. Migs wins out after emphasizing the certainty of Carl's incompatibility with his ex.

Migs' certainty and report-like style by saying "It IS true," is of note because she was not directly involved. In correcting Carl, who alone knows how his previous relationship ended and how he felt about it, Migs is asserting her feelings on the situation based on how she feels about her relationship with Carl at the moment. Carl expressing any possibility of compatibility with this other woman beyond "but" in line 122 would likely have caused friction with Migs, leaving his relationship with her vulnerable due to low investment.

Excerpt 10 is a good example of how lingering strands of jealousy are evident in how relational partners talk about earlier romantic interests. However, while Migs and Carl discussed Carl's earlier romantic interests, Excerpt 11 shows John and Anne reveal an instance of romantic competition as Anne discusses a time she and a friend went over John's house:

Excerpt IV.11

```
241     Anne:  John told me that a few people were coming and there were
242            like twenty-five people at John's house and none of them knew
243            that we were coming and so it was just SUPER awkward and It
244            like really put a bitter taste in our my mouth about our
245            relationship because like there were these girls who were like
246            all over him the whole time and just like getting trashed and
247            just s- slopping themselves all over him and it was disgusting.

248     John:  Slopping?

249     Anne:  Yeah slopping. She was sloppy.

250     John:  Ah sloppy. Wow.

251     Anne:  And u:m (1.0) you know there was an instance there and John
252            just hurt my feelings really bad.
```

While John does not disagree with Anne's assessment, he does question her use of the word, "slopping." Lines 248-250 show some clarification of the word, coming to the more common form, "sloppy." Since "slopping" and "sloppy" are so much alike, it seems unlikely that John sought clarification of the meaning of "slopping." It seems more likely that he was quibbling with the word's form to draw attention to its meaning. By him giving the word attention, along with Anne's singling out one particular girl by saying "She" was sloppy, John's "Wow" recognizes it as a strong word but also indicates that it may be too strong. The questionable agreement of the word's appropriateness and Anne saying her feelings were hurt draw a picture of a declining relationship.

Vulnerability 3: (Not) Meeting Partners' Expectations

In romantic relationships, partners naturally hold expectations of what they will give and receive from their partners, and differences in expectations can create conflict (Seigert & Stamp, 1994). These expectations can serve as a litmus test for the relationship due to the fact that partners are examining each other and the relationship through these different lenses. These data revealed that partners' expectations could be volatile areas for relational maintenance, especially in periods leading up to a change of their relational status. Partners often talked about these expectations as criteria for potential partners (e.g., "I want someone who is has masculine qualities") in terms of both how a partner should look and act in the relationship.

However, expressions of these expectations were not always produced in a straightforward way. Meeting partners' social expectations was also a source of frustration despite the fact that partners often claimed in all three interviews that a strength of their relationship is their communication. For example, in relational development, Migs' expectations caused confusion, which resulted in her shying away from the relationship due to her uncertainty. Partners' talk about their expectations involved two themes: partners' personal expectations and partner's cultural expectations. Expressing how these expectations affected the relational process was important to revealing that if they go unmet, they can become problematic.

(Not) meeting personal expectations.

Participants often revealed personal expectations as problematic states that served to confuse their partner. In Excerpt 12, Migs explains how her personal expectations

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about dating put her in a difficult position. As she describes, her expectations did not align with the timing of her budding relationship with Carl:

Excerpt IV.12

757	Migs:	I don't know I guess I felt like I needed to have this like really
758		excited feeling or something just like head over heels I don't
759		know like that and that's why I didn't want to date him.
760		Because I am like no it's not time for that that's supposed to be
761		like ha ha right before I graduate or at another time in my life
762		like it's too early in my college years for that to happen. Hah
763		hah. It's not time yet.

Migs discusses how she didn't want to date Carl because of her personal expectations for dating that had not been fulfilled. Her failure to meet her personal expectations (to have "this really exciting feeling…") signal vulnerability in her and Carl's relationship because they serve to shape the relationship as problematic and not ideal from its initiation. Saying that her expectation "to have this really excited feeling" (lines 757 and 758) seems akin to the fantasy of "love at first sight," making her expectations rather unrealistic, which makes the relationship even more vulnerable to failure (in this case before it even got a chance to start). In addition, Migs also says she felt hesitancy towards dating because of her expectation to only date later in her life (see line 762), showing Migs to have a schedule in mind for when to begin dating and perhaps one in mind for finding love in general.

While failing to meet expectations can create uncertainty (Seigert & Stamp, 1994) and lessen the chances of commitment (Dailey et al., 2010), Migs and Carl, Lisa and Phil, Anne and John say something more. Talking about their expectations and the extent to which expectations have been satisfied showed that they can be also negotiated and altered. In Excerpt 13, Anne and John discuss a breakup that occurred as John felt it was necessary to see what other romantic alternatives were available besides Anne. John

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discusses this breakup as coming from a need to meet his own expectations for a girlfriend:

Excerpt IV.13

273	Anne:	In the meantime he dated someone. Um he dated a few people.
274		I don't know if it was dating but um he had a few flings um he
275		got it all out of his system.
276	John:	Basically what my deal was you know I knew what I had in
277		Anne and I've never really gotten my feet wet in Smithtown
278		and gotten to test out hey this is like um I'm very very anal and
279		I'm very much a perfectionist about everything in my life so
280		like that's what I was looking for in a relationship.

