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Neill Korobov and Avril Thorne  
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## The Negotiation of Compulsory Romance in Young Women Friends' Stories about Romantic Heterosexual Experiences

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*For young women in western cultures, satisfying the dictates of traditional romantic norms while sustaining intimacy with same-sex friends and a sovereign sense of self can be daunting. The present study explored how 23 pairs of young adult, white female friends (ages 19–25) attending a public university in Northern California positioned themselves vis-à-vis norms of compulsory romance as they told spontaneous stories about their own and others' experiences. While their story discourse generally oscillated between complicity and resistance to the compulsory romantic interpretative repertoires of 'sentimentality', 'unrequited pursuit' and 'emotional caretaking', such complicity and resistance was often mitigated, qualified or displaced. The findings suggest that for these young women, complicit and resistant positions to repertoires of compulsory romance are synergistic. Implications are discussed for a view of identity development as growth in ideological dexterity and rhetorical fluency.*

**Key Words:** *compulsory romance, discourse, interpretative repertoires, narrative, romantic relationships, young women*

The development of romantic relationships is widely believed to be a central developmental task during adolescence and young adulthood (Brown, 1999; Connolly and Johnson, 1996). Researchers increasingly view romantic relations not just as dyadic experiences between isolated couples, but as social affairs, especially during the pre-adult years (Brown, 1999). Friends, in particular, not only supply a steady stream of influence, but friendships also double as the everyday contexts in which an understanding of romantic experiences develop. These friendships are often sustained insofar as romance is the topic *du jour*, a fact particularly apt for adolescent girls (Griffin, 2000; Hey, 1997; Simon et al., 1992).

Developmental research has shown that premature or excessive forays into

heterosexual romance by early adolescent heterosexual girls predict problems (e.g. depression, anxiety, eating disorders) for young adult women's psychological and social development (Hartup, 1993; Jackson, 2001; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002). These problems are fundamentally relational in nature and are profoundly shaped by broader social and cultural ideologies. Dating norms and cultural scripts in which women are positioned as passive, needy and compliant become increasingly salient in middle adolescent girls' social interactions (Griffin, 2000; Hey, 1997; Jackson, 2005). This trend led Feiring (1999) to argue that negotiations of heterosexual romantic experiences among same-sex heterosexual friends may be a vital domain where gendered norms are vigorously reinforced. In concert with Feiring, this study is based on the premise that young heterosexual women negotiate their romantic experiences within the context of close friendships with each other, and that such *social interactions* are vital sites where heterosexual romantic identities develop.

#### COMPULSORY ROMANCE AND HETEROSEXUAL FEMININITY

The present study takes a developmental and a critical-discursive approach to explore how heterosexual romantic identities are socialized within storied conversations about dating and romance. In particular, we are interested in how young women discursively negotiate heterosexual 'compulsory romance' (Simon et al., 1992; Tolman, 2002) during their transition to adulthood. The term 'compulsory romance' refers to a broad range of gender-related expectations and cultural norms that white adolescent young women are believed to grapple with during their indoctrination into the ideology of western heterosexual romance (Burns, 2000; Fine, 1988; Kirkman et al., 1998; Phillips, 2000; Thompson, 1995; Tolman and Porche, 2002). The ideology of heterosexual compulsory romance is inexorably linked to the idea of traditional heterosexual romance narratives (see Jackson, 2001) and, as such, is best understood as a trope through which heterosexuality is naturalized, while other forms of sexuality are pathologized. Compulsory heterosexuality is a pervasive sociopolitical institution that mandates heterosexuality as normative (Rich, 1983). In western cultures, compulsory heterosexuality typically prescribes compulsory romance as the *sine qua non* romantic orientation, especially for white middle-class adolescent women (Fine, 1988; Griffin, 2000; Jackson, 2005; Tolman and Porche, 2002).

Feminist researchers have increasingly drawn attention to the ways that female friendship groups cultivate climates of compulsory heterosexuality where traditional romance narratives are both reproduced and resisted at the level of practice (Griffin, 2000; Hey, 1997; Jackson, 2001, 2005; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). Sue Jackson (2001) has discussed how the press for passivity and submissiveness inherent in the traditional romance narrative can create vulnerability to abuse. When abuse does occur, young women may encourage one another to endure it, ameliorate it through increased affection and love, or else resist it and potential-

ly end the relationship (Jackson, 2001). Similarly, research has shown how dilemmas arise interpersonally in the negotiation of traditional romance narratives. Such narratives may encourage young women to work to disavow certain identity categories such as 'victim', 'single' or 'slag' (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003), while at the same time attempting to expose abuse or enjoy a range of romantic and sexual experiences simply because they want to (Jackson, 2001; Tolman, 2002). Like the adoption of femininity, acquiescence or resistance to heterosexual romantic norms is always at best shaky and partial (Walkerline, 1990). Whether casually reproduced or strategically resisted, the central idea is that female friendship groups are ripe sites where compulsory heterosexual romantic norms are vigorously negotiated.

