# An Inductive Analysis of Relational Maintenance Strategies: Comparisons Among Lovers, Relatives, Friends, and Others

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*This investigation reports a typology of maintenance behaviors that were derived through inductive analyses of papers students wrote about their strategies for maintaining various relationships. Ten major strategies were inductively derived:* positivity; openness; assurances; sharing tasks; social networks; joint activities; cards/letters/calls; avoidance; anti-social; and humor. *These strategies extend the previous research on relational maintenance strategies. More specifically, the latter five strategies and the subcategories of all the strategies are additions to Stafford and Canary's (1991) typology. In addition, analyses revealed the positivity, openness, assurances, sharing tasks, and cards / letters / calls differed in their frequency of use among lovers, relatives, friends and others.*

Interpersonal communication researchers have offered various conceptualizations of maintenance and corresponding typologies for examining strategies that people use to maintain their relationships (Ayres, 1983; Bell, Daly, & Gonzalez, 1987; Dindia & Baxter, 1987). Two studies have attempted to synthesize the literature by factor analyzing responses to previously published items. Dindia (1989) found three strategies labeled *romantic, prosocial,* and *antisocial.* Romantic behaviors refer to being affectionate, fun, and spontaneous; prosocial behaviors refer to cooperatively discussing the relationship; and antisocial behaviors refer to using coercion. Stafford and Canary's (1991) factor analyses revealed five strategies: *positivity*, or remaining cheerful and optimistic; *openness*, or direct discussion and disclosure; *assurances,* or statements that imply a future; *social networks,* or use of common associations to keep the relationship going; and *sharing tasks*, or fulfilling one's chores and responsibilities.

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COMMUNICATION RESEARCH REPORTS, Volume 10, Number 1, pages 5-14

Although the Dindia (1989) and Stafford and Canary (1991) investigations reduced the existing strategy typologies to a finite set, these typologies are not exhaustive for several reasons. First, both studies only sampled romantic relationships (i.e., married, engaged, or dating partners). It is possible that different maintenance behaviors are used, or at least emphasized more, in non-romantic involvements (i.e., friendships, family relations, and co-workers). Second, the two typologies are dissimilar in major respects. Dindia (1989) found an antisocial strategy that did not emerge in the Stafford and Canary (1991) study. Stafford and Canary found that sharing tasks and use of social networks are important to maintenance, though Dindia did not find these strategies. Third and finally, both studies (and those that preceded them) relied primarily on a deductive measurement building approach; that is, previously published items anchored the instruments. It appears likely that a more exhaustive typology would be constructed by inductively deriving items from participants' accounts, sampling behaviors used in a variety of relationships. In this way, communication researchers could provide a more complete typology of relational maintenance behaviors.

Inductive analyses of participant responses can yield many insights researchers may have either overlooked or discounted. Additionally, an inductive approach to survey data has been praised for being unobstrusive (Lolas, 1986) and minimizing the effects of social desirability (Westbrook & Viney, 1980). Additionally, Viney (1983) has argued that open-ended data allows categories to emerge rather than conform to the constraints of a closed-ended questionnaire. Given there are important advantages for selecting an inductive approach for arriving at a representative set of relational maintenance behaviors, this paper addressed the following research question.

RQ1: What relational maintenance behaviors emerge through an inductive approach?

Beyond the methodological issues of inclusiveness, we predict that maintenance strategies vary among relational types (i.e., romantic relationships, kinships, friendships, and others). Canary and Stafford (in press) argue that maintenance strategy use varies due to differences within as well as between relational types. Canary and Stafford note that relationships develop along different trajectories and evolve into different forms. The differences in these relationships should lead to differences in maintenance strategy use.

Previous research has established that maintenance behaviors vary within relationship type, given the development of the relationship. In an experimental study, Ayres (1983) found that those whose hypothetical partner wanted to de-escalate the relationship would use balance (e.g., remind partner of previous joint decisions) more so than those in escalating relationships. In a short longitudinal study, Guerrero, Eloy, and Wabnik (1993) found that people whose relationships were developing or stable reported greater use of positivity, assurances, and sharing tasks than did those whose relationships were de-escalating. Likewise, Stafford and Canary (1991) reported that engaged and married partners perceived more assurances than dating partners, and engaged and seriously dating partners perceived more openness than married partners.