Here, Anne and John treat the nature of John's expectations dramatically differently. John's expectations are of his *pursuit* for a partner (see lines 278 and 279), as if *having* a partner was less important than pursuing one. In fact, he treats Anne as a benchmark (line 276-277, "I knew what I had in Anne"). It is his perfectionism that he reports as important, and interestingly, he does not say that his expectations of perfection have been met. Perfection is as much a fantasy, and therefore unattainable, as Migs' fantasy of "love at first sight" in Excerpt 12. Anne's focus, on the other hand, is not on expectations of the pursuit but the activity of dating other women. Talking about getting his "flings" out of his system makes meeting the expectations of the pursuit a foregone conclusion. Both Anne and John's views on expectations make their relationship vulnerable. John's perfectionism rejects Anne as a potential partner, and Anne's trivializes John's need to be clear on his needs for the right partner.

(Not) meeting cultural expectations.

In addition to their personal expectations, participants also cited cultural expectations when talking about their relationship. These expectations involved

collections of gender norms; traditional southern values; and compatible religious beliefs. These cultural expectations are consequential because they shape both the partners in the relationship and the relational movement (development, termination, reunification). For example, in the interview between Lisa and Phil, Lisa says, "it was definitely bred in me that little cute girls need to marry cute little doctors and lawyers." The gendered stereotype here is fairly clear. Notice, too, that the phrase "cute little" marks expectations of both partners as being neatly packaged and compatible roles in the relationship. While it may be a stretch, "cute little" as a diminutive description, could also resemble a way of talking often found in Southern culture. At times participants described expectations as if they were more like obligations. Traditional southern values, for instance, guide how Phil and Lisa talk about the prospect of being in a long distance relationship:

Excerpt IV.14

166	Lisa:	It's <u>hard</u>. It's hard because it's I think and this is just our
167		perspective we both feel I think you agree that its unnatural to
168		be away from someone that you are dating.
169	Phil:	Yep for sure.
170	Lisa:	Because in our grow- in Mississippi you don't you don't <u>do</u>
171		<u>that</u>. Like you don't separate um like and for example people
172		get married right after college because someone going off to a
173		separate school that that's not natural like it from from our
174		background it's not.

Both partners agree – with emphasis (Lisa: It's <u>hard</u>; Phil: Yep for sure) – that being in a long distance is not just hard but "unnatural." (see lines 167 and 168). The adherence to this cultural expectation makes the process of having to deal with distance in a relationship one that can leave the relationship vulnerable to a break up. It also is very limiting for partners who may feel obligated to stay in the same area or else risk their relationship. Therefore, the prospect of being in a long distance relationship is noted

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emphatically as being hard (line 166) because it does not feel right "to be away from someone you are dating" (lines 167 and 168). Phil agrees with Lisa's evaluation of long-distance relationships. Lisa's further reasoning, that "in Mississippi you don't do that" (lines 170 and 171), makes a strong statement about how cultural values make it an expectation for partners to stay in the same geographical area and "get married right after college" if they are involved in a romantic relationship.

The importance placed on religious expectations is also addressed as a relational mainstay. Take for example the magnitude Lisa places on making sure a relational partner is of the same religious background and not of one that could be at odds with a partner's own religious beliefs:

Excerpt IV.15

734	Lisa:	Um I plan to live in the south s:o I didn't want to date any like
735		southern Baptist. I couldn't do um so that I mean I Phil is
736		Episcopalian and I'm Methodist which are really pretty close
737		so it's kind of the same belief track.

Lisa outlines the prospect of dating someone of another religion could prove as a very vulnerable area to the relationship. After noting that she is Methodist while Phil is Episcopalian, Lisa says that these two religions are "pretty close." Here "pretty close" still makes religion an area vulnerable in Lisa and Phil's relationship. Both are Christian denominations, but so is "southern Baptist" (line 735), a religion incompatible with Lisa's expectations. Lisa states that not only are similar religious beliefs regarded as an affirmation of a culturally held expectation, but also that she feels an opposing religion is seen as relational deal breaker. As Lisa says she plans to live in the south (line 734) she also feels the tug of cultural expectations that make dating someone of a different religion

problematic. "Pretty close" is acceptable but still different, which has the potential to lead to problems in the future.

Now consider Migs' reliance on religion to make a decision about who she should date. In Excerpt 16 she reports on advice she received from her bible study leader:

Excerpt IV.16

```
402    Migs:  On the things that you know were biblical. He was just talking
403           about how those, are what you should decide not by other
404           things that can't be tied to scripture or something like that.
405           And I was just thinking about that and I was like well I'll just
406           use the bible to make my decision.
```

Migs' expectation that a partner should fit the mold of an appropriate boyfriend according to the Bible makes her relationship with Carl vulnerable. Carl is thrust into an almost unattainable position – having to coincide with the teachings and philosophy of a 2000 year old religious text. As Migs has been talking extensively about the influence of religion on her life, the prospect of deciding on a relational partner by observing religious expectations does not come as a surprise. In telling how she was advised, Migs states that her decision should be based on biblical things and "not by other things that can't be tied to scripture or something" (lines 403 and 404). In operating under this premise, Migs holds that the lessons of biblical scripture should guide how one finds a romantic partner. However, the most telling argument that Migs makes is when she states "I'll just use the Bible to make my decision" (lines 405 and 406). This argument shapes Migs as a relational partner who is relying on a religious text as a matchmaker. Therefore, Migs' expectation and its effect on Carl make the relationship one that is vulnerable to the strict dogma of the bible – unless, of course, Carl follows biblical teachings in the same way.

