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## *Behaviors That Determine the Fate of Friendships After Unrequited Romantic Disclosures*

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Platonic opposite-sex friendships often are among our most valued relationships (e.g., Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). It is not surprising that romantic attraction sometimes develops within these initially platonic friendships, and it is not surprising that often the attraction is not mutual. The disclosure of romantic feelings that develop within a platonic friendship is risky. It is possible that the feelings are not mutual, and in that case, while the friendship may survive the asymmetry, it is more likely that it will not (Motley, Faulkner, & Reeder, 2008; Werking, 1997).

By age 20 or so, about 80% of today's population has experienced unrequited romantic attraction within an ostensibly platonic friendship, typically more than once. These experiences are problematic both before and after the disclosure and rejection. Deciding whether to reveal romantic attraction for a friend is among the most common serious communication dilemmas reported by college students (Motley, 1992), presumably because of partners' general reluctance to discuss the relationship (e.g., Baxter, 1988), the fear of asymmetry (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976), and fear of damage to the friendship in case of asymmetry (e.g., Werking, 1997). And once the disclosure is made, unrequited romantic attraction is awkward for both partners, at least for a while

(Motley et al., 2008). Among other problems, the romantically inclined partner almost always has felt led on and is surprised, embarrassed, and of course disappointed by the rejection. And almost always, the platonically inclined partner feels pressured to reciprocate the attraction, feels awkward rejecting the attraction, and feels guilty for having disappointed a friend.

To exacerbate the discomfort of the disclosure/rejection episode, the partners are on their own to determine how to deal with the situation and must operate without the benefit of predetermined “scripts” to guide their behavior. That is to say, while movies, songs, novels, and so forth provide many examples of scripts for behaviors common to *mutual* romance, there are very few for *unrequited* romance, and almost all of these are for negative relationship-dissolution outcomes. There are virtually no guidelines available for either the unrequited lover who wants to repair and maintain the friendship despite the rejection nor for the “rejecter” who, while not romantically attracted to the partner, wishes to reestablish and maintain the friendship (Baumeister et al., 1993).

If unrequited romantic attraction within friendships causes awkwardness and embarrassment for the partners, but there are no guidelines with which to navigate the experience, then it is not surprising that most cases end with a dissolved friendship. But since some friendships do indeed survive the episode, it is obvious that losing the friendship is not inevitable. Apparently, some individuals or couples find ways of dealing with the initial awkwardness, ways of putting the episode behind them, and ways of reestablishing a mutual friendship. These people operate without scripts too, of course, but manage to improvise behaviors that salvage the friendship.

If there are particular behaviors that are unique to salvaged friendships after unrequited attraction episodes, and if they can be identified, then perhaps we could offer guidelines for future unrequited attraction episodes. That is to say, the practical answer to what one “should do” in case of unrequited attraction within a friendship probably lies in the difference between what friends typically have done when the friendship dissolved versus what friends have done when the friendship lasted.

Our interest in differentiating partners’ behaviors in friendships that last versus those that dissolve after disclosures of unrequited attraction began with an earlier study (Motley et al., 2008) described in Chapter 2. Using subjects who reported on a past unrequited attraction-in-friendship episode they had experienced, the earlier study first identified a number of *conditions* that participants believed to be instrumental in determining the subsequent fate (lasted/dissolved) of their friendship (e.g., partner appeared able to accept asymmetry, participant felt pressured to develop romantic feelings, participant/partner stayed embarrassed). Then the study identified *behaviors* that participants believed to be the means by which those conditions were communicated and manifested. By comparing participants in both roles—platonic versus

romantically inclined—across both friendship fates (lasted vs. dissolved), it was possible to identify a dozen or so behaviors that are perceived to be more common to one friendship fate than to the other. The conservative interpretation is that we identified behaviors that seem especially likely to occur within either friendships that last or those that dissolve. The liberal interpretation is that the behaviors may actually be responsible for the fate of the friendship. In this case they would represent a list of practical do's and don'ts for those who wish to keep the friendship together after one of these unrequited-romantic-attraction episodes.

The conclusions of our earlier study must be viewed cautiously, however. The target conditions and optimal behaviors emerged from qualitative, interpretative analysis of exploratory open-ended questionnaire items to identify the critical behaviors for specific conditions. While the study compared the frequency with which certain behaviors were *recalled*, there was no assurance that this recall reflected the true relative presence of the behaviors rather than merely their salience or memorability.

To put it another way, a consequence of the exploratory qualitative approach of the earlier study is that its conclusions technically are merely informed hypotheses rather than tested claims. The purpose of the present study is to go further toward testing those hypotheses.

The earlier study identified “positive” behaviors that seem to be present in friendships that survive unrequited attraction episodes and “negative” behaviors that seem to be present within friendships that dissolve. While these behaviors emerged from open-ended questionnaire items in the earlier study, the present study will treat them as *a priori* targets of interest for two kinds of hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: Behaviors identified in our earlier study as “positive” behaviors will be reported to have been present significantly more frequently for friendships that survived unrequited attraction episodes than for friendships that did not (while the opposite will be true for “negative” behaviors).*

*Hypothesis 2: The perceived effect of target behaviors upon critical conditions will be such that “positive behaviors” are perceived to have facilitated “positive conditions” significantly more commonly than to have facilitated “negative conditions” (while the opposite will be true for “negative behaviors”).*

## Method

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 98 native-English-speaking students of various upper-division communication courses at the University of California, Davis.