We suspect that maintenance behaviors also vary among relationship types (Canary & Stafford, in press). Rawlins (in press), for example, notes that many friendships are sustained over time with little contact. In contrast, partners in romantic relationships become more interdependent over time, which is marked by increases in maintenance activities (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). These studies suggest that romantic partners (vs. friends) enact more frequent use of maintenance strategies such as sharing tasks, assurances, and other behaviors that sustain high levels of interdependence. Given the inductive nature of this investigation, however, we cannot offer directional hypotheses based on strategies with known properties. Nevertheless, the general expectation that maintenance behaviors vary according to relationship type can be tested. Accordingly, we offer the following hypothesis:

H1: Maintenance behaviors vary among romantic partners, relatives, friends, and other relationship types.

## METHOD

### *Sample*

The participants (N = 579) were enrolled in undergraduate interpersonal communication classes at two midwestern universities. Forty-three percent of the sample was male. Participants had known their relational counterparts 11.07 years, on the average, and the current state of the relationship had existed 5.64 years, on the average. Friends, close friends, acquaintances, etc. comprised 36.9%; romantic relationships (i.e., dating, seriously dating, engaged, married) comprised 22.1%; family members comprised 32.2%; co-workers comprised 1.9%; and others (including roommates) comprised 6.9% of the sample relationships. In addition, 41.8% of the relationships were defined by participants as long-distance (i.e., not living in the same town).

### *Data Collection*

In order to assess relational maintenance behaviors, the researchers designed, pilot tested, and revised a research paper assignment which was then adopted by directors of sophomore level courses in interpersonal communication at two universities. These directors also approved of the researchers soliciting from the students their summaries of the papers once completed. Although the paper itself was required for the course, student participation in the research was entirely voluntary and was solicited after the paper assignment was completed. It was made clear that grades were not at all dependent on participating in the research, confidentiality was assured, and written consent was sought for voluntary participation. Instructors of the various sections provided the researchers with the volunteers' summary sheets or photocopies of the volunteers' summary sheets (see below).

The paper required participants to write about three different types of relationships. The paper focused on the question, "What are the communication behaviors that I use to maintain my various relationships?" Students were told not to refer to texts or outside sources but instead to discuss what they do to

keep their relationships the way they like them. Students were instructed to write about both positive and negative behaviors that were employed to maintain the relationship, to use relationships with a history of at least three months, and to write only about those relationships wherein they currently interact with the other person. One other important instruction was that the participants write about three *different* types of relationships (friends, romantic, family, work, other).

The students were required to include several pieces of information in their papers. First the students were told to "title" the behaviors that they used to maintain each relationship. Second, they had to offer specific examples of the titled behavior they had used within the term of study. Finally, at the end of the paper, the students completed summary sheets, whereon they listed their titles for each strategy.

*Constructing the Typology*

Coders wrote the strategies of 100 participants (i.e., 300 summary sheets) on index cards for sorting convenience. At this point several existing taxonomies (Ayres, 1983; Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Bell et al., 1987; Dindia, 1989; Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Stafford & Canary, 1991) were listed as a guide for identifying categories. To create the initial categories, the coders relied primarily on Stafford and Canary (1991) due to the range of items included in that measures' development. This also helped to prevent category overlap between various measures' taxonomies. Hence, the index cards were sorted according to the five categories of positivity, openness, assurances, sharing tasks, and social networks. When these categories failed to represent a class of behavior, new categories were adopted. The coders relied on the literature to find labels to represent the emerging categories. When a new category emerged not already represented in the literature, the research team consensually titled the new category.

All cards that referenced *participant behaviors* were included, while those that described relational characteristics or traits were omitted. If participants listed more than one behavior as a single strategy (e.g., "I support him and try to make him laugh"), only the first behavior was coded. Using these rules, nine supraordinate categories were derived.

Once the nine supraordinate categories were created, each category was re-examined for internal variations. If more than one behavior could be grouped on the basis of shared similarities as detected by coders, a subcategory was created. Within each subcategory, cards were again re-examined for topic variations, and if necessary, a third level distinction was made. Cards that could not be described by any of the major categories or subcategories were placed in a miscellaneous group. These cards did not appear to contain commonalities that would dictate an additional category.

Using the nine categories and subcategories, the two research assistants independently coded 150 summary sheets. This was done to determine the interpretability and exhaustiveness of the taxonomy. both coders suggested that a tenth category, humor, be included, given the number of participants who cited humor in the summary sheets. The ten strategy typology appeared

exhaustive and inclusive of lower level behaviors. These supraordinate codes, behaviors, and their percentages are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Maintenance Strategies, Example Behaviors,
and Percentage of Sample Reporting

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I. *Positivity* (35.8%) Attempts to make interactions cheerful and pleasant.
   a. Nice and Cheerful (7.5%)
   "I try to be upbeat and positive around her."
   b. Favors (7.9)
   "We do nice favors for each other to show we care."
   c. Prosocial Behaviors
      1. Proactive 11.1%)
      "I act excited and willing to do things even if I am not."
      2. Reactive (7.1%)
      "I give in a lot to keep her happy."
   d. Show Affection (7.5%)
   "We hold hands and hug a lot."