In sum, this initial analysis has described three broad topics of conversation raised that reveal relational vulnerabilities: partners' inexperience in romantic relationships; the

influence of their social networks; navigation of gender roles in the relationship, and negotiation of each other's expectations. These topics were generated discursively rather than psychologically, emphasizing the communication in the relationship rather than individual decisions that affect it. Talk between partners constitutes the on/off relationship as tenuous. However, outlining how vulnerabilities were revealed only lays groundwork to a further discussion of how vulnerabilities are managed in on/off relationships.

V. Analysis II: Managing Relational Vulnerabilities

This portion of the analysis moves from describing how participants exposed relational vulnerabilities to describing their interactional practices that managed them. On/off relationships provide a particularly relevant context for vulnerabilities and their interactional management. Carl and Migs, Lisa and Phil, and John and Anne, all reconstructed the vulnerable characteristics of their relationship in ways that worked towards minimizing their adverse consequences and thus resituating their relational status. These practices increase in their complexity from conversationally searching for adequate words and phrases to describe their relationship, to playfully accounting for the rocky spots in their relationship, to partners jointly performing their relationship.

Searching for Relational Description

As all the partners interviewed in this relationship were in the "on" stage of their relationship, it makes sense that they might smooth out the rocky spots in their relationship as they talk about it. Conversational repair, false starts, and language correction frequently colored partners' talk about the on/off nature of their relationships. Conversational repair in general is done as a "self-correcting" action within the conversation as partners attempt to deal with problems of understanding (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977, p. 362). However, as participants described their relationship these small discourse practices were not one-time corrections that Schegloff et al. (1977) describe. Instead, they were multiple and stood out as more extended. This distinction can be interpreted as not just correcting but searching for an adequate description of their

relationship. Searching for words is often, if not typically, a trial-and-error process, which

inevitably involves self-correction. A classic illustration in the data is in Carl's search to

describe his thoughts about the process of his relational development with Migs:

Excerpt V.1

```
101    Carl:   We:ll it was just it was it happen like I I wasn't picking up on
102            anything I would I was just like (.) hanging out with her hoping
103            that I don't know I don't  know what I was think[ing
104    Migs:                                                    [I would just
105            all of a sudden fall in love with you and just make out with
106            you?
107    Carl:   Basically.
```

Schegloff et al.'s (1977) study examined one-time self-corrections such as (e.g.,

Sure enough ten minutes later the bell r- the doorbell rang). Carl can be seen using these

self-corrections multiple times to accomplish the task of explaining what he was thinking

as he was recounting his potential relationship with Migs. Lines 101-103 take ten

seconds to utter, which seems like a significant difference from a single 1- to 2-second

self-correction. Saying, "I don't know what I was thinking," resigns him to failure,

signaling the end of his attempt. Migs takes him to the end of the actual search. Carl's

"Basically," in line 107 confirms it categorically with no self-correction and a full stop.

This "searching" style of talking among Carl and other participants, in reference to points

in the conversation, not only reveals the vulnerability (or vulnerabilities) in the

relationship but also discursively works to reduce it, thereby strengthening the

relationship. Self-correction could be seen as "relationship-righting" while the

participants reconstruct their romance. In Excerpt 2, for instance, John and Anne are in

the midst of a conversation about how one of their breakups occurred. Anne is searching

for a way to describe a problematic time in the relationship:

Excerpt V.2

```
151    Anne:  And then so he was going to be in Plainville all summer and I
152           was going to be halfway in Coppertown where I am from
153           Coppertown and then halfway I was studying abroad and it was
154           just well we didn't really talk about my stuff very much but he
155           was um starting to meet all these people a:nd he just decided
156           that he wanted to have u:m more fun that I wasn't fun enough
157           and that we weren't having enough fun and s[o

158    John:                                              [No I said I
159           wanted a break.
```

Anne's narrative involves a searching style as she discusses a vulnerable point in her and John's relationship. First, she describes a summer in her and John's relationship. She points to several problems in relationship, including distance between her and John, John's lack of participation in talk about her "stuff" (line 154), and the influence of John's social networks as he was meeting new people. (see line 155). She searches for what she claims to be John's decision about the relationship. He wanted to have more fun and that meant either she was not fun enough for him or that they were not having fun together. As Anne stumbles with this relational description, none of her choices make the relationship sound promising. But John offers an alternative choice by saying, "No I said I wanted to a break" (line 159). Anne's searching in lines 155-157 to describe the move of the relationship from an "on" an "off" stage shows a discomfort in discussing this problematic situation. Interestingly, though, John's correction contributes to the search and makes coming to the "off" phase of the relationship less grim.