*Groupings:* Each participant reported via questionnaire about a single recent unrequited-romantic-attraction-within-friendship episode for one of the following target situations:

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

Participants were assigned to a group that represented one of the four target situations via a simple screening questionnaire asking, yes or no, whether the participant had experienced any of the four target situations within the past 3 years. Those who could not identify with any of the situations were dismissed. Participants who identified with only one situation were assigned to the corresponding group. Those who identified with more than one situation were assigned randomly to one of the relevant groups. Group *n*'s were as follows: participant romantically inclined and friendship lasted = 24, participant platonic and friendship lasted = 25, participant romantic and friendship dissolved = 24, participant platonic and friendship dissolved = 25.

## QUESTIONNAIRE

Participants completed questionnaires that were identical across groups except for minor editing to fit the four target situations (e.g., switching "lasted" for "dissolved," switching "you" for "your partner"). Primary questionnaire items investigated two matters:

### *Part I*

Based on the earlier study, 19 behaviors were selected as a priori items hypothesized to differ on their reported presence between the lasted and dissolved groups. Essentially, these behaviors were the ones identified in the earlier study as having potential for a strong positive or negative effect upon the eventual fate of the friendship. These behaviors are listed in Table 4.1. The questionnaire asked participants to answer a number of questions within the context of the single unrequited-romantic-attraction episode corresponding to their group assignment.

Table 4.1 Target Behaviors

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. P (re)affirmed friendship, told R that the friendship was important (+)</li> <li>2. R (re)affirmed friendship, told P that the friendship was important (+)</li> <li>3. R said it was okay (that feelings weren't mutual) and talked about it openly (+)</li> <li>4. P said it was okay (that feelings weren't mutual) and talked about it openly (+)</li> <li>5. R called, got together, maintained earlier patterns of contact (+)</li> <li>6. P called, got together, maintained earlier patterns of contact (+)</li> <li>7. R dropped the subject of romantic attraction, acted like nothing happened (+)</li> <li>8. R complained, acted bothered/uncomfortable (-)</li> <li>9. P avoided, ignored, or reduced contact with R (-)</li> <li>10. R avoided, ignored, or reduced contact with P (-)</li> <li>11. P acknowledged blame or acceptance re R's assumption of mutual romantic attraction (+)</li> <li>12. P indicated that romantic feelings for R may develop later (-)</li> <li>13. P said a new romantic interest in another was reason for rejecting R (-)</li> <li>14. P told others about R's disclosure, R's feelings (-)</li> <li>15. R accepted P's subsequent attraction to others/another (+)</li> <li>16. R told P of his or her subsequent interest in others (+)</li> <li>17. P told R of his or her subsequent interest in others (+)</li> <li>18. R reduced flirtation and sexual innuendo (+)</li> <li>19. P reduced flirtation and sexual innuendo (+)</li> </ol> |
|--|

NOTE: P = platonically inclined partner, R = romantically inclined partner; + = presumed "positive" behaviors, - = presumed "negative" behaviors.

For each target behavior, participants were first asked simply whether the behavior had occurred in conjunction with their disclosure/rejection episode. Responses were either yes or no. The prediction, of course, was that yes responses to positive behaviors would be more frequent in lasted friendships, while yes responses to negative behaviors would be more common to dissolved friendships. These 19 yes/no questions regarding the presence of target behaviors will be treated as Part I of the study.

### Part II

Each of the 19 yes/no questions about the presence of a particular behavior was accompanied by three to five follow-up questions. One of these asked whether the reported presence or absence of the target behavior was perceived to have played a major role in the eventual *fate of the friendship* (rated on a 1-7 Likert-type scale). The remaining subquestions asked whether the reported presence or absence of the target behavior served to manifest certain of the key maintenance/repair conditions suggested by our earlier study, for example, "Do

*you feel that this (your answer to [the preceding item]) reduced or increased the embarrassment or awkwardness for your partner*" (1–7 Likert scale), "Do you feel that it showed whether he/she was able or unable to 'handle' or 'live with' the situation" (1–7 Likert scale), and so forth.<sup>1</sup> These items will be discussed as Part II.<sup>2</sup>

## ANALYSIS—PART I

Participants' yes or no (present/absent) responses on the 19 target behaviors were coded as "correct/incorrect" responses—assuming a lasting friendship as the goal and assuming the "positive/negative" characterizations above. That is to say, "yes" responses on "positive" behaviors and "no" responses on "negative" behaviors were coded as "correct," or consistent with the hypothesis. "Correct" responses were assigned a value of 1, "incorrect" responses a value of 0. Thus for each of the 19 target behaviors, the potential range of presence/absence group means was 0.0 to 1.0.