II. *Openness* (52.7%) Direct discussions and listening to one another.
   a. Self-Disclosure (29.5%)
   "We share things with each other that no one else knows."
   b. Meta-Relational Communication
      1. Problems and Feelings (10.9%)
      "I talk about what I want out of the relationship."
      2. History (0.9%)
      "We often talk about how things used to be."
   c. Advice
      1. Advice Giving (3.8%)
      "I try to provide advice through knowledge and past experience."
      2. Advice Seeking (6.8%)
      "I rely on her for advice."
   d. Conflict Engagement (5.4%)
   "When there is something he does that angers me, I let him know."
   e. Empathic Behavior (7.8%)
   "We listen to each other without judging."

III. *Assurances* (45.8%) Covertly and overtly assuring each other of the importance of the relationship.
   a. Supportiveness (30.6%)
   "We rely on each other for support."
   b. Comfort (9.2%)
   "We comfort each other during difficult times."

*(table continues)*

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c. Need Satisfaction (2.1%)
"We try to put each other first."
d. Overt Expression (10.4%)
"I express an unconditional love for my sister."

IV. *Social Networks* (7.3%) Relying on the support of friends and family.
"We rely on her twin sister to help us with problems."

V. *Sharing Tasks* (8.5%) Performing routine tasks and chores in a relationship.
"We share the cleaning responsibilities."

VI. *Joint Activities* (44.6%) Spending time with one another.
a. Share Time Together (23.0%)
"We spend time hanging out."
b. Routine Events and Places (7.4%)
"We play softball together."
c. Rituals (2.4%)
"We attend Saturday football games."
d. Anti-Rituals (0.7%)
"Once in a while, as a surprise, I'll take her away for the weekend."
e. Talk Time (14.9%)
"We designate time when just the two of us can talk."
f. Occasional Visits/Road Trips (5.8%)
"I visit my brother when he is away at school."

VII. *Cards, Letters, and Calls* (35.4%) Use of mediated communication.
a. Cards and Letters (3.8%)
"We write letters to each other."
b. Phone Calls (19.5%)
"We keep in frequent contact by phone when apart."
c. Combination (14.7%)
"We communicate on the phone and through letters when we are at school."

VIII. *Avoidance* (30.1%) Evasion of partner or issues.
a. Topic Avoidance (17.3%)
"We don't talk about sensitive issues."
b. Person Avoidance (6.2%)
"I avoid him."
c. Alternate Associations (1.2%)
"We plan separate activities to enjoy time with our friends."
d. Negotiated Autonomy (8.6%)
"I try to allow her independence."

*(table continues)*

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IX. *Anti-Social* (7.9%) Behaviors which seem unfriendly or coercive.
a. Indirect (4.7%)
"I act moody so he will not want to get closer."
b. Direct (3.8%)
"I am rude to his friends."

X. *Humor* (6.6%) Jokes and sarcasm.
a. Positive (3.5%)
"We try to make each other laugh."
b. Negative (3.1%)
"I tease him about his nose."

XI. *Miscellaneous* (28.9%) Non-behaviors or those that do not fit into any of the above categories.

*Note*: The numbers exceed 100% because participants usually nominated more than one maintenance behavior.

An additional coder was trained by one of the authors. After both coders agreed to the meaning of the codes, 160 summary sheets, which contained 424 strategies, were independently coded. Intercoder reliability was satisfactory, with intercoder agreement at 81% and Cohen's kappa = .80. The remainder of the 579 participants' summary sheets were then equally divided between the two coders and each behavior on the participants' summary sheets was assigned one of the behavioral codes presented in Table 1.

## RESULTS

The research question concerned the different types of maintenance behaviors that would be found using an inductive method. The frequency of the major categories and examples are provided in Table 1. Table 1 reveals that openness was the most commonly nominated strategy, with self-disclosure as the most frequently cited behavior. Assurances and joint activities each were nominated by approximately forty-five percent of the sample. Positivity, cards/letters/calls, and avoidance were listed by 30-35% of the sample. The least frequent maintenance behaviors involved the strategies of humor, anti-social, social networks, and sharing tasks (all of which were nominated by fewer than 10% of the participants).