Once an event such as a breakup has occurred, participants illustrated their relationships as remaining in a vulnerable state. Searching occurred in how partners described relational movement during cyclical changes. In Excerpt 3, Phil shows that

giving a clear description of how he and Lisa got back together after breaking up is

difficult:

Excerpt V.3

328	Phil:	I mean we we would bring up the relationship like if we were
329		going to get back together or not I mean that would come up of
330		course I mean that I mean that has to come up in order for you
331		to get back together [so I mean it obviously came up or we
332		wouldn't
333	Lisa:	[Well I had to assert yeah
334	Phil:	but yeah nah it did but it wouldn't go too deep it would be kind
335		of on the surface. Do you think we should get back together? I
336		don't know? Do you? don't know. It's about it. Yeah

Phil explains that while he and Lisa were broken up they would bring up their

relationship and the prospect of getting back together. In lines 328 and 329, Phil initiates

the repetitive use of the vocal filler "I mean" as he stumbles to assert how discussing the

relationship has to occur in order to get back together. Though he is stating an

understandable fact about the need to discuss the state of the relationship, he searches as

he tries to get this out. Lisa overlaps Phil to clarify their relational movement and begins

"well I had to assert yeah" (line 334 and 335) and she indicates that she had her own way

of talking about her intentions, but her "yeah" in line 333 also suggests some agreement

to what John is getting at. In lines 331 and 332 Phil clarifies his previous statement and

remarks that the relationship "obviously came up or [they] wouldn't" have gotten back

together. He then goes into more detail about how he and Lisa discussed the prospect of

getting back together and how "it wouldn't go too deep it would kind of be on the surface"

(lines 334 and 335). This description is interesting because in discursively presenting the

conversation as more "surface level" than "deep" (line 334), Phil construes the

relationship in a less than favorable light. Further, as Phil gives a series of examples of

how this talk played out, he searches in recollecting a series of questions that he and Lisa

went through in reconciling. These simple questions frame the relationship as an

immature relationship, but the searching used for these questions manages the

vulnerability. The searching highlights that though Phil cannot find the wording to

describe how he and Lisa got back together, the fact that they are back together makes the

process he describes successful, no matter what words he actually finds.

As a side note, it could be worth underscoring that the relational renewal took

place out of mutual exchange. Phil prefaces his questions in line 335 as "surface level."

His assessment makes the questions sound more like ponderings, which treats relational

renewal as not-so-urgent. However, Lisa's "Well I had to assert yeah" (line 333) both

potentially disagrees and agrees with Phil. "Well" indicates a readiness to rebut, but

"yeah" suggests Phil is on the right track. They essentially prod each other to get at the

reason for getting back together.

Playful Accounting

Naturally, since gathering data involved asking participants about their on/off

relationships, they gave accounts of their relationship. As Buttny and Morris (2001)

indicate, an account may simply be a report, or an account may function to repair a social

trouble, problem, failure, or undesirable identity (see also Tracy, 2001b). The nature of

the data gathered as interview data, necessarily illustrates the former type of accounting,

but participants regularly displayed the latter type, accounting for the rocky phase(s) in

their relationship. It is unclear as to whether the participants made the accounts for me

(the research) or each other. Either way, in these cases of the relationship talk in this

study, accounts still functioned to smooth out the rocky periods of the relationship. In

other words, it is the relationship that was accounted for, not the individuals in the relationship. Further, as an account addresses a social trouble, the vulnerable nature of the participants' on/off relationships could be seen as problematic and subsequently dealt with.

Particularly interesting is *how* these accounts were provided as a way of managing the reconstructed vulnerability of the rocky phase(s) of the relationship. A regular feature of participants' talk was that their accounts were enacted in a playful, not-so-serious way. The playful nature of partner accounts was marked by increased levels of laughing, joking, sarcasm, and imitation of each other. As Goffman (1961) argues, joking and sarcasm serve to distance partners from their relational roles and the expectations of their partners. By distancing, they lessen the consequences of failing to meet expectations that come with those roles. As one partner began a playful account, the other partner often played along by contributing to the account in his/her own way. Excerpt 4, for instance, begins during a discussion of how John and Anne's poor communication often led to fights and breakups. John and Anne having been talking about how to improve the way they support each other during hard times:

Excerpt V.4

387	John:	And when she's struggling with something you know like I
388		have these say[ings.
389	Anne:	[These baseball analogies or something.
390	John:	Not even analogies for baseball or a specific sport its just like
391		instead of encouraging her its like saying ((soft, high-pitched
392		voice)) Oh I kn:ow I know it's really hard you know I'm here
393		to help. ((back to regular voice)) I would say like
394	Anne:	If life's a ((deep, raspy voice)) BITCH BE A BITCH BACK!
395	John:	Heh heh heh.
396	Anne:	Like what does that even mean.

397   John: Like when stuff gets tough you got to be tough back? Or like
398   when the going gets tough the tough get going? I would say
399   stuff like that and she just absolutely does not take to that at all.

