Negotiating Between Relational and Educational Identities

Cheyenne Carpenter

Brittany Salyars

Elissa Terry

Martha Thurman

University of Northern Iowa

Salyarsb@uni.edu

Negotiating Between Relational and Educational Identities

According to the National Center for Education Statistics there are 11,620 postsecondary campuses in the United States as of 2012, and in the fall of 2012 there was 17.7 million undergraduates enrolled (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Most people choose their mates and are dating between the ages of 18-24 (Cheney, 2009). Being a college student is a large commitment due to its many time commitments, such as class, study, and school work. It also takes a lot of time and commitment to be in a relationship because one must find time to go on dates, earn trust, and develop their relationship. With changing social rules and standards it is important to see how college students can effectively manage being an enrolled student along with negotiating being in a long-term opposite sex monogamous relationship. We chose to study these types of relationships because there is a lack of research regarding how traditional aged college students (18-24) negotiate their roles as relationship partners and as students. This study can help to better understand the college culture in the area of relationships and monogamy by bringing light to the identities that college students form as students and partners in relationships through Identity Negotiation Theory.

There have been many studies involving college students, their identities as college students, and their views on relationships. However, there are not enough studies that look at all of these concepts in relation to one another. For example, Reitzes and Burke (1980), found that there is no single college-student identity and that students who saw an expectation for good education as a goal relevant to their identity behaved in a way that reflected this idea (see also Kayne & Houston, 1981). Another example includes Martin and Martin's (1984) study, which

found that college students may have a lack of dating experience and may need communication training to meet potential partners as well as to help them maintain relationships. Overall these studies show that although a student identity or a relational identity are important aspects for many students enrolled in higher education, there remains a lack of attention to how they interact with one another.

In this study, our goal was to discover how college students communicatively negotiate their dual identities as both college students and members of a long-term, monogamous, opposite sex relationship. Specifically, we apply Identity Negotiation Theory to determine how college students communicatively negotiate these conflicting identities.In order to realize this goal, we first review the tenets of Identity Negotiation Theory and discuss specifically how they apply to our study. Second, we describe how we gathered and analyzed our data using emotion coding and grounded theory (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Third, we generate three themes that college students use to communicatively negotiate their dual identities as both college students and members of a relationship. Finally, we discuss how these themes can be related to Identity negotiation theory.

Identity Negotiation Theory

Identity refers to our reflective views of ourselves and other perceptions of our self-images at both the social identity and the personal identity levels (Mead 1934, as cited by Ting-Toomey, 2005). Through interaction with others on a daily basis, individuals acquire meanings, values, norms, and styles of communicating. Ting-Toomey's (2005) description of Identity Negotiation Theory breaks down the theory into five sections: family and gender socialization, content and salience, core assumptions of the identity, two ethnic identity

development models, and criteria and outcomes of intercultural identity competence. Ting-Toomey's five sections help to further define cultural values.

Family socialization is defined by Ting-Toomey as through pervasive cultural value patterns as filtered through the family and media systems - that the meanings and values for identities such as ethnicity, gender, and identity types are defined. Gender socialization are identities we learned as children that affect our communication with others. It refers to the meanings and interpretations we hold concerning our self-images and expected other-images of "femaleness" and "maleness" (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Cultural identity salience refers to the strength of affiliation we have with our larger culture (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

There are ten core assumptions:

1. The core dynamics of people's group membership identities and personal identities are formed via symbolic communication with others.
2. Individuals in all cultures or ethnic groups have the basic motivation needs for identity security, inclusion, predictability, connection, and consistency on both group-based and person-based identity levels.
3. Individuals tend to experience identity emotional security in a culturally familiar environment and experience identity emotional vulnerability in a culturally unfamiliar environment.
4. Individuals tend to feel included when their desired group membership identities are positively endorsed and experience identity differentiation when their desired group membership identities are stigmatized.

5. Individuals tend to experience interaction predictability when communicating with culturally familiar others and interaction unpredictability when communicating with culturally unfamiliar others.
6. Individuals tend to desire interpersonal connection via meaningful close relationships and experience identity autonomy when they experience relationship separations.
7. Individuals tend to experience identity consistency in repeated cultural routines in a familiar cultural environment, and they tend to experience identity change and transformation in a new or unfamiliar cultural environment.
8. Cultural, personal, and situational variability dimensions influence the meanings, interpretations and evaluations of these identity-related themes.
9. Importance of integrating the necessary intercultural identity-based knowledge, mindfulness, and interaction skills to communicate appropriately and effectively with culturally dissimilar others.
10. Satisfactory identity negotiation outcomes include the feelings of being understood, respected, and affirmatively valued. (Ting-Toomey, 2005)

The two ethnic and cultural identity development models, according to Ting-Toomey (2005), are first ethnic-cultural identity typology and racial/ethnic identity development model. The outcomes of intercultural identity competence is that identity understanding begins with gathering accurate identity-based information and being culturally sensitive in probing identity-based layers in the intergroup negotiation process. It is also the willingness to share facets of our own self-conceptions with others in a culturally and personally resonating manner. (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Identity Negotiation Theory has been used in studies to understand how Chinese immigrant professionals negotiate their cultural identities (Min&Buzzanell, 2013), to understand the role of targets in the identity negotiation process (Swann, 1987), and to understand college student identities (Reitzes and Burke, 1980). Understanding college student roles, with their identity is why we have chosen this theory to help us better understand how college students in long-term relationships negotiate their multiple identities.