Compulsory heterosexual romantic norms can be invoked in a number of ways. For heterosexual young women, such norms may be invoked by talk about an active or unremitting desire to have a boyfriend or to be the object of boy's attention and affection (Bartky, 1990; Phillips, 2000). Whereas being 'single' tends to be constructed as a troubled identity category (see Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003), having a boyfriend and garnering male attention often validates a young woman's attractiveness, which tends to confer social status and popularity (Tolman, 2002). Complicity with compulsory heterosexual romance may also entail the pressure to manufacture romantic feelings, which can be both emotionally taxing and self-alienating (Bartky, 1990; Tolman, 2002). Conversely, compulsory romance may require young women to mitigate their romantic unhappiness, since success in romantic endeavors tends to be taken as a measure of women's social worth (Fine, 1988; Hey, 1997; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Tolman, 2002). Women who adhere to compulsory heterosexual romantic norms may also feel pressure to acquiesce to what Connell (1987) calls 'emphasized femininity' – a range of feminine norms (sociability, passivity, sexual receptivity) that encourage women to accommodate men's 'needs' for sex, sexually attractive female bodies, power or control. Another ingredient is a kind of 'love conquers all' sentimentality (Lawes, 1999; Phillips, 2000; Rich, 1983), as seen in women's idealized accounts of wanting to find their soul mates, of wanting to be courted or treated chivalrously, of enjoying wedding pageantry and the trappings of forever-and-ever love.

Satisfying the dictates of compulsory heterosexual romance while maintaining both intimacy with same-sex friends and a sovereign sense of self can be daunting (Fine, 1988; Griffin, 2000; Tolman, 2002). On the one hand, orienting to compulsory heterosexual romance usually confers status and popularity with like-minded young women, which in turn can promote social status symmetry and a feeling of being in-sync with each other's experiences. Desirability and social status is thus reaffirmed with respect to other young women. This may enhance a feeling of closeness, so long as these young women's desirability status remains relatively commensurate. On the other hand, young women who are excessively invested in compulsory heterosexual romantic norms, either by appearing consumed with being in love or by attracting too much attention from

males, are open to criticism from friends for being obsessive or indiscriminate (Hey, 1997; Jackson, 2005). Because compulsory heterosexual romantic norms construct women as objects of the male gaze and commodities on the heterosexual market (Bartky, 1990; Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002), complicity may create competition, jealousy and loyalty wars between female friends. Competition may foster mistrust, causing some girls to police each other's romantic endeavors. Forms of surveillance may be overt during early adolescence, but may become increasingly subtle and inoculated against easy detection or challenges during late adolescence and early adulthood (see Korobov and Thorne, 2006).

### EMERGING ADULTS

The developmental focus of the present study is on how 'emerging adult' heterosexual female friends discursively invoke compulsory romantic norms while telling stories about romantic experiences during casual conversations. Within US culture, 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2004) has gained popularity as a historically recent and distinct period of developmental transition between late adolescence and adulthood, when young people often no longer live at home as prototypical adolescents, but are not yet fully immersed in adult responsibilities. It is distinctive as a period of heightened exploration, instability and social versatility, where being in limbo is both exciting and daunting. Although research has documented the ways adolescent girls are capable of resisting conventional feminine ideologies (Brown, 1998; Tolman, 2002), this resistance tends to be piecemeal and most common among adolescent working-class and ethnic minority girls (Robinson and Ward, 1991; Taylor et al., 1995). Far less is known about the processes of transacting compliance and resistance during the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Some feminist theorists (Butler, 1990; Heilburn, 1988) suggest that adult women develop an 'oppositional gaze' (see hooks, 1993), or a critical way of observing the world that opposes stifling aspects of gender ideologies. Little is known, however, about how these processes develop collaboratively as young women transition from adolescence to adulthood. One powerful clue follows from research that shows that close friendships between young women can serve to counter the pull of compulsory heterosexual norms (Hey, 1997; Simon et al., 1992; Taylor et al., 1995; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002), particularly when these friendships deepen, as they often do during the college years. As such, we opted to explore the negotiation of compulsory romance between emerging women friends.