John begins to explain how he typically offers support for Anne by using certain sayings, baseball sayings according to Anne. Anne's "or something" indicates that she pays little attention to this style of social support and she may likely be unsatisfied with it. However, this problem of the way John offers social support is dealt with in a playful way. Whether John was laughing at Anne's citation of the saying or her vocal imitation of him, his laughter and subsequent explanation of the saying indicates he still finds value in his style. He imitates Anne's style of comforting that he says she likely prefers (line 392-393), and Anne imitates John's way of comforting that she implies he typically uses (lines 394-395). Saying "what does that even <u>mean</u>," further indicates Anne's likely dissatisfaction with John's style. John, however, knows his style contrasts with Anne's performance because he laughs at her imitation.

However, John and Anne seem to be having fun with their differences. Anne plays along to John's imitation of her with her own imitation of John. She also plays to his laugher when she asks, "what does that even mean," without the intonation of a question. In addition to the playfulness, while Anne may not be satisfied with John's style of social support, he shows that it is nonetheless sincere. He owns it as he approves of it with his laughter in line 395 and supports it in lines 397-399. He does know Anne's preferred style from his imitation in lines 392 and 393. So to some extent, John and Anne have come to terms with the difference in support-giving style. Playfully accounting for their differences allowed them an avenue to reduce the vulnerability in the gray areas of the relationship. Accounting, playfully or otherwise, may not solve them

their differences, but they are being managed, which contributes to a mutual understanding of the relationship, whether Anne and John stay together or break up permanently.

Partners also used playful accounting as conflict arose in their conversation during the interview, especially in response to how their relationship has proceeded in the past. Excerpt 5 occurs as Lisa has called out Phil for taking an extra year to graduate from college. In Lisa's eyes, the delay in graduation is a delay in her and Phil's relationship:

Excerpt V.5

199	Phil:	You act like I am just like piddle paddling.
200	Lisa:	You were.
201	Phil:	Heh hah hah. They aren't three easy degrees.
202	Lisa:	Su:re they're not.
203	(3.0)	
204	Phil:	Spanish of course you know I was I'm a natural Spanish
205		speaker I was born in Mexico.
206	Lisa:	Native.
207	Phil:	Native. So you know that wasn't hard oh wait. No [born in
208		Mississippi. It wasn't easy learning Spanish well.
209	Lisa:	[I'm not
210		belittling I'm not belittle there are a lot of Hispanic people in
211		Mississippi. I didn't sa- not believe not belittling your degrees I
212		am just saying I WAS getting a masters.

In line 199 Phil concludes that Lisa has been describing his delays in graduating as "piddle paddling" – wasting time, moving with no direction, dragging his feet – which Lisa confirms as accurate. This launches Phil's account, which is accompanied by laughter. He justifies the extra year, saying he wasn't taking "three easy degrees." However, Lisa's "su:re" in line 202 suggests she does not buy his argument. Phil then explains how his degrees indeed were not easy. He does so by ironically stating that he is

"a natural Spanish speaker" who was "born in Mexico," and thus learning the language was no problem. However, Phil is not a native speaker as his punch line to the irony ("oh wait") states that he was born in Mississippi (see lines 207 and 208). In line 206, Lisa plays along with this irony narrative when she says, "Native," suggesting that at least one of Phil's majors is as difficult as he reports.

Phil's exaggerated justification about being a native Spanish speaker from Mexico indicates how he distances himself from his perceived role as a "piddle paddler" who was not working hard to graduate. He emphasizes it by pointing out something Lisa presumably already knows, that his is actually a native of Mississippi. Lisa takes this as an attack for not noticing the obvious. She accounts for this by saying that her contribution in line 206 ("Native") was not meant to belittle his accomplishment, rather, her own accomplishment of getting a MASTERS degree is more difficult than getting 3 degrees (whether or not they were "easy"). Lisa and Phil's accounts laced with irony show them dealing with an issue important to the fate of the relationship. As such, the irony masks the underlying disdain that Lisa and Phil reportedly feel about this rocky time in their relationship and serves to manage the vulnerability.

Performing Stability

As participants talked about their relationships in ways that made them vulnerable to termination, they often performed together to re-construct the relationship as stable and fostered a sense of solidarity. Partners' performance created joint ownership of problematic events and minimized the events' threat to the relationship. For instance, this performance may signal partners fully coming to terms with the event and understanding each other's actions, as in Excerpt 6 when Carl and Migs talk about their first breakup:

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Excerpt V.6

229   Migs: I was trying to be really casu[al I was eating hot wings licking
230   my fingers

231   Carl: [heh huh yeah hah hah

232   Migs: and being like can't we just be friends? We can be friends.

233   Carl: And u[:h I think I took it pretty well.

234   Migs: [UG:H IT SUCKED. You did take it really well and I
235   was like I hate this this is horr[ible I didn't

236   Carl: [heh huh uh

237   Migs: like my decision even as I was making it. I felt really cold and
238   heartless it was terrible.

Migs and Carl's performance of their first breakup is initially cast as a non-serious event. Migs says that she tried to make it casual by licking her fingers and eating hot wings while telling Carl she wanted to de-escalate the relationship from romantic to friendly (line 229 and 230). Carl's laughter in lines 231 and 236 and saying he "took it pretty well" contributes an amusing edge to the story. Carl's contribution to the story can be interpreted as serving two purposes. First, it corroborates and legitimizes Migs' narrative. Second, it presents Carl as a confident partner who can discuss a face-threatening moment in his relationship.

