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Communicative Processes within Relational Termination and its Effects on Face: An Application of Facework Theory

Erica Doherty
SUNY Geneseo

Daniel Stern
SUNY Geneseo

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Erica Doherty & Daniel Stern

Sponsored by Meredith Harrigan

ABSTRACT

Framed by facework theory (Goffman, 1967; Cupach & Metts, 1994), the present study sought to identify the communication processes that emerging adults perceive as face-threatening, as well as understand strategies used to maintain face within the context of a relational termination experience. A data set consisting of six interview transcripts showcased three communication practices that are perceived as face-threatening: a desire for autonomy, differing expectations, and perceived disrespect. Furthermore, three communicative facework strategies were identified: communication regulation, interpersonal management, and selective disclosure. Implications of the findings are discussed and suggestions for future research are provided.

During the process of transitioning to college, students typically experience greater opportunities to form new relationships. This stage of life, which is commonly referred to as emerging adulthood, is a time where new identities are explored and constructed (Arnett, 2000; Kenney, Thadani, Ghaidarov, & LaBrie, 2013). Arnett (2000) states, "a key feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the period of life that offers the most opportunity for identity explorations in the areas of love, work, and worldviews" (p. 473). Specifically, further exploring romantic relationships, whether casual or committed, is common during this period of time (Arnett, 2014; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). As emerging adults begin to form romantic relationships, these relationships are often unstable and ambiguous due to the lack of committed relational experience (Arnett, 2014; Maner & Miller, 2011). Furthermore, because of numerous other responsibilities, such as education and work, more young people intentionally delay their participation in romantic commitment (Arnett, 2000; Kenney et al., 2013). Therefore, it is commonplace for emerging adults to engage in a cycle of romantic relationship formation and termination (Vennum & Fincham, 2011).

The study centers on the relational experiences of emerging adults. More specifically, we sought to understand communicative processes within the context of relational termination and its effects on identity. Relational termination has been defined by scholars as the final stage of interaction prior to physically and psychologically leaving a relationship (Trenholm & Jensen, 2013). This communicative experience can occur through a variety of strategies and techniques. The language the terminator chooses to use and the attitudes they express can result in positive or negative interpretations by the receiver. In addition, these interpretations can be attributed to the terminator or to the receiver. Furthermore, these positive or negative interpretations can either strengthen or weaken one's identity post-termination (Kunkel, Wilson, Olufowote, & Robson, 2003).

Due to the importance of identity exploration during emerging adulthood, further research could assist in understanding the methods and effects of relational termination. In some cases, relational termination has been associated with negative effects such as increases in depression, anxiety, and hostility (Sprecher, 1994; Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley, & Barenbaum,

1997). In other cases, relational termination has been associated with positive effects such as a sense of relief (Kunkel et al., 2003). Additionally, it is important to explore how these contrasting effects are formed based on one's desired sense of self and autonomy.

FACEWORK THEORY

Face refers to a "conception of self that each person displays in particular interactions with others" (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 3). Face can be broken down into two types: positive face or "the desire to be liked and respected by the significant people in our lives," and negative face as "the desire to be free from constraint and imposition" (p. 165).

People strive to achieve both desired identities, however, any interaction can potentially challenge this desire and result in face loss (Tracy, 1990). This jeopardization of one's sense of self is called a *face threat*. Cupach and Metts (1994) divided this concept into two distinct categories: *positive face threats* and *negative face threats*. A positive face threat occurs "when one's fellowship is devalued or one's abilities are questioned" (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 166). On the other hand, a negative face threat occurs when there's an infringement on one's desire to remain autonomous and free from burden (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Specifically, in regards to relational termination: "ending a relationship is perhaps one of the most face-threatening situations we encounter" (Kunkel et al., 2003, p. 386). In order to avoid and manage face threats, one must engage in the process of facework.