## A DISCURSIVE-NARRATIVE APPROACH

Our focus is not strictly a narrative analysis, but a critical discursive analysis of 'small stories' that tend to arise during mundane conversations (see Korobov and Thorne, 2006, 2007; Moissinac and Bamberg, 2005; Ochs and Capps, 2001). Like Wendy Hollway's (1989) analysis of the 'discourses' that people draw on to position themselves with regard to their heterosexual relationships, our analysis is similarly interested in tracking how 'discourses' or cultural resources are flexibly used, resisted and revised by participants in the exchange of small stories.

We thus construe compulsory romance as comprised of *interpretative repertoires* that are partly co-opted from a cultural lexicon and partly improvised upon during interaction, and which function to accomplish some social business that the participants deem relevant (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). An interpretative repertoire (see Edley, 2001 for extended discussion) is a 'recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions, and evaluations found in people's talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes, and tropes' (Seymour-Smith et al., 2002: 255). Our aim is to catalogue and discursively identify some regular and pervasive interpretative repertoires that young women friends co-opt and construct to occasion compulsory romance. In concert with critical discursive psychology (Wetherell, 1998), our discursive analysis will be relatively global in nature, and we will focus on the identity-positioning work displayed in female friends' discourse. As developmental psychologists, we also consider the implications of this positioning work for young women's development with respect to romance.

## THE STUDY

*Participants*

The initial sample consisted of 23 pairs of female friends between the ages of 18 and 25, averaging 19 years of age, who were living away from home at a public university in Northern California. One member of each pair took part in the study as part of a requirement in large psychology courses for research participation. The research was described as a study of friendship dynamics, and participation was limited to native English speakers. To ensure that the friendships had some longevity, each participant was asked to bring along a same-sex friend whom she had known for at least six months. Dyads reported having been friends (as opposed to merely acquaintances) for an average of one year, ranging from five months to 12 years. The majority (90%) of the sample self-identified as either 'Caucasian' or 'white'; the remainder declined to state ethnicity, or indicated either 'Asian' or 'Latino' descent.

### *Catch-up Conversations*

Upon arrival in an alcove of the psychology building, the two friends were seated in a comfortable room with couches and children's art on the wall. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to understand how friends talk to each other, and that we wanted them to participate in a 10-minute, audio-recorded conversation behind closed doors. We emphasized that the conversation would be transcribed so that names and identifying details would be disguised. After giving their consent, the dyad was told to use the 10 minutes to simply catch up and talk about anything whatsoever. The directions were intentionally left vague, so as to not pre-emptively structure the conversations. As hoped, each dyad spent the vast majority of their time actually catching up on current events in their respective lives. Debriefing occurred after the catch-up conversations, as we explained that our interest was in the dynamics of conversations between friends. Since the conversations were collected several years prior to the involvement of the first author, the original focus of the study was not on romance talk.

### *Identifying Compulsory Romance*

To identify discursive patterns, or interpretative repertoires that constituted compulsory romance, we initially perused the discursive features identified in previous research on women's formulation of compulsory heterosexuality or traditional romance narratives (Gilfoyle et al., 1992; Griffin, 2000; Hey, 1997; Hollway, 1989; Jackson, 2001, 2005; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Tolman, 2002). In coupling this research with our own awareness as members of a culture in which compulsory romantic norms figure centrally, we developed a set of conceptual heuristics to guide us through a quasi-inductive analysis of the conversations. To identify compulsory romantic repertoires, we paid close attention to the patterns of identity positioning that emerged as the young women rhetorically worked to reconcile the dilemmas inherent in romantic relationship stories that featured topics such as breaking up, physical attraction, infidelity, dating, and so on.

This broad and quasi-inductive search revealed that when compulsory romantic formulations were invoked, they seemed to cluster around one of three broad interpretative repertoires: a *sentimentality* repertoire, where the young woman idealizes or sentimentalizes the male or the relationship by talking about it in an affectedly effusive, schmaltzy or maudlin way; an *unrequited pursuit* repertoire, where the women are positioned as openly, capriciously or energetically in pursuit of a man who is less interested; and an *emotional caretaker* repertoire, where the young woman assumes (an often disproportionate) responsibility for maintaining romantic harmony, initiating reconciliation and accepting blame for problems (similar to idea of 'emotional literacy' – see Burns, 2000; also similar to what Phillips, 2000, calls 'the pleasing woman discourse'). The process of naming, defining and identifying the parameters of these repertoires involved an extensive and iterative process of redefining, expanding and collapsing definitions, and routinely checking them against the actual data.