Conceptually, Part I represents 19 separate hypotheses wherein the mean for each behavior is predicted to be significantly larger (i.e., more participants giving "correct" responses) for participants reporting on friendships that lasted than for those reporting on friendships that dissolved. Analysis consisted of a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA (*outcome*: lasted/dissolved, and *partner*: romantic/platonic) for each of the 19 behaviors.<sup>3</sup>

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION—PART I

Results are summarized in Table 4.2. Main effects on the outcome variable represent the primary predictions. For all but one of the behaviors examined (#11), overall differences between lasting and dissolved friendships were in the predicted direction (i.e., higher scores for the former). For all but two of these behaviors (##7 and 12), the differences were statistically significant. But in both of those cases, at least one pairwise subgroup difference was statistically significant in the predicted direction.

In short, almost all of the behaviors hypothesized earlier to be "positive" behaviors were reported to be more often present in friendships that lasted after an unrequited-romantic-disclosure episode than in friendships that dissolved. And the behaviors identified as "negative" were found to be more often present in friendships that dissolved than in friendships that lasted.

### *Secondary Observations*

While differences on the partner variable were of less a priori concern, Table 4.2 shows a few interesting differences and trends. For example, for almost all behaviors, platonic/romantic partners' perspectives are much more similar in



Table 4.2 Presence of Behaviors Across Situations—Means and F Values

Behaviors	Means				F(1, 94)			Subgroup Differences					
	RL	PL	RD	PD	Outcome	Viewpoint		O × V	P				
						P	P		RD/RL	PD/PL	RD/PD	RL/PL	
1. R reaffirmed friendship (+)	.96	.84	.13	.32	****			*	****				
2. P reaffirmed friendship (+)	.79	.88	.29	.52	****				****	**			
3. R acknowledged OK (+)	.75	.76	.58	.20	****	*		*	****	****	**		
4. P acknowledged OK (+)	.79	.88	.21	.48	****	*		*	****	****	*		
5. R returned to earlier contact patterns (+)	.58	.56	.08	.44	***			*	**			**	
6. P returned to earlier contact patterns (+)	.63	.60	.08	.32	****				****	*			
7. R dropped discussion of romantic interest (+)	.75	.72	.75	.44						*		*	
8. R complained, acted bothered (-)	.79	.76	.75	.32	**	**		*		**	**	****	

(Continued)

Table 4.2 (Continued)

Behaviors	Means				F(1, 94)			Subgroup Differences			
	Outcome		Viewpoint		O × V		P				
	RL	PL	RD	PD	p	p	RD/RL	PD/PL	RD/PD	RL/PL	
9. R avoided contact/ communication (-)	.50	.76	.12	.32	****	**		**	**		*
10. P avoided contact/ communication (-)	.71	.72	.21	.20	****			***	***		
11. P acknowledged R's assumption justified (+)	.62	.52	.63	.56							
12. P suggested future romantic interest (-)	.71	.84	.50	.80		*				*	
13. P new romantic interest as reason (-)	.75	.88	.50	.64	**						
14. P told friends of episode (-)	.96	.56	.63	.16	****	****		**	***	***	**
15. R accepted P's new romantic targets (+)	.83	.89	.55	.18	****	**	***	***	****	****	

Behaviors	Means				F(1, 94)			Subgroup Differences			
	Outcome		Viewpoint		O × V		P				
	RL	PL	RD	PD	P	P	RD/RL	PD/PL	RD/PD	RL/PL	
16. R told of new romantic targets (+)	.55	.82	.33	.09	****			*	****	**	**
17. P told of new romantic targets (+)	.93	.53	.33	.17	****	****		****	***		****
18. R decreased flirtation and innuendo (+)	.95	.92	.58	.71	****			***	*		
19. P decreased flirtation and innuendo (+)	.92	.96	.75	.93	*	*		*		*	

NOTE: R = romantically inclined partner, P = platonically inclined partner; D = dissolved friendship, L = lasted friendship. A priori alpha = .05; *p* values are for comparison (\*, \*\*, \*\*\*, \*\*\*\* = .05, .01, .001, .0001, respectively). Pairwise comparisons via Newman-Kuels. *F* values available upon request.

friendships that lasted than in those that dissolved. (That is, for subgroup means and tests, the agreement between romantic/platonic partners is usually greater in friendships that lasted and lesser in those that dissolved.) Moreover, the interactions and pairwise comparisons amplify a pattern hinted at in the earlier study regarding the relative "charity" of romantic/platonic partners' attributions in lasted and dissolved friendships. In particular, within the dissolved friendships, significant partner-viewpoint differences (in all cases except Table 4.2, #5) occur because the actors of the target behaviors give themselves more credit for having behaved "correctly" (i.e., higher mean scores) than do the partners. In lasted friendships, on the other hand, significant romantic/platonic differences (except #14) occur because the observing partners give the actors of the target behavior more credit than do the actors themselves. For example, as for whether romantically inclined partners displayed the positive behavior of mentioning their new targets of romantic attraction after the episode, more romantic than platonic partners answered affirmatively in dissolved friendships, while more platonic than romantic partners answered affirmatively in lasted relationships (i.e., Table 4.2, #16). In general, it appears that actors of the target behaviors in the dissolved friendships are more naive or presumptuous, while those in the lasted friendships are more sensitive, or that the "observing" partners are relatively critical in dissolved friendships, while those in the lasted friendships are more charitable. Of course, these data may simply reflect the difference between subjects looking back on relatively negative and positive social events. But it is interesting to speculate that if these charity differences were present at the time of the episode, for example, as personality or style differences, they may in part account for the fate of the friendship or the tendency toward positive and negative behaviors.