Telling their story together shapes a serious event as a non-serious one, which allows Carl and Migs a way to reduce the threat of a vulnerable moment in the history of their relationship. Migs' contribution is of regret and mistake. She stresses that the situation "SUCKED" (line 234), going on to suggest that she felt badly and perhaps guilty about the event. Though she continues to indicate her sense of discomfort about the breakup event (line 235), she also agrees with Carl's self-assessment that he took the breakup "really well." This works to save face for Carl, that he did not deserve such a "cold and heartless" breakup and that he did indeed take it well. As Migs expresses her

emotions, Carl again responds with laughter (line 236), framing his attitude toward the event as easy-going at this point in their relationship, perhaps because they are presently in an "on" stage of their relationship. As she describes how she felt at the time of the decision, it is unclear why she did it in the first place. Whatever the reason, Migs and Carl come to terms with the event together. The performance's significant component of the breakup is retained, complete with Migs' feelings of regret, but those feelings – along with the relationship itself – are retained because of Carl's contribution to the story. In getting this vulnerable moment in the open, they implicitly show how they rode out this bad time and their relationship and can now think more lightly about it.

While the joint performance of a story may serve to help partners explain how they have ridden out an event that made the relationship vulnerable, it can also help partners re-construct a sense of togetherness. In operating this way, co-construction can help both partners save face even if one partner is threatened more than the other. In Excerpt 7, Phil and Lisa discuss what brought them back together after their first breakup. Phil begins:

Excerpt V.7

248	Phil:	Our love.
249	Lisa:	What a GAY answer.
250 251	Phil:	Hehmph. (2.0) °wha° whAT? ((*singing*)) *Love will*. How does that song go?
252	Lisa:	Yeah.
253	Phil:	((*singing*)) *Love will bring you together*.
254 255	Lisa:	No. You are getting love will keep us alive [and and love will keep
256 257	Phil:	[Hah love will keep us alive.

258	Lisa:	us together mixed up and so you're like meshing the Captain
259		and Tennille and The Eagles and its not working [out
260	Phil:	[Okay I guess.
261		No what brought us back together was u:m.
262	Lisa:	We always loved it each other that's true.

Re-development of a relationship often involves identifying a reason for renewal, whether that reason is explicitly or implicitly discussed. In these data, discussion naturally becomes explicit because participants are asked to talk about their relationships. Here, Lisa and Phil co-construct through song(s) the reason for getting back together. This construction is initiated and maintained by Lisa's threat to Phil's face. Phil's first response in line 248 ("our love") brings to the discussion what brought him and Lisa back together. Lisa's reaction to Phil's response in line 248, "what a GAY answer" (line 249), indicates Phil's reason was simplistic, overly romanticized, and cliché.

Interestingly, Phil's face-saving strategy is to cite a song as a source for his response – either the Captain and Tennille's "Love Will Keep Us Together" or The Eagles, "Love Will Keep Us Alive." These songs help him save face by pointing to his response as not necessarily his. However, Lisa threatens his face for another reason in lines 254 and 255. Whether Phil is confusing the two songs by "mixing them up" or meshing them together, Lisa evaluates his citation practice as inadequate.

It should be noted that in other moments in the interview, Lisa indicated that she enjoys late 1970's and early 1980's pop music. As the Captain and Tennille's "Love Will Keep Us Together" and The Eagles "Love Will Keep Us Alive" both come from this era, Phil's singing and song-choosing efforts share in Lisa's interest in this music and add to the importance of "love" as a narrative in their relationship. In line 252, Lisa is not yet fully involved in the narrative Phil is constructing with her as she responds with only an

acknowledgement but not an answer to Phil's question. She becomes more involved when she corrects Phil's songs related to love bringing relationships back together. Phil has an "a ha" moment in line 256 when he realizes in the middle of Lisa's explanation that Phil is mixing up two songs and that this mix-up is a poor attempt at meshing them together (line 259, "it's not working out"). After he reluctantly agrees that his attempt to portray in song how their love brought them back together is not working out (line 260, "okay I guess"), he tries again but only ends with "u:m" (line 261), indicating he cannot think of anything. However, in line 262, Lisa raises Phil's original reason – love. She says, "always loved it each other that's true," affirming Phil's assessment. "That's true" (line 262) also affirms his efforts, thereby saving his face despite her previous face threats. Nevertheless, it was Phil's original assessment of love bringing them together that was meant to stand on its own as reason enough for relational renewal. As the co-construction of the narrative indicates, Lisa eventually agrees with Phil that yes, they did love one another. However, Lisa's initial response to Phil's assessment indicates just saying that love brought them back together is not enough to manage the vulnerability.

This second analysis discussed three practices participants in this study used to manage relational vulnerabilities: conversational searching, playful accounting, and joint performance. These practices functioned to manage the vulnerabilities that had been revealed in the previous chapter. In showing how these practices were used to mange partners' vulnerabilities, this analysis shows how partners' discursive re-construction of their relationship is important to facing the challenges in their on/off relationships.