Because research on interpretative repertoires often reveals speakers to be quite flexible and inconsistent in how they marshal particular repertoires to finesse multiple identity positions, we were especially attuned to the ways the young women positioned themselves with regard to such repertoires. A central aim of the analyses that follow is to reveal the synergistic nature of complicity and resistance. In other words, our discursive analyses attempt to reveal how both complicit and resistant positions were seldom straightforward or uniform, but rather were often softened or hedged in a variety of ways so as to mitigate the potential for complicity to appear *too* complicit or for resistance to appear *too* resistant.

## DISCURSIVE ANALYSES

To elucidate how the young women displayed complicity, resistance and a mixture of complicity and resistance to the three repertoires of compulsory romance, we performed a discursive analysis of all source material on romance. In what follows, we present an analysis of stories selected in order to elucidate repertoires in action and context (see Appendix for transcription conventions). The stories presented here were chosen because they displayed a range of discursive strategies not only for appearing both complicit and resistant, but also (and most importantly) for mitigating the hearable trouble of appearing complicit or resistant to certain repertoires, thus making for a more economical use of stories. We focus on two stories that occasion the sentimentality repertoire, two stories in which the unrequited pursuit repertoire is negotiated, and two stories that illustrate the emotional caretaker repertoire. As will be obvious, our analyses attempt to do more than parade a large number of excerpts as exemplars meant to simply bolt-on to a larger ideological argument; rather, we aim to provide a close argumentative analysis of the discursive methods friends use to work up compulsory romance, with an eye to how these methods are organized rhetorically so as to prevent them from being easily critiqued (Edwards and Potter, 1992).

### *Sentimentality Repertoire*

In this first example, Abby relates a story about how she and her friend (Veronica) enjoy laughing at and patronizing the interactions between Susan and her boyfriend Aaron. Abby characterizes these interactions as predictable and mawkish.

#### *Excerpt 1*

Participants: Abby (A) and Haley (H)

- 1 A: Susan gets really mad at me and Veronica like when we were in
- 2 her room last night
- 3 H: what were you doing?

- 4 A: [I was]  
 5 H: [were ] you making fun of them?  
 6 A: cause yeah we kinda lau::gh at the things they do but it's not  
 7 like mean laughing  
 8 H: kinda patronizing laughing?  
 9 A: yeah kinda (.) Susan goes uh hey hey and Aaron knows that she  
 10 means get me the Pepsi cause she was like she had put out her  
 11 hand so he gets her the Pepsi (.) unscrews the top and hands it to her  
 12 and then like Veronica goes oh my:: god he unscrewed the top (.) and  
 13 then so I was on the phone with Mike and I was like hey if I asked  
 14 you for a Pepsi (.) would you go get it for me? and then he was like (.)  
 15 is this a(hhhuh) trick(huh) question(hh) ((laughing, 1.0)) an'I was 'ike  
 16 no no (.) an' he was like >who's closer?< an' I was like let's say I was  
 17 closer he's like >where are we?< (.) I was like we're on the sofa  
 18 he's like(hhh) are:: we comfortable? (.) I said yeah an' he's like(heheh)  
 19 who's more comfortable? an' I was like we're equally comfortable just  
 20 would you get me the Pepsi? an' he's like=  
 21 H: =I take that as a no  
 22 A: no (.) he's like yes (.) an I was like okay that's all I was asking an then  
 23 I was like but you wouldn't really would you? (.) an he was like yeah  
 24 uh no (.) so then we were laughing (.) n'then Susan was staring at  
 25 Aaron all lovingly (.) she's laying down on the bed and he's at her desk  
 26 H: she's so different  
 27 A: I know (.) an she's ru::bbing his arm with her foot like her bare foot  
 28 H: ugh(huh)  
 29 A: n'then he's all like (.) see (.) I get her a Pepsi and I get foot petting n'she's  
 30 probably just wiping her feet off me an he was obviously just joking  
 31 but she got all offended n'she's like ((in cutesy voice)) no I'm not (.) no  
 32 I'm not (.) n'Veronica and I are totally laughing (.) n'like I felt bad  
 33 H: ugghh  
 34 A: I mean like they're cute n'all (.) but:: uhh