Facework is "the communication designed to counteract face threats to self and others" (Goffman, 1967, p. 166). The complexities of facework can be differentiated into four sections: *positive facework, negative facework, preventative facework,* and *corrective facework.* Positive facework is the communicative process that maintains and restores our positive face, whereas negative facework is the communicative process that maintains and restores our negative face (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Facework can take the form of prevention or correction depending on the sequence of events. If one anticipates their face or someone else's face to be threatened, they may engage in preventative facework, which is the process of avoiding or minimizing the loss of face. This type of communication is commonly achieved through tactics such as "avoiding face-threatening topics, changing the subject of conversation when it appears to be moving in a face-threatening direction, and pretending not to notice when something face-threatening has been said or done" (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 166). Meanwhile, if someone has already lost face, they may engage in corrective facework, which is "an effort to repair face damage that has occurred because of a transgression" (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 167). For example, one may engage in corrective facework through avoiding, apologizing, accounts, humor, nonverbal displays of anxiety or discomfort, physical remediation, empathy, and/or support (Cupach & Metts, 1994). When one engages in facework, it is oftentimes a combination of positive or negative facework with preventative or corrective facework. This allows for one to protect their positive or negative face while simultaneously avoiding or remediating the loss of face. According to Cupach and Metts (1994), "facework is integral to managing the challenges and dilemmas of relationships" (p. 169). More specifically, the potential to manage one's own and another's face is key to being a competent interpersonal communicator (Cupach & Metts, 1994).

According to Cupach and Metts (1994), "the management of face is particularly relevant to the formation and erosion of interpersonal relationships" (p. 169). Furthermore, "it seems likely that people's strategic choices are guided and constrained, in part, by the face concerns that they infer from particular relational influence goals" (Kunkel et al., 2003, p. 385). Clearly, when terminating a relationship, one must be aware that their communication, whether carefully or loosely selected, can dramatically impact their own, as well as another's, face. Therefore, facework theory provides a lens that enables us to study the correlation between one's communicative processes used and the effects that these processes have on one's own or another's identity.

The present study centers its attention on two specific aspects of romantic relationships: the communication that takes place during the termination as well as the communication that takes place post-termination. Since there are a variety of ways in which this communicative experience can occur, we are curious how this process is determined by the terminator. In our case, we sought to comprehend the particular

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communication processes emerging adults view as face threatening within the context of a relational termination, and more so, how they manage those communicative processes in order to maintain or correct face post-termination. Aligning with this objective, our research questions are as follow:

> RQ1: What communication-related experiences do college students perceive as face threatening within the context of a relational termination experience?

> RQ2: What facework strategies do participants practice during and following the termination of the relationship that were not present in the relationship?

METHOD

The present study is situated within the interpretative paradigm and, in turn, seeks a rich, detailed understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Consistent with interpretative research, we employed qualitative methods of data collection in order to understand participants' communicative experiences.

Data Collection

The present pilot study centers on relational termination and the communicative experiences associated with it. Out of a total research group of 24 people, six individuals participated in this research: Participants 4, 5, 6, 22, 23, and 24. In order to participate in that study, individuals had to meet the following criteria: (a) be at least 18 years of age; (b) have experienced a "break-up" of a serious romantic relationship which lasted at least six months; (c) ended that relationship at least three months prior to the interview but no longer than five years ago; and (d) ended the relationship between the time they were 17.5 to 25 years old.

Following the approval of SUNY Geneseo's Institutional Review Board, all participants first completed a brief survey about basic background information such as their sex, religion, relationship status, and organizational affiliation. Following the completion of the survey, participants engaged in semi-structured interviews about their perceptions of their relational termination experience and the communicative experiences surrounding it. Questions included: why

did you break up; did the break-up occur during one conversation or over time; would you describe the break up as clean or would you describe it as messy; and have you come to make sense of the relationship and its ending. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. With participant consent, each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim yielding a data set consisting of 58 pages of single-spaced text.

Data Analysis

The researchers performed a collective process of qualitative thematic analysis in which the goal was to identify themes or similarities in experiences throughout the interviews. Themes were generated by an inductive process. The researchers began with an in-depth reading of a subset of transcripts in order to develop an initial list of themes. After this collective process of analysis, the researchers discussed the generated categories and focused on areas of difference in phrasing. The researchers then used the shared list of themes to analyze a second subset of data. Following this collective process, the team collaborated to discuss the effectiveness of the original categories, making adjustments when needed. Then, the researchers used the final list of categories to analyze all six of the resulting transcripts. The researchers followed this same process to answer the second research question. Following this process, the researchers located exemplars to support each finding in the conclusions and to offer a rich description of each finding.