VI. Discussion

In this thesis, my goal was to find out ways in which relational partners discursively construct the meaning of their relationship, focusing on potential problems therein. As such this thesis highlights relational vulnerabilities that are revealed and managed through the discourse of partners in on/off relationships. As such, vulnerabilities are issues in on/off relationships that are occur in various thematic instances and are managed through discursive practices of ranging complexities. As I have explained in the analysis of on/off partners' discourse, partners reveal problematic states in their relationship and find ways to manage them. I frame these states as relational vulnerabilities to encourage more of a focus on how partners play out their relationship rather than how they think individually about it. Relational vulnerabilities are collaboratively created and managed within the discourse and thus influence the trajectory of the relationship.

While most of the previous research on on/off relationships is conducted through quantitative means, this study employed a qualitative approach for the study of relationships. As an inductive endeavor, participants themselves revealed what is important in their relationship instead of imposing theoretical interests onto the participants. Focusing on problems and challenges, the lens of Action-Implicative Discourse Analysis (ADIA) helped me discover how participants themselves revealed challenges in the relationship. This approach involved examining how partners talk to each other about their relationship.

Studying on/off relationships through discourse-analytic means can allow the researcher to get a closer glimpse into the elusive "black box" that Stokoe (2010) describes. Focusing on problems in on/off relationships we see where the inner workings of that "black box" can potentially be faulty, fixed, or maintained. Analysis revealed three ways partners talked about their relationship that exposed it as vulnerable to termination, whether that termination would be permanent or just another phase in the gray area of the on/off relationship.

A first vulnerability that was revealed in partners' talk was how inexperience played out in their relationship. I found that inexperience in relationships happened between one or both partners and that discussing this inexperience in the relationship would often leave partners to answer to trouble caused by this inexperience. Inexperience played out in several different ways including not understanding dating practices and not operating in a mature manner in a college relationship. A second vulnerability that was revealed was how the social networks of relational partners could flag down the relationship. Whether it was the allegiance to friends, the pressure from parents, or partners' past romantic interests, these social networks were discussed as making the relationship vulnerable. A third vulnerability that was revealed was partners talking about their expectations pertaining to the relationship and the extent to which they were met. Discussion was oriented around in two different areas. One was participants' personal expectations, which involved individual participant's expectations for their relationship. The other was participants' cultural expectations, which included gender roles, traditional southern values, and religious beliefs. These expectations were seen to shape both the partners in the relationship and the relational movement.

As the participants in this study discussed these vulnerabilities in the interaction, conversational practices were also used to manage them. First, partners were often seen searching for words and phrases to describe their relationship. This conversational searching showed partners working to make sense of their relationship next to their partner. Searching also allowed participants to avoid inaccurate descriptions of their relationship that could have hampered and aggravated a sensitive area in the relationship. In this way, searching for the right words to describe the relationship can be seen as successfully smoothing over vulnerabilities at best, showing attempts to smooth them over at least. Second, partners used accounts as a repairing speech act in discussing the problematic instances in their relationship. As they reconstructed the problems, these accounts were accomplished in a playful way. The use of imitation in these playful accounts allowed partners to explain their observations and interpretations from one another's point of view. This playful approach also allowed partners to distance their relational roles and still express and respond to face-threatening comments. Third, joint storytelling was the most complex practice used by partners to manage relational vulnerabilities. This was the participants' most comprehensive reconstructive practice as partners told complete events and described turning points in their relationship. Joint ownership of problematic issues relevant to both partners' interest in the relationship does more than let both partners give their impression of the vulnerability. Rather, the co-constructed narrative created solidarity in the relationship.

A more extended look at the data collected will show that these practices (searching in relational description, playfully accounting, jointly telling stories) were enacted in tandem and in combination, and even simultaneous with each other. It makes sense that a

story could act as an account. Of course, people may stumble in their descriptions while telling a story or giving an account. Understanding how these practices work together could generate either a more refined framework of findings than I have generated here or a different framework for relational challenges altogether.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, finding participants for this study proved to be a challenging endeavor. While the three couples interviewed provided rich data, more participants would have increased its diversity. Related to this limitation is the fact that this study focused only on relationships in their "on" stages. As finding participants to be interviewed about details of their relationship was a challenging endeavor on its own, attempting to find participants that were "off" to do the same was almost impossible. Finally, as Stokoe (2010) describes and as mentioned in Chapter III, penetrating the inner confines of the relational "black box" is extremely difficult, if not impossible. This thesis could only touch the edge of the "black box" because the interview style of gathering data takes away some of the conversational spontaneity in the relationship and to some extent imposes on their privacy.