In summary, Part I reinforces the identification of behaviors that are more common to lasting or dissolved friendships after unrequited-romantic-attraction episodes. The question of *how* the behaviors operate, at least with respect to promoting the critical conditions of corresponding friendship repair efforts, is investigated in Part II.

## ANALYSIS—PART II

Recall that on the questionnaire, each presence/absence question about a particular behavior was followed by two to four Likert-type scale questions about the extent to which the behavior's presence or absence was perceived to promote certain presumably associated conditions (e.g., "*Do you feel that [the absence/presence of the behavior] reduced or increased the embarrassment for [the romantically-inclined partner]?*"). Subjects' responses were grouped by lasted/dissolved outcomes and by platonic/romantic perspectives, as above, but also by the yes/no presence-of-behavior responses that served as the dependent measure for Part I above.

Thus data were analyzed via separate  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  ANOVAs for each behavior/condition item: *Presence of Behavior* (present/absent)  $\times$  Friendship Outcome (lasted/dissolved)  $\times$  Partner Perspective (romantic/platonic).<sup>4</sup> To repeat, dependent measures were Likert-scale (1–7) responses on whether the presence or absence of a given *behavior* was perceived as signaling or promoting a particular friendship repair *condition*.

Main effects on the presence variable were of primary a priori interest. That is to say, if a given behavior does indeed operate to promote a certain friendship repair condition, then Likert scale manifestation scores (i.e., the dependent measure) should differ in a predictable direction between participants who report the behavior to have been present and those who do not.

## RESULTS—PART II

Results are summarized in Table 4.3. Likert scale scores have been converted where necessary so that higher means represent the affirmative end of the scale, given the condition's wording on the table; for example, a 7.0 would now represent "very much" for both "showed friendship to be important" and "showed friendship to be *unimportant*."<sup>5</sup>

For purposes of display in Table 4.3, groupings on the presence/absence variable were converted to presumed "correct/incorrect" behaviors for friendship repair. That is, "correct" behavior (" $\checkmark$ " in Table 4.3) corresponds simultaneously to both "yes" on positive behaviors and "no" on negative behaviors; and "incorrect behavior" ("X") corresponds to "yes" on negative behaviors and "no" on positive behaviors. Thus higher means on desirable conditions would be expected for subjects reporting " $\checkmark$ " behaviors, and higher means on undesirable conditions would be expected for subjects reporting "X" behaviors.

Table 4.3 includes, for each target behavior, the conditions for which significant main effects were found on the  $\checkmark/X$  variable. All differences are in the predicted direction, with one exception, to be discussed below. That is, the presence of presumed positive behaviors generally was perceived to promote desirable conditions, compared with their absence, while the presence of negative behaviors promoted undesirable conditions. Clearly, most of the target behaviors may operate to promote more than one critical condition, though for most of these behaviors the relationship appears stronger to some associated conditions than to others.

As a whole, Table 4.3 offers a view of *how* positive and negative behaviors operate to affect the fate of male/female friendships after unrequited-romantic-attraction episodes. There are very few major surprises in the Table 4.3 data. Most of the behavior/condition relationships are consistent with those suggested by the qualitative analysis of our earlier study, and the few that represent new observations are intuitively sensible.

(Text continues on page 87)

Table 4.3 Perceived Effect of Behaviors on Conditions

Behavior and Conditions	Means				Main Effects F(1, 90)			
	$\sqrt{LR}$ XLR	$\sqrt{LP}$ XLP	$\sqrt{DR}$ XDR	$\sqrt{DP}$ XDP	$\sqrt{vs. X}$ p	L vs. D p	P vs. R p	
<b>R reaffirmed friendship (+)</b>								
Showed friendship to be important	6.4	6.1	5.0	5.6	$\sqrt{> X^{****}}$	L > D**		
	5.0	3.5	3.6	3.5				
Decreased P's embarrassment	4.9	5.4	2.7	3.4	$\sqrt{> X^*}$	L > D**		
	4.0	2.5	3.5	2.3				
<b>P reaffirmed friendship (+)</b>								
Showed friendship to be important	6.5	5.9	5.3	5.2	$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D**		
	3.2	4.0	3.2	2.8				
Decreased R's embarrassment	4.9	5.2	5.0	4.3	$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$			
	3.2	3.3	2.9	3.0				
Showed P able to handle it	6.3	5.6	4.6	5.2	$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D***		
	4.6	4.0	3.4	3.4				
Decreased P's embarrassment	4.8	5.1	3.6	3.8	$\sqrt{> X^{**}}$			
	4.0	2.3	4.0	3.6				