FINDINGS

Our first research question sought to understand the communicative experiences that emerging adults describe as face-threatening within the context of a relational termination. Additionally, through our second research question, we sought to investigate the facework strategies that participants practiced during and following the relational termination that were not present within the relationship. Through the process of qualitative thematic analysis, we identified three communicative experiences that participants described as threatening to their own positive and/or negative face. These are: a desire for autonomy, differing expectations, and perceived disrespect. Furthermore, we identified three facework strategies that participants practiced in order to correct or prevent a loss of face, both for themselves and/or for their

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partner. These are: communicative regulation, interpersonal management, and selective disclosure. We will further elaborate on these processes.

Desire for Autonomy

Participants commonly described their desire for independence as being threatened during their relational termination experiences. In scenarios when participants initiated the breakup, oftentimes their previous partner would attempt to try and maintain a non-romantic relationship, however, this was commonly undesired and perceived as a threat to the participant's independence. For example, Participant 5 explained, "So, he's like, 'We can still be friends,' and I'm like, 'No, no we can't'" (5: 103–104). In other cases, previous partners attempted to reignite the romantic relationship, creating an emotional burden for the participant. For example;

> He texted me and was like, 'I'm sorry I ever broke up with you, like, I miss you and blah, blah, blah.' And at that point, like, he had broken up with me once and I knew, like, I didn't want to get back together with him. (4: 104–106)

As described, individuals wanted to be free from imposition, yet these interactions caused a threat to their negative face. Another participant, who also experienced this negative face threat, noted, "He was always pushing to understand what was going through my mind and sometimes I like to just keep that in my own head" (23: 30–32). Overall participants expressed a common notion of, "I just wanted to move on," (22: 472) which was prevented through these communicative experiences during the course of the termination.

Differing Expectations

A second face-threatening communicative experience that participants identified was differing expectations. These experiences included feelings of uncertainty, deviations from unspoken rules of a relationship, and a lack of reciprocal actions and feelings. Some individuals who felt uncertain when interacting with their previous partner felt unsure of how to express their desired self: a positive face threat. One participant stated, "I never know if I'm going to get a friendly response, ignored, or yelled at for something,

so I feel like I'm still walking on eggshells and we're not even dating" (6: 222–224). This feeling of uncertainty was induced through a lack of clear expectations between the two individuals. Another instance of uncertainty occurred when Participant 24 shared,

> My thing that always tripped me up was how he acted so outgoing and confident and happy outside, but then he would break down to me about his insecurities. It seemed like I was dating two different people, a really cool confidant dude, then a really insecure dude as well. (24: 346–350)

The inconsistent personality of Participant 24's previous partner led to unclear expectations during their relationship, creating an emotional burden: a negative face threat. Similarly, expectations can be misunderstood when the rules of a relationship are not clearly defined, and instead, assumed. Participant 4, who was engaging in a "friends-with-benefits" relationship, experienced a face-threatening situation when their partner broke these unspoken rules. They expressed that, "I thought it was weird that he seemed super upset about it," (4: 297) and further explained that, "It was supposed to be a like a friends-with-benefits thing with no, like, feelings" (4: 300). As described by Participant 4, these unclear expectations led to an unwanted emotional burden: another negative face threat. A lack of communication can lead to differing expectations; in some cases, however, even when expectations were explicitly communicated, face threats occurred when one's actions and feelings were not reciprocated by their partner. One participant explained that they communicated with their partner about their unhappiness in the relationship and wanted to work together to fix it. The participant expressed that their partner, "seemed willing to do that," (6: 88) and went on to disclose that, "I felt that I was trying and they weren't" (6: 89). Due to a lack of reciprocity, a positive face-threatening experience was created because the participant did not feel valued.