Potential heuristic value for this study can be taken in several different directions. First, participants in this study were all in the "on" stages of their relationship, so it makes sense that their conversational searching would be for the sake of maintaining the romance and commitment. But I speculate that searching would still be a practice among participants in their "off" stage as well, working to stabilize the relationship as permanently terminated—or perhaps suggesting reunion. Further studies with more variety could explore this hunch. A conflict management approach might prove to be more helpful than an AIDA approach. Further questions to ask might address timing in

raising certain issues, whether or not some issues should remain implicit or not be raised at all. It is difficult to imagine any romantic relationship that at times does not face a vulnerable moment. Understanding how these vulnerabilities contribute to various aspects of noncyclical relationships, how they are revealed, and how they are managed may prove insightful in future research. For example, a relational partner could become frustrated over another partner's lack of experience in romance, relational partners may be at odds over the actions of a soon to be mother-in-law, and other partners could disagree on the expectations of the religious upbringing of children. This analysis suggests that the management of relational vulnerabilities is part of the communication process that is present in romantic relationships in general.

A second direction of heuristic value for this study is in using a discourse analytic approach to study the revelation and management of vulnerabilities. This thesis extends the work of both Staske (2001) and Stokoe (2010) who both, like this study, combine discourse analysis with relationship concepts. While Staske closely, even microscopically, examines different forms of one particular practice (claims of individual partner knowledge, CIPKs), this study looks at broader communicative practices and their implications for the development, stability, and termination of relationships. Thus, the discursive practices partners use to manage vulnerabilities took on more than one practice, each of which were broader than CIPKs (e.g., searching in relational description, playful accounting). Stokoe examines the discourse of potential romantic partners accounting for their past relationships (or lack thereof) in speed-dating interaction. My study features the discourse of partners interacting about a relationship that is many years in the making

with history among themselves. In short, Staske, Stokoe, and now myself have come to the "black box" from different angles.

Third, this study contributes to Dailey and colleagues' (Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010; Dailey, Pfiester et al., 2009; Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009) work on on/off relationships. Their past studies describe characteristics of on/off relationships and argue that research should focus on how partners work to maintain relational stability. This study takes that charge to explore these efforts by examining the partners' conversational practices. My contribution is in attending to partners' talk amongst each other and how they reveal challenges and seek to manage them. In my approach, I have shown researchers of interpersonal communication an additional way to study on/off relationships.

While this study primarily explores partners' discourse, their talk about relational problems gives it some application value. It is well known in popular literature that partners in a healthy relationship "talk out" their problems. This study shows that *how* partners talk out their problems may be even more important than simply *that* they talk about them. This is not to say that partners *should* necessarily engage in conversational searching, playful accounting, or try to tell stories together about their problems. This study, however, shows participants making specific, identifiable, communicative efforts to manage their relationship in a productive way. Thus, we can reflect on its findings in several ways. Searching, for instance, helps in discussing sensitive issues in a relationship because it shows attempts at being carful - tip-toeing around an issue. When is it helpful to be playful when talking about differences in the relationship and when is it helpful to stay serious? Joint performance reveals the importance of third parties in the relationship

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– whether or not that third party is in either partner's social network. That is, performing together is essentially instigated by an outsider. In this case, that outsider was me, the researcher. But that third party could also be a friend (or friends) or, perhaps a counselor. It should be noted however, as I indicated Chapter IV, members of partners' social networks can also challenge or bog down the relationship. Joint storytelling may help partners excavate their problems but this leads to asking how, when, where, and with whom, would this practice be most helpful.

This study of on/off relationships using AIDA is a reconstruction of partners' reconstructing their relationship. The reconstruction of these reconstructive practices illustrates how on/off partners' use discourse to both reveal and manage vulnerable times in their relationship. By understanding how vulnerabilities come up in an on/off relational context, I have taken a first step in examining their impact on partners and the relationship, and in doing so, have also extended the use of discourse analysis in the research of romantic relationships.

Endnotes

[i] Data collection method has been approved by Auburn University Institutional Review Board (approval # 10-297 EP 1010)

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Appendix I

Jeffersonian transcription system (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Transcription symbols
include:

?	Rising intonation (sounding like a question)
.	Falling intonation
-	An abrupt cut-off
::	Prolonging of sound
<u>never</u>	Stressed syllable or word
>word<	Noticeably quicker speech
º	softer speech
hh	Aspiration or laughter
[	Simultaneous or overlapping speech
(.)	Micro-pause, 0.2 second or less
( )	Nontranscribable segment of talk
(( ))	Transcribers comment or description
↑ ↓	Rise or fall in pitch

Appendix II

Interview Schedule:

I.   Relational Background and History
   a. How did you and your partner meet? How did you start talking? Introduced?
   b. How long have you known each other? How did it progress?
   c. How did you and your partner come to know each other?
   d. At what point did you consider yourselves as "dating?" Was there a definition of the relationship (DTR) talk? Was this talk clear?
   e. Do you talk often about your relationship?
   f. Has there been any important turning points in your relationship?
   g. How did the first breakup happen?
   h. What brought you and your partner back together?
   i. How many times were you break up and then get back together?
   j. If you have broken up two or more times, how did these breakups happen?
   k. Was there an almost break up, a period of time where you didn't know? What was the flex period or off periods?

I.   Status of the Relationship
   a. What do you like to do together? Why?
   b. What do you talk about when you are together? Gossip?
   c. What do you like most about your relationship?
   d. Why is this relationship important to you?
   e. What have been the most significant challenges in your relationship?

II.   Relationships in General
   a. What are some important relational qualities in a boyfriend or girlfriend?