	Means				Main Effects F(1, 90)		
	$\sqrt{LR}$ XLR	$\sqrt{LP}$ XLP	$\sqrt{DR}$ XDR	$\sqrt{DP}$ XDP	$\sqrt{vs. X}$ p	L vs. D p	P vs. R p
<b>Behavior and Conditions</b>							
<b>R acknowledged situation OK (+)</b>							
Shown R able to handle it	Subsequent means available upon request.				$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D**	R > P****
Decreased P's embarrassment					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D***	
Shown friendship to be important					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D***	R > P****
Decreased R's embarrassment					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$		
<b>P acknowledged situation OK (+)</b>							
Shown P able to handle it					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D**	
Shown friendship to be important					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D*****	
Decreased R's awkwardness					$\sqrt{> X^{***}}$	L > D*	
<b>R tried to return to earlier contact patterns (+)</b>							
Shown friendship to be important					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D*****	
Shown R able to handle it					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D*****	
Decreased P's discomfort					$\sqrt{> X^*}$	L > D**	R > P**

(Continued)

Table 4.3 (Continued)

	Means				Main Effects F(1, 90)		
	$\sqrt{LR}$ XLR	$\sqrt{LP}$ XLP	$\sqrt{DR}$ XDR	$\sqrt{DP}$ XDP	$\sqrt{\text{vs. X}}$ P	L vs. D P	P vs. R P
<i>Behavior and Conditions</i>							
<b>P tried to return to earlier contact patterns (+)</b>							
Shown friendship to be important					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$		
Decreased R's discomfort					$\sqrt{> X^{****}}$	L > D**	
Shown P able to handle it					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$		
Decreased P's discomfort					$\sqrt{> X^{**}}$	L > D*	
<b>R dropped mention of asymmetry (+)</b>							
Reduced pressure felt by P					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D**	R > P*
Shown R able to handle it					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$	L > D**	
Shown friendship to be important					$\sqrt{> X^{***}}$	L > D**	
<b>R complained of asymmetry (-)</b>							
Shown R unable to handle it					X > $\sqrt{*****}$	D > L****	P > R*****
Increased pressure felt by P					X > $\sqrt{*****}$	D > L**	
<b>R avoided contact (-)</b>							
Shown friendship to be unimportant					X > $\sqrt{*****}$	D > L*****	
Shown R unable to handle it					X > $\sqrt{*****}$	D > L****	P > R****



	Means				Main Effects F(1, 90)		
	$\sqrt{LR}$ XLR	$\sqrt{LP}$ XLP	$\sqrt{DR}$ XDR	$\sqrt{DP}$ XDP	$\sqrt{vs. X}$ p	L vs. D p	P vs. R p
<i>Behavior and Conditions</i>							
<b>P avoided contact (-)</b>							
Showed friendship to be unimportant					X > $\sqrt{L^{*****}}$	D > L <sup>*****</sup>	
Showed P unable to handle it					X > $\sqrt{L^{*****}}$	D > L <sup>**</sup>	
Increased R's embarrassment					X > $\sqrt{L^{**}}$	D > L <sup>*****</sup>	
<b>P acknowledged R justified to expect symmetry (+)</b>							
Reduced R's discomfort					$\sqrt{D} > X^{***}$	D > L <sup>*</sup>	
<b>P suggested future symmetry (-)</b>							
Increased R's discomfort					$\sqrt{D} > X^{*****}$	D > L <sup>**</sup>	
Made it hard for R to return to friendship					X > $\sqrt{L^{*****}}$	D > L <sup>*</sup>	
<b>P's reason for rejection was new romantic target (-)</b>							
Made friendship less genuine					X > $\sqrt{L^{*****}}$	D > L <sup>*****</sup>	
Showed friendship to be unimportant					X > $\sqrt{L^{**}}$	D > L <sup>**</sup>	
<b>P told friends about episode (-)</b>							
Increased R's embarrassment					X > $\sqrt{L^{*****}}$	D > L <sup>*</sup>	
Made it harder for R to deal with episode					X > $\sqrt{L^{*****}}$		
Showed friendship to be unimportant					X > $\sqrt{L^{*****}}$	D > L <sup>***</sup>	

(Continued)

Table 4.3 (Continued)

	Means				Main Effects <i>F</i> (1, 90)		
	$\sqrt{LR}$ <i>XLR</i>	$\sqrt{LP}$ <i>XLP</i>	$\sqrt{DR}$ <i>XDR</i>	$\sqrt{DP}$ <i>XDP</i>	$\sqrt{vs. X}$ <i>p</i>	<i>L vs. D</i> <i>p</i>	<i>P vs. R</i> <i>p</i>
<i>Behavior and Conditions</i>							
R accepted P's romantic interest in others (+)							
Reduced P's perceived pressure					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$		
Showed friendship to be important					$\sqrt{> X^{**}}$		R > P**
R disclosed subsequent interest in others (+)							
Decreased pressure on P					$\sqrt{> X^{*****}}$		
Showed friendship to be genuine					$\sqrt{> X^{**}}$	L > D*	
P disclosed subsequent interest in others (+)							
Made R feel less "led on"					$\sqrt{> X^{***}}$		
R increased flirtation (-)							
Increased pressure on P					X > $\sqrt{**}$		
P increased flirtation (-)							
Made R feel "led on"					X > $\sqrt{*}$		

NOTE: *p* values provided for significant differences only. A priori alpha = .05; *p* values are for comparison (\*, \*\*, \*\*\*, \*\*\*\*, \*\*\*\*\* = .05, .01, .001, .0001, .00001, respectively). R = romantically inclined partner, P = platonically inclined partner; D = dissolved friendship, L = lasted friendship.  $\sqrt{>}$  "correct" behavior, X = "incorrect" F values, means, and interaction effects available upon request.