Perceived Disrespect

The final face-threatening communicative experience that participants described was perceived disrespect. Through a variety of actions, whether it be

via technology, actions, or words, participants felt that their feelings were no longer valued. Many participants described experiences where their face was threatened on a social media site. For example, Participant 6 recalled, "I was blocked on Snapchat," (6: 212) and Participant 23 stated, "She unfriended me," (23: 370) referring to Facebook. This cessation of connections via social media is a parallel to relational termination. These actions showcase a positive face threat by deflating the participant's sense of desired self. Another participant attempted to abstain from the use of technology and went on to explain, "We were both just waiting 'til we were face to face, cause I wanted to give him a little more respect than a phone call or a text," illustrating the disrespect associated with terminating a relationship by means of technology. However, once the participant's partner made no attempt to talk face-to-face, the participant was forced to resort to a text. Participant 5 described the content of their message along the lines of, "I'm done with this. I don't want to do this any longer" (5: 94). Although the participant tried to terminate the relationship in a respectful manner, they were forced to resort to technology when their partner did not value the participant's request. This interaction is an example of a positive face-threatening communicative experience, because the participant felt that they were no longer appreciated.

Other participants perceived a similar sense of disrespect through their partner's behavior. When describing their relational termination experience, Participant 23 stated, "I wish he didn't stay as long as he did because then you're just marinating in the fact that you broke up and he's still sitting there, like, 'get out of my face please'" (23: 147–149). In this scenario, a positive face threat occurred when the participant's partner failed to respect their emotional space. A similar face threat was experienced by participants who were not directly interacting with their previous partner, but rather, were interacting with others while their previous partner was present. Participant 6 expressed, "If I'm showing interest in someone else, they will purposely lurk around and make both of us feel uncomfortable" (6: 230–232). Additionally, sexual interactions between an individual's partner and another leads to perceived disrespect. For example, one participant expressed anger and sadness when disclosing, "It probably was a slightly emotionally abusive relationship," (5: 27) and went on to state, "I found out after we broke up that he was potentially cheating" (5: 248–249). Furthermore, invading one's privacy also leads to perceived disrespect. After the relational termination occurred, Participant 22 explained how their previous partner continued to maintain connection with their Aunt, who the previous partner often confided in. Their previous partner frequently visited the participant's house unbeknownst to them. Participant 22 stated, "My aunt would tell me sometimes, like, even if I had no idea that she came to my house" (22: 401–402). Due to a disrespect of privacy, space, and autonomy, this experience is both positive face-threatening as well as negative face-threatening.

Finally, a perception of disrespect can stem from verbal interactions. The interaction between Participant 5 and their partner highlights this face threat. While conversing with their partner, their partner made the claim that, "I've been wanting to break up for months" (5: 221–212). This was immediately received as a positive face threat by the participant, who went on to say, "I think he was avoiding the break up. So, in my opinion, that's violating me, kinda, because it's like, you should give me that respect to not to drag it out" (5: 209–210). Here, the perception of disrespect was rooted in the hidden feelings that were disclosed by the participant's partner.

Interpersonal Management

Our second research question sought to understand the facework strategies that participants practice during and following the termination of the relationship, that were not present in the relationship. The first facework strategy that was used during and/or after the relational termination was identified by researchers as interpersonal management. Interpersonal management can be described as the process of working towards the desired relationship post-termination to either prevent or correct a loss of face. Individuals commonly engaged in two forms of management: total termination and connection maintenance.

Total termination.

When participants engaged in total termination, they desired complete separation, both physically and verbally, from their previous partner. This occurred before or after the loss of face, and was due

to a desire for autonomy, respect, and freedom from emotional burden. The degrees of total termination were expressed by participants in a variety of ways. Some individuals carried negative emotions and anger behind their total terminational experiences. In order to mask their feelings, Participant 23 expressed, "I just cut off complete communication; we just didn't talk at all," (23: 228–230) preventing the loss of negative face. When Participant 5's previous partner expressed interest in continuing a friendship, they replied, "No, no, we can't," and went on to explain, "I didn't want to be near him. I didn't wanna be in school with him. I didn't want anything to do with him. We were broken up. We were done" (5: 115–116). The participant expressed a fear of losing positive face again if the relationship were to continue, exemplifying preventative facework. Other participants who engaged in total termination did so in a passive manner and associated this experience with feelings of acceptance. One participant verbalized a desire to move on, stating, "I kind of just went on my merry way" (23: 109). This demonstrates a corrective facework strategy because the individual regained their positive face by spending time with family and friends. Another participant conveyed a similar desire to physically separate by saying, "I think it was good for me to take my mind off that. I think it was also good for her to take her mind off that. You know, just do other things" (22: 382–383). This resulting satisfaction from separation can be labeled as a corrective facework strategy due to the attempt to repair their positive face. Lastly, when an individual emotionally accepts the relational termination, they gain the ability to self-rely without any need for their previous partner. In regards to their partner, Participant 23 expressed, "he became irrelevant," (23: 239) representing their self-reliance following their breakup. This autonomous attitude is indicative of corrective facework to their negative face.