Abby employs a myriad of discursive maneuvers to resist Susan's sentimentality while inoculating her own stance. First, she employs script formulations (Edwards, 1995) to construct Susan and Aaron's sentimental behavior so that it appears routine and predictable, rather than rare or unexceptional. Otherwise, it could be Abby and Veronica's patronizing that might appear excessive. The scripting is brought off through the use of the iterative present tense ('Susan gets really mad'), event pluralization ('the things they do'), and the explicit instancing of events as pattern exemplars ('Susan goes uh hey hey and Aaron knows that she means'; 'like when we were in her room'). These script formulations solidify Susan and Aaron's sentimental behavior as part of a recognizable and predictable script, rather than a product of biased or idiosyncratic reporting. Also predictable is Abby's and Victoria's teasing, as evinced through Haley's question 'were you making fun of them?' and 'kinda patronizing laughter?'. That Haley can predict their response aligns her with these women, making teasing and patronizing laughter a part of their shared experience.

Abby then engages with compulsory romantic sentimentality by recruiting the voices of Susan, Veronica, her boyfriend Mike and Aaron, in a series of displaced evaluations, to formulate resistance to Susan's sentimentality. She reports Veronica's reaction ('oh my:: god') to Aaron's unscrewing of the Pepsi top before launching an embedded story about her phone conversation with her boyfriend, Mike. She positions Mike's reaction as a foil to the idea of perfunctory chivalry. It is not accidental that Abby presents the circuitous and suspicious series of questions that Mike asks; doing so positions Mike as *practical* rather than romantic, thus securing an indirect foil between herself and Susan.

Haley's 'she so different' (line 26) reference to Susan creates further alignment with Abby, signaling that she also thinks that Susan's romantic behavior is odd, a position that Abby has been alluding to indirectly, but which Haley now names explicitly. Though Abby relays most of the narration, these brief asides by Haley (lines 5, 8, 21, 26, 28, and 33) create intersubjectivity and a sense of co-telling with respect to the larger evaluative points being made.

Finally, Abby reports Aaron's joke (lines 29–30) and then caricatures Susan's misinterpretation, a caricature that yet again indirectly problematizes Susan's naïve sentimentality. Abby tops it off with a series of strategic concessions ('n'like I felt bad'; 'I mean they're cute n'all') to mitigate the threat of appearing to have a vested stake or interest in being resistant per se (see Edwards and Potter, 1992). Yet, the coupling of emphatic stress on 'cute' in the concession 'they're cute n'all' and 'but' in the disclaimer 'but:: uh' mitigates these very concessions. Abby's resistance thus appears as unmotivated noticing.

In the next story, we see the emergence of the sentimentality repertoire within an intergenerational context. Jada positions her mother, grandmother, and aunt as hegemonic voices that claim to know what is really good for her.

### Excerpt 2

Participants: Jada (J) and Gaby (G)

- 1 J: my mom doesn't care about the age difference an' my grandma like  
 2 loves him (.) an(heh) she hasn't even met him she's like telling  
 3 everyone at Thanksgiving she's like oh:: hey:: Jada has a boyfriend  
 4 n'I'm like grandma (.) I've <only gone out on two dates with the guy>  
 5 he's not my boyfriend (.) n'she's(hehe) like(huh) oh:: honey (.) shish  
 6 it's oka::y (.) yes he is n'I'm like <no::: grandma he's not(heh)> (.) an  
 7 everyone's like >you have a boyfriend?< an' I'm like no I don't (.)  
 8 listen (.) it was really embarrassing  
 9 G: that's so funny  
 10 J: an my aunt's like oh (.) he's a firefighter? she's like no no that won't work  
 11 for you you know (.) you need someone more ambitious (.) an' I'm like  
 12 that's not nice (.) an she's like no no you need a doctor or something  
 13 an I was like uh:: oka::y  
 14 G: I think he's someone to get to know and just see  
 15 J: yeah I dunno  
 16 G: he's cool to just hang out with

- 17 J: yeah but you know how we used to have that feeling of oh my god  
 18 he's so cool n'like think about'em like 24 hours a day? (.) like I haven't  
 19 talked about him hardly ever