Two Table 4.3 curiosities seem worthy of mention, however. One has to do with the behavior whereby the *platonic individual*, in rejecting the romantic attraction, *acknowledges that the partner was justified in having assumed symmetry*. Recall that Part I (e.g., Table 4.2) showed this to be the only behavior of the 19 investigated for which there was no difference in frequency between any main groups or subgroups (having been reported as present by about half the participants in all groups). While the behavior apparently is no more common to lasting friendships than to dissolved friendships, Table 4.3 suggests that it is indeed a “positive” behavior in the sense that it clearly is perceived to reduce the romantic partner’s discomfort when it does occur. A second curious result is observed with the behavior by which the *platonic partner rejects the romantic inclinations while suggesting that he or she may very well develop a romantic attraction at some future time*. Earlier phases of our research suggest this to be a negative behavior (e.g., see Table 4.2), so we would not expect it to manifest or promote positive conditions. Yet Table 4.3 shows that the behavior clearly is perceived to reduce the romantic partner’s discomfort. (This is the only case in the entire Part II analysis, including conditions deleted from Table 4.3, where a negative behavior promoted a desirable condition, or the reverse.) On the other hand, Table 4.3 suggests that this behavior makes it much more difficult for the romantically inclined individual to return to a friendship mode. Thus it appears that the behavior may be accompanied by a short-term gain followed by a long-term loss with respect to its effect on friendship maintenance. Except for these two curious but understandable results, relationships between target behaviors and friendship repair conditions, as summarized by Table 4.3, seem straightforward.

### Supplementary Analyses

The questionnaire included additional items regarding the relationship, recall of the episode, demographics, and so forth, some of which are worth reporting briefly.

Recall that the questionnaire asked the subjects to rate, for each behavior, the role of its presence or absence in determining the fate of the friendship. These data were analyzed as were the other data in Part II (i.e.,  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  ANOVAs). Each of the target behaviors was perceived by at least one subgroup as critical to the fate of the friendship. Means representing the  $\sqrt{X} \times \text{Lasted/Dissolved}$  interactions showed that partners in lasted friendships generally consider it to have been crucial when positive behaviors did occur and when negative behaviors did not. The same was true for partners in dissolved friendships.<sup>6</sup>

Recall that in all parts of the study, participants reported on an episode that occurred within the last 3 years. Our intention with this time window was to allow enough time to have passed to ensure that “lasted” friendships had indeed lasted while not allowing so much time that the behaviors and conditions would be recalled incorrectly. As a crude measure of the latter, the questionnaire

contained two items: (1) *How well do you remember the episode?* (mean response [1–7 Likert scale, 7 = *very well*] was 6.15, with no significant difference between main groups or subgroups) and (2) *How confident are you in the accuracy of your responses to the above questions?* (mean response [1–7 Likert scale, 7 = *very confident*] was 5.98, with no significant difference between main groups or subgroups). Apparently, most participants consider their recollection of the episode to be fresh and consider their memory of the episode to be valid.<sup>7</sup>

## Discussion

This study continues earlier investigation of the relational dilemma whereby a friendship is threatened by one partner's revelation of romantic attraction for the other, followed by the other's rejection of romantic advancement. Having noted that some friendships survive these unrequited attraction episodes, while most do not, our primary question all along has been whether particular behaviors could be identified as likely to contribute to repairing, maintaining, and prolonging the friendship, while other behaviors could be identified as likely to contribute to the dissolution of the friendship. And one of our primary motives all along has been to provide real-life opposite-sex friends with prescriptive guidelines for maintaining the friendship, if that is their preference, in future unrequited-romantic-attraction experiences.

Our earlier research was able to identify friendship maintenance *conditions* that people perceived to be crucial to the fate of their friendships after past unrequited attraction episodes and to generate a set of behaviors that could be hypothesized to facilitate those conditions. But the earlier study fell short of being able to say that "positive" behaviors—those thought to contribute to friendships lasting—were actually more common in friendships that lasted than in those that dissolved (or conversely for "negative" behaviors), because subjects reported via open-ended recall rather than via a priori prompts.

The present study examined these behaviors and behavior/condition relationships as a priori items, testing (a) whether positive and negative behaviors are indeed more common, respectively, within lasting and dissolved friendships, and (b) subjects' impressions of the degree to which particular behaviors are perceived to promote critical friendship repair conditions.