Connection maintenance.

On the other hand, some participants engaged in the process of maintaining connection with their previous partner through a multitude of ways. While some individuals maintained connection through providing emotional support, others continued to engage in a friendly, non-sexual relationship. During the termination, Participant 4 explained how their partner engaged in preventative-positive facework by stating,

"He said that, like, in the future, like, if I ever needed to talk about it, he would be there to talk about it," (4: 128–129) to prevent the loss of their desired sense of self. Rather than engaging in connection maintenance during the time of the relational termination, other participants expressed connection maintenance occurring post termination: corrective facework. One participant explained how they reached out to their previous partner via text to emotionally support them, saying, "There would be times where I would be like, 'Hey, how are you doing?' You know, like making sure everything was alright with you" (22: 233–234). Even participants who did not normally interact with their partner post-termination provided emotional assistance if their previous partner was in need. Participant 5 described a time when their previous partner appeared physically unwell and demonstrated corrective facework when explaining, "I did stop and ask like, 'Are you alright? Do you need anything?' And he's like, 'Yup, I'm fine. I'm good.' End of interaction. I was nice; I was the bigger person; I made sure he wasn't dying" (5: 295–299).

An alternative connection that individuals participate in is maintaining a friendly, non-sexual relationship. These relationships involve basic communication, friendly meet-ups, and sometimes a renewal of friendship. Due to the bolstering of positive face following the termination, these strategies exemplify corrective facework. For example, Participant 23 exemplified basic communication when they explained, "If he posts something like pictures or whatever we'll like each other's pictures," (23: 194–195) whereas Participant 24 engaged in a friendly meet-up when they stated, "When we go home for the holidays, we'll meet up for a coffee and catch up; see what's going on in each other's lives" (24: 180–181). Meanwhile, some individuals expressed a renewal of a friendship. Participant 23 went on to explain,

> Everyone will go through that, 'Oh, we broke up' stage, but it wasn't too horrible where I was miserable for forever. It was a couple days and I was like, 'you know what, it was for the best.' After–near the end of the summer, we were kind of just talking again. (23: 72–75)

Evidently, individuals manage their interpersonal connections with their previous partners, through

total termination and connection maintenance, to prevent or correct their loss of face.

Communication Regulation

The second facework strategy that was implemented throughout the context of the relational termination was identified by researchers as communication regulation. Communication regulation can be described as the process of controlling verbal and nonverbal interactions between participants and their previous partners to prevent and/or correct the loss of face. Individuals commonly engaged in two forms of regulation: technological and interaction.

Technological. When participants engaged in regulation through technology, they often used passive-aggressive behaviors to protect and/or bolster their positive or negative face. Some participants posted on social media to implicitly express their emotions. In hopes of eliciting a reaction from their previous partner, Participant 4 posted a collection of photos on Instagram that were "a little bit, um, ambiguous I guess" (4: 229–230) and further explained,

> I said something like 'step one to feeling better or, like, dealing with sadness' and it was, like, cuddling with my cat. And then, I don't know if that was the first one but I also posted one with M&Ms with a blue M&M and I was like 'blue.' And so, I was, like, kind of hinting at the fact that I was sad. (4: 233–236)

Similarly, Participant 5 "was discreet about it" (5: 262) and stated,

> I posted a nice little selfie. It had some Ariana Grande lyrics…I don't remember the exact lyrics…I could probably go find them…. It was a nice little selfie about being single, and there were some Ariana Grande lyrics, and I looked absolutely fantastic in the photo. (5: 255–257)

They went on to elaborate on their intent with the photo and said, " It's kinda like a nonchalant, like… 'yeah, I'm single. Don't talk to me, but I'm single'" (5: 258–259). These actions demonstrate corrective-positive facework because the participants are mending the loss of their desired sense of self.