What is central here is not so much the content of Jada's story, which follows a fairly stereotypical script that exploits intergenerational differences, but *how* she stylizes the dialogue (with intermittent laughter, emphatic stress, pauses, etc.) to position a reasoned and balanced voice of resistance. Notice the way she slows down her speech (lines 4 and 6) in a way that sounds almost patronizing, and in so doing, knowing and confident. The laughter and emphatic stress used to report her grandmother's speech (lines 5–6) disarms it and makes its dogmatism appear cute or harmless. Whether Jada and her grandmother actually spoke like this in the setting is impossible to know; what is important is that Jada reports it as such, and in so doing, does important discursive work. She seems to be indirectly resisting grandma's myopic version of romantic attachment (of-course-he-is-your-boyfriend type thinking) and her aunt's conflation of romance with status ('you need a doctor'). In so doing, she foreshadows the larger point she makes in lines 18–19 concerning a social and developmental change that has occurred for them. She alludes to a time in their lives when they used to gush more openly about boys. Jada's distanced interest in the fireman and Gaby's safe but unenthusiastic 'I think he's someone to get to know and just see' and 'he's cool to just hang out with' represents a developmental shift in their joint way of constructing desire. Their friendship, in other words, is being built around the collective construction of resistance to compulsory romance.

### *Unrequited Pursuit Repertoire*

These next two stories illuminate the negotiation of the unrequited pursuit repertoire. In this first story, Mara positions herself as very cautious and reluctant towards the advances of the man she is dating, which has the effect of positioning her as desirable, though she resists being pursued by this particular man.

#### *Excerpt 3*

Participants: Mara (M) and Tahlia (T)

- 1 M: it is a good sign that he didn't call yesterday (.) that was actually like normal  
 2 a normal person would not call back (.) but no he-I was talking about this to  
 3 the receptionist at work an'she was all oh so how is it going with that guy?  
 4 an'I was like (.) he's kinda: (.) he's really cute and nice but he just wants  
 5 to spend too much time with me (.) n'she's like whadaya mean? (.) an I was  
 6 like well he invited me Baja for the weekend an she was like OH I would  
 7 go in a second (.) an'I was'ike <oh my god> okay an'she's all that's not weird  
 8 an'I was like why?  
 9 [. . .]  
 10 T: yeah before he makes that decision he should get to know you

- 11 M: yeah I agree (.) I dunno I probably won't see him much before he goes so  
 12 I'll just talk to him when he gets back probably  
 13 T: when does he go to Baja?  
 14 M: on Thursday [and then]  
 15 T: [today's ] Wednesday  
 16 M: yeah so tomorrow (1.0) he bought a ticket to Costa Rica or somewhere for a  
 17 month with his friend in January so I was like uh:: bye have fun  
 18 T: ((laughing)) you're like(heh) I'm really gonna miss you ((laughing))  
 19 M: ((laughing)) I know(heh) he's all like it's only a month (.) I'll be back soon an  
 20 I'm all like hehh uh::: ((laughing))

As in the prior stories, Mara occasions the norms of compulsory romance, but does so indirectly by juxtaposing her own voice with those of other women (the receptionist in lines 2–8) who are presented as embracing compulsory romantic norms too uncautiously. More important, however, is the way Tahlia shares this experience. In yet another bid for intersubjectivity, Tahlia agrees ('before he makes that decision he should get to know you'), thus aligning herself with Mara's resistance and, at a broader level, helping to co-construct what is normal in romantic relationships. His pursuit and the receptionist's acceptance of it is, in other words, not normal.

Mara and Tahlia further resist the unrequited pursuit repertoire in the final part of the story (lines 17–20) where they mock his bid for attempt to say goodbye. Mara reports her response as 'so I was like uh:: bye have fun'. The simple hedge 'uh' and stress on 'bye', coupled with the generic 'have fun', is hearably flat and deadpan and thus incongruent with the so-called 'romantic good-bye script' that would call for a more heartfelt response. Tahlia obviously gets this as she continues with sarcasm (in line 18), but apparently Mara's boyfriend does not, as he clumsily misses the force of her sarcastic repartee and seems to straightforwardly reassure her with 'it's only a month I'll be back soon'. Again, Mara's purported reply to this, is minimal ('hehh uh:::' plus laughter), and understandably so, as it signals that she and Tahlia are already in sync in the way they are formulating resistance, here through irony and deadpan affect.

In this next story, Sue adopts the thorny position of 'female desire' as she positions herself as openly, energetically and strategically in pursuit of Joe, who appears less interested. The asymmetry of interest is presented as distressful. Yet, the distress is not unqualified. Sue weaves a great story, turning a position of unrequited pursuit into a bit of an absurd comedy, replete with knowing self-deprecation and hyperbole.