For the most part, the behaviors hypothesized to contribute to an enduring friendship were indeed significantly more common to friendships that lasted than to those that dissolved, while those hypothesized to hurt the friendship were significantly more common in friendships that dissolved. And for the most part, the perceived relationship between behaviors and friendship repair conditions was as had been expected. The clear impression is that when romantic attraction is disclosed and rejected within a friendship, the result is

awkwardness and embarrassment for both partners in virtually all cases, but the eventual fate of the friendship is largely a result of particular behaviors performed by the partners.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Given that part of the difficulty of disclosing one's romantic feelings within an ostensible friendship apparently comes from the absence of scripts with which to maintain the friendship in the event of asymmetry, the study appears to be of pragmatic value in providing prospective guidelines for unrequited-romantic-attraction episodes. That is to say, the findings may be taken as providing a tentative list of do's and don'ts when real-life friends experience these attraction/rejection episodes—a list to be shared via interpersonal communication textbooks, classroom lectures, the popular press, and so forth. While the study's suggested guidelines should not be taken as directly tested prescriptions, they are backed up by strong evidence of their relative presence and perceived consequences in lasting and dissolved friendships.

In particular, the following postepisode behaviors seem to be advisable for *either* partner; that is, they were found to be associated with *lasting* friendships when performed by *either* partner:

1. *Verbal affirmation of the importance of the friendship.* This behavior shows the friendship to be of high priority and also reduces the other partner's embarrassment and awkwardness over the disclosure/rejection episode.

2. *Verbal acknowledgment that one is okay with the disclosure/rejection episode and the friendship/romance asymmetry inherent within it.* This shows that one is able to handle the episode, shows the friendship to be of high priority, and decreases the other partner's embarrassment.

3. *A return to preepisode patterns and routines of social contact (seeing one another, phoning, etc.).* Given the awkwardness of disclosure/rejection episodes, it may be tempting for partners to avoid one another for a while, perhaps not realizing that the other is likely to interpret the avoidance in any of several negative ways (e.g., signaling that the avoidant partner is unable to handle the situation, signaling that the avoidant partner wants to terminate the friendship). The study suggests that timely reestablishment of earlier social contact patterns serves to decrease the other's embarrassment, to demonstrate that the friendship is still valued, and to show one's ability to handle the situation or asymmetry.

4. *Disclosure of one's subsequent interest in others.* When the romantically inclined partner mentions a new interest in someone else, the platonically inclined partner feels relieved of his or her perceived pressure toward symmetry. Apparently, the disclosure confirms a return to the friendship mode, since

such disclosures are known to be common to friends and uncommon to romantic targets. When the platonically inclined partner discloses interest in another, it reduces the romantically inclined partner's feelings of being led on to expect romantic feelings to be developing.

5. *Decrease (or at least no increase) in the preepisode level of flirtation and sexual innuendo.* While a certain degree of sexual frankness, flirtation, and innuendo is reported as one of the particular features of healthy opposite-sex friendships, it appears helpful to the friendship to taper off a bit after an unrequited attraction episode. The earlier levels make the platonically inclined partner feel more pressure toward symmetry and provide the romantically inclined partner with evidence of being led on to expect romantic symmetry.

As for behaviors within the domain of one partner or the other, the following are associated with (i.e., presumably advisable for) lasting friendships:

1. *The romantically inclined partner drops the matter of asymmetry.* While one cannot flip a switch to turn off one's romantic attraction toward another, it apparently helps to turn off one's comments (and perhaps other signs) about the attraction. Doing so reduces pressure felt by the partner, shows that one is able to handle the asymmetry, and validates the importance of the friendship.

2. *The platonically inclined partner acknowledges the other to be justified in having expected his or her romantic feelings to be mutual.* This serves to reduce the partner's discomfort with the disclosure/rejection episode.

3. *The romantically inclined partner accepts the other's new romantic interests.* This reduces the pressure toward symmetry felt by the platonically inclined partner and also shows that the romantically inclined partner values the friendship.

On the other hand, certain behaviors appear to be inadvisable or at least are "negative" behaviors associated with friendships that *dissolve* after unrequited romantic disclosures:

1. *Either partner avoids social contact with the other.* While it is intuitively understandable that the awkwardness and embarrassment of the episode might incline the partners to avoid one another for a while, this behavior apparently carries consequences of implying the friendship to be unimportant, of implying that one is unable to handle the situation, and of increasing embarrassment at least for the romantically inclined partner.

2. *The romantically inclined partner complains about the absence of mutually romantic feelings.* It was implied above that it is unwise to even continue mentioning asymmetry, so it makes sense that actually complaining about it would

exacerbate the negative conditions of showing that one is unable to deal with the situation and of increasing pressure on the partner.

3. *The platonically inclined partner suggests that mutual romantic feelings may develop in the future.* It may seem kind to reject another's romantic interest by suggesting that mutual attraction, while absent at the moment, is not out of the question for the future. Apparently, if the partner recognizes the suggestion as a mere ploy, it increases his or her embarrassment and discomfort; and if he or she believes the suggestion, the assumed potential for romantic symmetry makes it difficult for him or her to return to a friendship mode.