Other individuals illustrated an avoidance of social media to protect and/or repair the loss of their positive face. When speaking about their usage of Instagram, Participant 24 stated, "For a while I didn't want to look at his pictures; I thought he may post something that would make me sad" (24: 305–306). Analogously, Participant 5 terminated their connection with their previous partner via social media when they explained, "I definitely deleted him off of Snapchat, or blocked him…one of the two" (5: 302–303). Some participants refrained from using social media as a whole, such as Participant 22, who expressed, "I remember not going on social media or anything for a while and instead I just hung out with my friends" (22: 322–323). On the contrary, another participant partook in the use of social media to renew their positive face through new connections when they said they "went on Tinder, had fun with that" (23: 217).

A final instance of avoidance occurs when an individual will "hide behind technology" (5: 181). This act of "putting the screen between you" (4: 192) was represented when Participant 5 allowed their friends to terminate their relationship via text in order to prevent a positive face threat, therefore, engaging in preventative facework. Participant 5 justified this behavior when they expressed it was "kind of like, putting the blame on somebody else; not taking responsibility" (5: 382).

Interaction. When participants engaged in regulation through interaction, they used facework strategies that were either reciprocated or one-sided in order to prevent or correct the loss of positive or negative face. In terms of reciprocation, one participant "tried to work through it" (22: 194) after experiencing an argument, or a threat to their positive face. They continued to explain, "She couldn't handle it and stuff like that, and then other times I would be like, 'hey, I can't handle this,' and then it progressed to the point where we were like, 'hey, we both can't deal with this,'" (22: 131–133) and finally, "came to a mutual agreement…[that] it was probably best" (22: 103–104) to move on. Due to the desire for autonomy and freedom from emotional burden, this participant practiced corrective-negative facework. Another reciprocal interaction was highlighted by Participant 24 when they began to engage in sexual behavior with their partner, but had not previously defined their relationship. Immediately prior to this activity, they

asked, "'What are we even doing? Am I your girlfriend?'" (24: 243). The individual continued to say, "I literally said that, and he was like 'Yeah, you can be my girlfriend.' And then I actually said, 'Okay, we can make out now' (24: 243–245). Through engaging in this communication, Participant 24 avoided a potential face threat by defining "what we were," (24: 246–247): a preventative facework strategy.

Other participants regulated their relational termination through a one-sided, verbal interaction. Participant 24 expressed, "I wasn't gonna let myself be hurt by the fact that he still didn't want me as much as I wanted him" (24: 215–216). Due to a lack of reciprocation, Participant 24 was forced to use one-sided communication and express cold feelings to their partner about the relationship ending. This strategy is an example of preventative-negative facework because the participant was avoiding losing negative face, or acquiring an emotional burden. Another participant verbalized negative feelings during the relational termination in a one-sided manner when they stated that they "expressed feelings of being unhappy and unsatisfied multiple times in hope that something would change" (6: 51–52). When things did not change, they were again forced to engage in one-sided communication and "initiated it," (6: 51) referring to the breakup. In this case, the individual partook in preventative-positive facework when they communicated that they were unhappy to prevent the loss of positive face, and engaged in corrective-positive facework when they initiated the breakup to repair the loss of positive face. Lastly, other participants did not even mutually attempt to fix their relationship problems with their partner, but instead immediately communicated in a one-sided fashion. For example, Participant 5 explained, "It was just to get my point across that 'you're not good for me, so I'm leaving'" (5: 98–99). This attempt to repair their positive face exemplifies corrective-positive facework.