Rationale

Identity Negotiation Theory is a heuristic theory that has been used in many studies relating to communication research. Because this theory has many components, it has been used in a variety of ways for each study. The tenet that is of interest for this particular study is tenet 6: "Individuals tend to desire interpersonal connection via meaningful close relationships and experience identity autonomy when they experience relationship separations." This study will look at how autonomy and connection are affected for college students when negotiating their identities as college students and as long-term relationship partners.

One way in which college students can negotiate their identities is how they cope with stress. One example of research that looks at how college students cope with stress was done by Vela, et. al (2013). This study looks at how college students cope with stress in their relationship, particularly through the use of humor. They found that there was variance in the levels of relationship satisfaction and relationship stress depending on the relationship status: those who were engaged to be married had different levels of satisfaction and stress than those in casual relationships or serious dating relationships (Vela et al, 2013). They concluded that couples in serious dating relationships were most satisfied in their relationship and also had the

lowest levels of relationship stress. This study is useful in understanding how college students cope with stress in their relationships. We looked at the emotions that come into play when students have to negotiate their identities as students and relationship partners, and stress plays a key factor in the negotiation of these identities. Through the use of emotion coding and grounded theory to interpret interview data, which are explained in our methodology section, we attempted to answer the following:

RQ: "How do college students communicatively negotiate their dual roles as students and members of a long-term, monogamous, opposite sex relationship?"

Methodology

Participants

Participants (N = 5). All participants were full time students of the University of Northern Iowa and in a long term relationship. The age of the students who participated in our study ranged from 18-24. For the purposes of this study, we considered couples dating for six months or longer to be in a long term relationship. They also had to be full-time university students. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling and snowball techniques.

Procedures

We conducted semi-structured interviews, which included pre-planned questions as well as probing questions to gain more insight. To interview our participants, we met with each individual one-on-one in a private room, or public place, depending on the interviewee's preference. In order to conduct data analysis we recorded each interview via audio recording which lasted about 30-45 minutes. We then proceeded to transcribe and code the data with all of the interviews conducted. All data was produced in a single-typed page format.

Data Analysis

We found that there was a lot of emotion expressed by our interviewees when discussing their identity negotiation, so we decided to use emotion coding combined with grounded theory as a process for categorizing the different emotions found.

Our first theory we used to help with our process of coding was grounded theory. Grounded theory is characterized by researchers commitment to "continuously check and re-check categories which helps to yield more valid and meaningful categories and codes within the data analysis" (Manning&Kunkel, 2014 p.157). We then implemented grounded theory as a systematic approach to coding the emotions we founds; and "(Emotion) coding occurs when emotions are explicitly articulated, made evident through discourse, or explained through action" (Manning&Kunkel, 2014 p.60). While looking at the data, we decided to use both grounded theory, and emotion coding.

We applied emotion coding in our research by looking at the interview data and finding times where the interviewee expressed some type of emotion. We then looked for similar emotions expressed by other interviewees in order to find patterns in our data. In order to find patterns to code our data, we applied grounded theory. By checking and re-checking our interview data and using emotion coding, we were able to develop three themes related to emotion.

Positionality

We decided to study how participants negotiate their student and relationship identities because all four researchers are full time students and are either in long-term relationships or

have been in a long-term relationship in the past. We were interested to find how different college students negotiate their different roles and identities while maintaining happiness in their partner relationships and their relationship with school.

Results

From all five interviews that were conducted, we noticed the following themes: First, when interviewees had to choose between their identities as a student and their identities as a relationship partner, their identities as a relationship partner usually were more important to them. Second, support and compromise with their partners made it easier for interviewees to balance their conflicting identities. Third, communication between partners was also key in negotiating interviewees' dual identities as students and relationship partners, and was key to maintaining a healthy relationship with their partner.

When our interviewees were asked if they had to pick between school or their relationship, the responses showed that overall, interviewees would choose their relationship. One interviewee, Jessica, said, "Some days I will spend like all day with Colin and realize I didn't do any homework (laughs)."Another interviewee, Jade, brought forth the idea of having more than just a significant other- Jade also has a daughter to care for. "My first priority is my relationship to my spouse, then my daughter, and *then* school." This quote shows how Jade negotiates her identities by listing her priorities in order of importance-family and relationships being most important. Lastly, Lindsey is quoted as saying the following:

> I could always study more, work harder in school, but sometimes I don't feel like that is the most important thing. I get good grades, so as long as I am okay with

> the grades that I get and feel comfortable with that I would choose hanging out with him any day over doing homework.