4. *The platonically inclined partner suggests that the romantic feelings cannot be reciprocated because of a new romantic target of his or her own.* While it is common to reject advances of various kinds by stating that one is already interested in someone else, it appears to be a poor rejection strategy within unrequited romance friendships. The information implies the friendship to have been insincere and unimportant, presumably because within true friendships one is expected to disclose one's interest in others.

5. *The platonically inclined partner tells friends about the episode (and the other finds out).* The data suggest that it is quite common—within both friendships that last and those that dissolve—for the platonically inclined partner to tell friends of the disclosure/rejection episode. What distinguishes between lasting and dissolved friendships is not the platonic partner's having told but rather the romantic partner's awareness that friends were told, in which case his or her embarrassment becomes more difficult and the platonic partner's commitment to the friendship seems questionable.

## Conclusion

The standard approach to the study of interpersonal communication strategies and behaviors is to examine variables such as personality, gender, and demographics as causal variables; to examine hypothetical strategies or behavioral choices as an outcome variable; and to ignore the efficacy variable. The present study examined behavior choice as a causal variable; examined efficacy as an outcome variable; and infers, but does not test, generalizability across personality and demographics. And while there is value in both approaches, further attention to the efficacy variable should be welcomed in communication research.

Still, we cannot be certain that the behavior/efficacy associations observed in this study are perfect, of course. To rely on participants' recall does not constitute a direct test of factors influencing the fate of friendships in unrequited romance situations. While true-life male/female friendship partners should welcome the practical advice suggested by the behavior/outcome associations

of this study, we should prefer more direct tests guided by the present observations. For example, an obvious next step would be an intervention study with individuals who are considering disclosing romantic feelings within an existing friendship.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, the study brings us closer to an understanding of why, after unrequited romantic disclosures, some friendships last, while others dissolve. An applied interpretation of the findings provides one of very few available scripts or guidelines to behaviors for handling these situations in ways that are advantageous to the friendship. Sharing these guidelines via lectures, textbooks, and so forth seems likely to reduce the risk of disclosure and to increase the likelihood that friends may maintain their relationship when romantic attraction is not mutual.

## Notes

1. As an example of the exact questionnaire wording (for romantic/lasted in this case): "5.A. Did you try to return quickly to the same frequency and patterns of contact as before the disclosure? [Yes/No.] 5.B. Do you feel that this (your answer to 5.A) played an important role in the fact that the friendship lasted? [1–7 yes/no Likert scale.] 5.C. Do you feel that it (your answer to 5.A) reduced or increased the embarrassment or awkwardness for you? [1–7 increased/decreased Likert scale.] 5.D. Do you feel that it (your answer to 5.A) reduced or increased the embarrassment or awkwardness for your partner? [1–7 increased/decreased Likert scale.] 5.E. Do you feel that it showed whether you were able or unable to 'handle' or 'live with' the situation? [1–7 showed to be able/unable Likert scale.] 5.F. Do you feel that it served to show the importance or unimportance of the friendship? [1–7 showed to be important/unimportant Likert scale.]"

2. Rather than testing all candidate conditions suggested by Motley et al. (2008), only those suggested as primary associates of the behaviors were included. On occasion, we added conditions only remotely suggested by the earlier study and, in a few cases, even "filler" conditions with no apparent a priori link. The inclusion of these less likely associates was primarily to disguise the investigators' predictions so as to reduce subject effects.

3. Multiple ANOVAs appear justified, given evidence that the responses on all 19 behaviors were intercorrelated, as would be expected. Specifically, a  $2 \times 2$  MANOVA on all 19 behaviors combined indicated significant main effect on the outcome variable, Wilk's lambda (22, 73) = .19,  $p < .00001$ , and for the outcome-by-partner interaction, Wilk's lambda (22, 73) = .54,  $p = .0005$ .

4. MANOVAs ( $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ) were performed on the collective conditions for each behavior. A significant main effect ( $p < .0001$ ) on the presence variable was observed in all cases. While collapsing the conditions via MANOVA does not especially inform the primary questions of Part II, the significant main effect does suggest legitimacy for multiple ANOVAs.

5. On the actual questionnaire, these would be the 1 and 7 ends of identically worded scales, of course. The conversion for Table 4.3 is to simplify the presentation via a consistent pattern.



6. Details of these results are available upon request.

7. Responses to additional supplementary questions indicate the following: (a) on average, the episodes on which participants reported had occurred approximately 1.29 years earlier, (b) participants' mean age at the time of the study = 21.04, (c) whereas neither subject sign-up nor screening questionnaires specified male/female friendships for unrequited attraction episodes, all participants' partners were of the opposite gender, and (d) participant *n*'s by gender within the main groups were: romantic/dissolved, male = 13, female = 11; platonic/dissolved, male = 14, female = 11; romantic/lasted, male = 14, female = 10; and platonic/lasted, male = 15, female = 10.

8. For example, participants could be divided into two groups—one receiving "advice" based upon the above predictions and the other receiving placebo information—with the groups compared on friendship maintenance at a later point (eliminating participants who never disclosed and those for whom the partner's feelings were mutual).

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