Selective Disclosure

The final facework strategy that was used during and/or after the relational termination was identified by researchers as selective disclosure. Selective disclosure can be described as the process of choosing which information to share and with whom to share it in order to prevent or correct the loss of face. Participants used selective disclosure when sharing feelings and emotions with their previous partner throughout the context of the relational termination as well as when revealing their feelings and emotions with friends and family post-termination. Some participants chose to be very selective with the feelings and emotions they shared with their partners in an effort to prevent a loss of face. For example, one participant experienced negative feelings towards the strength of their relationship, however, used selective disclosure to delay the potential relational termination. They stated, "I kind of just kept dating him because I didn't think it was a strong enough reason to break up" (4: 320–321). Participant 6 engaged in selective disclosure during the relational termination when they expressed, "I had kept some of my more intense emotions to myself to kind of, I guess, protect my own self-esteem during the break up" (6: 254–255). Furthermore, Participant 6 continued to withhold their feelings towards their partner when they explained, "Obviously I was in love with the other person but I never said it because I knew the feeling wouldn't be reciprocated" (6: 97–98). These are all examples of preventative-positive facework because the individuals were preventing the loss of their positive face, or the self that desires to be liked and valued. A final example of participants engaging in selective disclosure with their partner occurred post-termination. Participant 24 also used preventative-positive facework when they chose to hide their negative emotions following their breakup and said, "I pretended to play it cool" (24: 116). They went on to explain the reasoning behind this by saying, "I didn't want this to linger over my head for the next four years" (24: 117).

Selective disclosure was also present during conversations with friends and family regarding the relational termination. Some individuals used selective disclosure to avoid providing too many details to conceal private information and emotions. Participant 6 described this strategy when they said, "I don't want to embarrass my ex in any way, so I tend to not disclose a ton" (6: 256–257). Similarly, another participant purposely chose not to disclose and explained, "I was probably embarrassed by it and I didn't know how to handle it" (24: 355–356). Moreover, Participant 22 did not choose to fully disclose and shared, "I kind of left a lot of things out when explaining it. Just like, yeah, we broke up, and they would ask why and I was just like, just because it happened" (22:

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457–459). Likewise, another participant explained, "I didn't tell anyone anything happened until it came up in conversation" (23: 234). Strategies of this nature represent preventative-positive facework because of the participants' decisions to not disclose in order to protect their positive face. On the other hand, Participant 4 chose to disclose information about their relational termination to their mother, yet refrained from disclosing their lingering romantic feelings. They justified this decision when they expressed, "I feel like if I told her that I still had feelings for him she'd be like 'well, that's stupid, why would you have feelings for somebody that just talked to you like this and broke up with you?'" (4: 349–351). Due to the potential for their sense of self being violated, this behavior exemplifies preventative-positive facework. Finally, Participant 22 engaged in selective disclosure immediately following their relational termination, explaining that "it was a little bit about keeping it between us" (22: 471). After time had passed, they accepted what had happened and became comfortable enough to broaden their scope of disclosure and went on to say, "That was before, now I can talk about it" (22: 472–473). This corrective-negative facework strategy allowed Participant 22 to pursue their desire for autonomy.

As described, the present study discovered three experiences that participants describe as face threatening within the context of a relational termination, as well as three facework strategies that participants practiced during and following the relational termination that were not present within the relationship. Face threatening experiences involved a desire for autonomy, differing expectations, and perceived disrespect, whereas facework strategies included communicative regulation, interpersonal management, and selective disclosure. In the following section we discuss potential implications of these findings and suggestions for future relational-termination research.

Discussion

The present study sought to understand the following research questions: to understand the communicative experiences that emerging adults describe as face-threatening within the context of a relational termination and to investigate the facework strategies that participants practiced during and following the relational termination that were not present

within the relationship. The three experiences that participants described as face threatening within the context of a relational termination were identified as a desire for autonomy, differing expectations, and perceived disrespect. On the other hand, the three facework strategies that participants practiced during and following the relational termination that were not present within the relationship, were identified as communicative regulation, interpersonal management, and selective disclosure.

We can conclude that emerging adults vary in choosing to self-disclose or not. Furthermore, when self-disclosure occurred, the quantity and quality of information shared ranged widely. Current findings support Peter, Valkenburg, and Schouten's (2005) argument that "because of their greater social skills, extroverted adolescents also self-disclose and interact more easily with others" (p. 428). In other words, participants who chose to self-disclose about their relational termination experience appeared to be extroverted individuals, whereas those who chose not to self-disclose about their relational termination experience appeared to be introverted individuals. In turn, future scholars might seek to understand the correlation between personality traits and level of self-disclosure.