#### *Excerpt 4*

Participants: Sue (S) and Alice (A)

- 1 S: so I stopped by his house on Friday because I was going over to Joe's  
 2 and I had his book and I was wearing like these new black pants ((laughs))  
 3 so I was just like I have got to go over there

- 4 A: yeah  
 5 S: so I went over and gave him his book n'he's like I dunno (.) we talked  
 6 for a couple minutes (.) I don't (1.0) there's just something like there's  
 7 jus' somthin' like OH GOD I can't even deal with this like chemistry  
 8 A: so what was he like? (.) was he weird?  
 9 S: I don't understand why I feel it and he doesn't I don't get it  
 10 A: oh so he didn't feel it?  
 11 S: well I dunno if he does or not (.) he I mean doesn't allude to it or say anything  
 12 you know (.) but I just can't understand cuz when I look into his eyes it's jus  
 13 this thing you know an like I don't know how he can't feel it at all (.) I  
 14 don't know if he does or not (.) but anyways we just talked for a couple  
 15 minutes n'I was like sorry that I came by without you know calling  
 16 first (.) I was jus on my way over in the area heheh ((laughing)) um not that  
 17 I'm not around his fuck(hh)ing house like every goddamn day  
 18 A: I know right  
 19 S: it's so::: bad (.) it's like I drive by there five times a day it's like my daily  
 20 routine thing ((laughs)) an' he was like what are you doing this weekend?  
 21 what are you doing? (.) jus' shootin' the shit (.) whatever an'then he was  
 22 like yeah well we should hang out this weekend maybe I'll give you a call  
 23 n'I was jus like yeah (1.0) didn't call [. . .] he never called me (.) never  
 24 fucking called

Sue does little to downplay her position of interest in Joe, or that she is not happy that he does not feel the same way, and that she drives by his house five times a day. What she manages are not these positions per se, but how seriously we hear them and what they imply about her identity. First, she laughs as she openly positions herself as a 'desiring woman' who admits feeling an urgency to go right over to his house in her 'new black pants' (lines 2–3). It is the matter-of-fact construction of this position, the exaggerated urgency and laughter that accompanies it that allows Sue to appear all too knowing about the potential trouble of appearing too desiring. She thus bluffs her way into this complicit-with-compulsory romance realm, but not without irony. She heightens the irony by then launching a very colorful, profanity-laced admission that she is relentlessly pursuing Joe (lines 16–17). The strong profanity (line 17) is stylistic in moments of self-deprecation (Antaki, 2004). It heightens the absurdity of her actions, which allows her to parody behavior that she positions as pathetic or excessive. The self-parody gives her poetic purchase on her actions, reconstructing them as props for good storytelling rather than as signs of her true self.

Whether accurate or not, these absurd sounding descriptions do important work, particularly since Alice seems to support the story. When cast absurdly, hyperbolic positions of active desire that are potentially delicate for women are now laughable and eminently retractable. Absurdity is thus good camouflage (Antaki, 2004); it reveals what is at stake. Sue and Alice are signaling that positions of complicity with romantic pursuit and desire are the kind of sensitive things that might attract criticism (Tolman, 2002). By signaling this, Sue, in particular, owns it and thus performs two essential discursive tasks: first, she lets

her audience know that she is aware of the ideological risks surrounding her position; and second, she splashes enough color across her narrative so as to caution us against taking her complicity too seriously.

### *Emotional Caretaker Repertoire*

This first story features Katy discussing a recent argument with her boyfriend, whom she works with at a business center on the university campus. While Katy resists being positioned as subordinate to him, her resistance is cloaked in a series of subtle qualifications. In addition, her friend (Mya) responds in a somewhat flippant way, which further weakens the force of the resistance by trivializing it.

#### *Excerpt 5*

Participants: Katy (K) and Mya (M)

- 1 M: so what did you guys argue about?
- 2 K: business cards
- 3 M: business cards? (.) was it like a really serious tiff?
- 4 K: [. . .] enough that I couldn't talk about it anymore and I needed to process
- 5 n' I was like look we can't talk about it now but we're gonna talk about it
- 6 tonight (.) we're gonna talk
- 7 M: that's bizarre how could there be anything so serious about business cards?
- 8 K: okay so here's the deal (.) we can get business cards made (.) we can order
- 9 them through the university [. . .] but we have to get a card that has all our names
- 10 on it
- 11 M: what order to put the names in?
- 12 K: exactly
- 13 M: you're(ha) kidd(hh)ing ((laughing)) you're lying to me?
- 14 K: no he's adamant about having his name first
- 15 M: why:: don't you guys just draw straws?
- 16 K: because he was so sure he had to have his name first [. . .] n' if there's no
- 17 logical reason then that would just bug me so that's what I said (.) like
- 18 why does your name have to be first you know (.) why (.) n'eventually
- 19 after a long drawn out conversation his face gets all uncomfortable (.)
- 20 he gets that little smile that he gets when he is not wanting to say
- 21 something an' then he's like I got hired first an' if it wasn't for me you
- 22 wouldn't have a job=
- 23 M: =wow [. . .] so it is just because he needs to feel special or =
- 24 K: =uh I dunno (.) we didn't get through it cause I jus got really upset cus it
- 25 seemed t'be a power thing ya know [. . .] I'm sittin there telling him
- 26 uh:: you have power issues n'I don't like the fact you are telling me
- 27 that you are more important
- 28 M: it all just seems fairly petty