The hypothesis predicted that strategies vary among relational types. No particular direction or model beyond this general expectation was possible. Nevertheless, H1 was supported. Certain strategies varied according to relational type (with $p$'s $< .05$), including positivity ($\underline{X}^2 = 26.71$, $\underline{C} = .21$), openness ($\underline{X}^2 = 28.57$, $\underline{C} = .22$), assurances ($\underline{X}^2 = 37.31$, $\underline{C} = .25$), sharing tasks ($\underline{X}^2 = 81.72$, $\underline{C} = .35$), and cards/letters/calls ($\underline{X}^2 = 20.68$, $\underline{C} = .19$). Examination of cell residuals indicated that positivity, openness, and assurances were used less than expected in friendships, but more than expected in romantic involvements.

Likewise, assurances, sharing tasks, and cards/letters/calls were used by relatives more frequently than expected, and were used by friends less frequently than expected.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this investigation was to derive an exhaustive taxonomy of relational maintenance behaviors. The objective was accomplished by designing a paper assignment that focused on students' articulation of specific maintenance behaviors. In all, 10 strategic approaches and 35 specific behaviors were identified (Table 1). In terms of our own research program, the latter five strategies reported in Table 1 (i.e., Joint Activities; Cards, Letters, and Calls; Avoidance; Anti-Social; and Humor) represent additions to the Stafford and Canary (1991) typology. In addition, each of the subcategories for all the strategies in Table 1 are new. These subcategories detail the specific ways that people enact the more general strategies. To our knowledge, the typology presented in Table 1 is the most comprehensive account of relational maintenance behaviors, extending previous efforts using data reduction techniques (Dindia, 1989; Stafford & Canary, 1991).

To answer the research question, frequencies were noted for each strategy. In descending order of their use, the inductively derived strategies were as follows: (1) openness; (2) assurances; (3) (sharing) joint activities; (4) positivity; (5) cards/letters/calls; (6) avoidance; (7) sharing tasks; (8) anti-social behaviors; (9) social networks; and (10) humor. It is important to note that one new category--joint activities--appears to be a commonly cited one. These strategies reflect direct and indirect communication approaches to sustaining relationships. Openness, assurances, and positivity, for example, are direct attempts to maintain the relationship, whereas joint activities, sharing tasks, and humor appear to be less direct. Future research is warranted to assess whether these strategies differ in the users' perception of their directness. If differences in perceptions of directness exist, then at least one dimension underlying these maintenance strategies can be explored theoretically as well.

The hypothesis predicted that maintenance strategies vary according to relational type. Positivity, openness, assurances, sharing tasks, and cards/letters/calls varied according to relationship type. Romantic partners and family members appear to use these maintenance behaviors more than friends do. These findings are understandable if one considers that although friends appreciate one another they may take their friendships for granted (Rawlins, in press). That is, people are probably less concerned about maintaining their friendships than their romantic and family relationships. In our view, the interdependence in family and romantic relationships requires conscious efforts to ensure these involvements exist as people want them. Without such maintenance efforts, these relationships would probably de-escalate in terms of their interdependence (e.g., Guerrero et al., 1993). Future efforts should be directed toward examining the reasons for variation in use, noting with more powerful tools the exact nature of the variation and corresponding associations with salient relationship outcomes.

One sampling limitation was the scarcity of co-worker relationships. It appears that co-worker relationships were not salient to these students. One reason for this is that students were asked to write about their ongoing personal relationships which had existed at least three months. It is likely that most college students do not stay at a particular job long enough to establish and maintain personal relationships with their co-workers. However, Waldron (1991) has found that people do enact particular strategies to maintain their co-worker relationships. Future research is needed to assess how other adults use various maintenance strategies to sustain their co-worker involvements relative to their other relationships.

Two coding problems should be noted. First, certain strategies were difficult to place into a specific category although they appeared to be maintenance behaviors (note that 28.9% of the sample nominated at least one miscellaneous behavior). Second, several times interpretation of students' summary sheets complicated the coding process (e.g., students nominating several behaviors as one; unclear phrases, etc.). Despite these problems, the typology seemed complete and functionally easy to use. The categories were generally clear and discrete. Moreover, the coding process went quickly and, with the exceptions noted above, without difficulty.

The typology offers much potential for future investigations. At a minimum, the range of behaviors identified in this study includes and extends previous efforts. The findings suggest a broader array of maintenance activities across a number of relationships that can be explored further. In addition, future research can utilize the inductively derived typology in its present form, or adapt it for observational and/or survey designs (e.g., Dainton & Stafford's [1993] study of married and dating couples' routine maintenance behaviors). Moreover, the inductively derived typology represents a variety of maintenance activities. Whether or not such differences affect important relational outcomes awaits future research.

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