Additionally, the present study concluded that emerging adults make sense of their relationships ending through feelings of acceptance and/or alleviation. Therefore, this finding supports the argument made by Kunkel et al. (2003) that relational termination has been associated with positive effects, such as a sense of relief. Interestingly, Fox and Tokunaga (2015) found that "individuals most traumatized by a breakup are most likely to monitor their ex-partners online" (p. 495). Based on the interpretation of the data collected, there was no display of traumatization amongst the participants. Given the fact that this was a pilot study and involved a small sample size, we suggest that future researchers go into a deeper analysis of the present study. However, future researchers should interview participants within one month after the relational termination occurred in order to find a relationship between relational termination and traumatization.

Furthermore, the findings in the current study identified feelings of discomfort and/or awkward-

ness when participants were in the presence of their previous relational partner. More specifically, these negative feelings were the result of relational termination experiences that were not mutual: either the participant initiated the relational termination or the participant's previous partner initiated the relational termination. This supports the argument made by Sprecher (1994) that relational termination has been associated with negative effects such as increases in depression, anxiety, and hostility. Future researchers would benefit from studying these non-mutual relational termination experiences by investigating the relationship between face-threatening behaviors and negative psychological emotions post-termination. Narrowing the sample of participants would allow researchers to find richer data that would provide more practical implications.

Also, it is potentially important to understand the analysis of relational termination experiences amongst divorced couples due to the probable severity of face-threat experiences and facework strategies. Additionally, due to the continuing evolution of social media, and updated study on the use of technology following a relational termination experience should be conducted.

Overall, these connections to the literature contribute to an increased awareness and practical application of relational termination. Again, emerging adulthood is defined by Arnett (2000) as a time for, "identity explorations in the areas of love, work, and worldviews" (p.473). Furthermore, these relationships frequently lack stability and clarity as a result of relational inexperience (Arnett, 2014; Maner & Miller, 2011). Therefore, emerging adults would benefit the most from becoming more aware of the common experiences surrounding a relational termination.

First, it is important for those who have initiated a relational termination to understand that their previous partner will have a desire to be independent post-termination. For example, these individuals should withhold from communicating with their previous partner immediately following the termination to give them time to begin to accept the end of the relationship. Failure to adhere to this suggestion commonly resulted in an emotional burden being placed on the previous partner. Further, emerging adults would also benefit from learning about the

importance of clear communication when engaging in a romantic relationship. Clear communication involves setting rules and defining the meaning of the relationship in order to prevent future misconceptions of one another's expectations. Student Care Services on a college campus could support a leadership workshop series on interpersonal relationships. Particularly, one that provides detailed information about clear communication within romantic relationships as well as post-terminational recommendations. A specific worksheet providing basic steps to take after a relational termination could be supplied to those who attend (see Appendix for an example of this worksheet).

Second, emerging adults commonly feel a sense of loneliness following a relational termination experience. It is essential for individuals going through this difficult time to understand that they are not alone and engage with others who are currently experiencing, or have experienced, a relational termination. Counseling centers on a college campus can facilitate support groups for individuals who need additional guidance. This service can reach a large portion of college-age students through fliers posted on bulletin boards in college unions, academic buildings, and residence halls. More specifically, Resident Assistants can be made aware of this service and provide more details to students who confide in them for help.

Finally, when emerging adults decided to self-disclose about their relational termination, they often did so with close friends and family members. It would be beneficial for the recipients of this private information to understand how to best empathize and support those experiencing a relational termination. Faculty members of the Communication and Psychology departments could supply a flier on how to best handle a relational termination based on evidence from scholarly sources. These fliers could then be distributed to incoming students and their families through the folder materials they receive at new-student orientation.

In conclusion, the present study outlined three communicative experiences that emerging adults describe as face-threatening within the context of a relational termination, as well as three facework strategies that participants practiced in order to correct or prevent a loss of face both for themselves and/or for their

partner. We can conclude that the decision to self-disclose information about the relational termination varied across participants. Additionally, while some individuals felt a sense of relief and/or acceptance following a relational termination, others felt a sense of discomfort and/or awkwardness. To maintain and/or correct their own and their partner's face in this relational context, individuals should cease from communicating with their previous partner in an attempt to rebuild autonomy.

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