Lindsey's quote reflects the idea that the relationship wins out over school. She emphasizes the idea that as long as she is satisfied with her school work, she is willing to move her focus from school to focusing on spending time with her significant other. This shows us that students would rather identify with their relationship identity than with their student identity.

The interviewees also made it clear that they felt supported by their significant other. They did not feel that they had to compromise their identities to either be with their partner, or to do their studies. However, compromise was key to maintaining a good relationship. Their responses helped showcase how they felt supported to do what they wanted, or needed to do. One respondent was quoted as saying "He wants to see me do well." Lindsey talks about support and compromise within her relationship, "I think willingness to compromise in a relationship is important because there will come a time especially in a long term relationships where you won't agree with everything that your partner does, says, and so on." Lastly, Stephanie brought to the surface the idea that, "because we're supportive of each other, if he feels that he's interfering with my education or my studies, he'll help me…"

The last theme that we noticed was that a lot of our interviewees felt that communication was key to a successful long term relationship. Georgie reflected this idea by saying, "Communicating is definitely the biggest thing." Another interviewee, Jessica, was asked about what was most important to her in her relationship, Stephanie said, "in general, communication. I would say that it is very important because communication can go a long way." Stephanie went on to say, "some behaviors I perform to maintain a healthy relationship, that I can pinpoint,

would be...communicating...I would say communication is the main point for us." Jade reflected the importance of communication by saying, "we try to work out our problems by talking about [them]." Lastly, Jessica said, "when we are not on the same page, things are harder than when we communicate [effectively] about stuff."

Conclusion

This particular study contributed to better understanding how college students negotiate their roles in the classroom and in their long-term monogamous opposite sex relationship. In our study we asked how college students communicatively negotiate their dual roles as college students and members of a long-term, monogamous, opposite-sex relationship. To find the answer, we conducted interviews and used emotion coding and grounded theory to interpret the interviews. We then applied Identity Negotiation theory to our findings. In the end we identified 3 main themes:

1. Whenever there came a time when an interviewee felt the need to choose between their relationship and being a "good" student, they chose their relationship.
2. Support and compromise were important factors for interviewees to feel happy as students and relationship partners.
3. Communication was key for maintaining a good relationship with their partners.

The responses reveal that our interviewees favored their relationships over studying and doing their school work, but throughout our research we did find that their significant others were supportive of their studies in general. Lastly, it became overwhelmingly obvious that our interviewees felt that communication was key to the success of not only their relationship but their success as a student. With all of these themes we realized that overall the interviewees'

negotiated more with their identity as a member of a long term, monogamous, opposite sex relationship more than with their other identity of a college student. When push comes to shove, they would pick their relationship over their studies.

To add to this study, further research could possibly compare students who live with their partners and students whose partners do not live with them, and see if there is any difference in how they negotiate their dual identities as students and relationship partners. Another suggestion for future research would be to compare students whose relationship partners are also students, to those students who are in a relationship with someone who is not also a student. There would likely be a difference in the dynamic of their relationships of these two groups and in how they would communicatively negotiate their dual identities as students and relationship partners.

References

Cheney, P. (2009). Dating and mate selection. *Sociology of the Family (Chapter 8).* http://freebooks.uvu.edu/SOC1200/index.php/ch08-dating-mate-selection.html

College Enrollment Statistics. (2013). *National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics.*

Howder, L. M., & Meyer, J. A. (2011). Age and sex composition: 2010. *The United States Census Bureau.*

Kayne, J., & Houston, S. (1981). Values of American college students. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 49(4),* 199-206.

Manning, J., & Kunkel, A. (2014). *Researching interpersonal relationships: Qualitative methods, studies, and analysis* . Sage.

Martin, D., & Martin, M. (1984). Selected attitudes toward marriage and family life among college students. *Family Relations, 33(2)*, 293-300.

Min, W., & Buzzanell, P.M (2013). Liminalities at work: Chinese professionals' immigrant identity negotiations. *China Media Research*, 9(4), 15-26.

Reitzes, Donald C. and Peter J. Burke. (1980). College student identity: Measurement and implications. *The Pacific Sociological Review, 23(1)*, 45-66.

Swann, W. (1987). Identity negotiation: Where two roads Meet. In Journal of personality and social psychology, *Personality and dyadic interaction 53(6)* (pp. 1038-1051). American psychological association Inc.

Ting-Toomey, S. (2005). Identity Negotiation Theory: Crossing cultural boundaries. In William B. Gudykunst, *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 2019-233). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Vela, L. E., Booth-Butterfield, M., Wanzer, M. B., & Vallade, J. I. (2013). Relationships among humor, coping, relationship stress, and satisfaction in dating relationships: Replication and extension. *Communication Research Reports*, *30*(1), 68-75. doi:10.1080/08824096.2012.746224.