Katy resists her boyfriend's 'power issues', and in so doing, the subordinate position ingredient in the emotional caretaker repertoire. This is most obvious in lines

25–27 where she directly confronts his position of hegemony. This position of resistance is, however, cloaked with subtle qualifications littered throughout the conversation. For instance, in lines 4–6, Katy positions herself as the one who ‘needed to process’ their disagreement soon (that very night). She comes off as the one who initiates a second round of conversation, thus carrying the weight of creating a space to potentially deepen intimacy. This is ironic given the fact she positions herself as the one inconvenienced by his power issues. Although Katy later admits that he was ‘adamant’ about having his name appear first, she offers a reprisal in the form of a conditional (lines 18–19), saying that his adamant insistence would ‘bug’ her *if* it was illogical. In other words, if he has a good reason, then she might be able to accept her subordination. With some embarrassment, he offers the (potentially logical) reason that he was hired first and then later secured Katy’s position for her (lines 22–23). He thus has seniority as well as Katy in his debt. What is interesting is that Katy does not critique his reasoning. It is Mya who positions his reason as absurd (‘wow’, line 24) and as a dispositional need to feel special. In sum, Katy continually mitigates the force of her resistance.

Mya’s rejoinders also curtail the resistance. Mya initially characterizes their ‘tiff’ as ‘bizarre’ and difficult to accept as ‘serious’ (line 7). She then laughs when the reason for the argument is revealed and frames it as a joke (line 13). She then offers a prosaic solution (line 15), effectively trivializing the problem. And finally, in line 28, she characterizes the whole thing (which would include Katy’s feelings and reactions) as ‘fairly petty’. As we will see in the next excerpt, this type of recipient engagement could be seen as a colloquial form of ‘oh just forget about it’ nonchalance designed to help Katy avoid worrying or caring too much about a problem that may seem, for many women at least, unavoidable. In other words, men inevitably act this way and women might as well pay no mind to it. The danger with these types of nonchalant rejoinders is that they indirectly naturalize men’s expectation for power. Mya’s lighthearted formulations of nonchalance may naturalize the pressure women feel to acquiesce to the emotional caretaker repertoire.

In this final story, we see yet again a tangible thread of equivocation between complicity and resistance to the emotional caretaker repertoire as Beth displays apprehension and uncertainty over her recent breakup with her boyfriend, Jack. Although Beth hedges her way into this equivocal realm during the first half of this excerpt, it is really her friend Julie’s parody of the emotional caretaker repertoire (from lines 19–34) that brings resistance into sharp relief. Like Mya in the previous story, Julie lightens the seriousness of Beth’s problem. Interestingly, Beth resists Julie’s attempted frame shift (lines 30–32), which occasions one final counter by Julie (lines 33–34).

*Excerpt 6*

Participants: Beth (B) and Julie (J)

- 1 B: Jack was always telling me you know he's like if we broke up I could  
 2 never be your friend n'I always thought that was a lil' bita' bullshit (.)  
 3 but that's fine
- 4 J: I still think you guys will get back together (.) but that's just my opinion
- 5 B: god I hope so but then I dunno (.) see then I dunno if I want to because  
 6 you know (.) it sort of screwed me over (.) not really but you know  
 7 I'm not exactly happy right now
- 8 J: yeah yeah obviously he pulled that out of nowhere (.) but then you think  
 9 about it in like like I said perspective (.) he's leaving next quarter right (.)  
 10 isn't he graduating?
- 11 B: he's graduating (.) yeah next quarter (.) spring
- 12 J: spring interesting
- 13 B: eh four months it's nothing
- 14 J: yeah (.) I know that's true that's true
- 15 B: that is that is (.) it is just nothing (.) and it's just eighh but I keep going  
 16 through my head what did I do wrong?
- 17 J: but you know you didn't do anything wrong
- 18 B: I know well that's cuz (.) you know (.) I'm not perfect
- 19 J: neither is he (.) I mean I am but that's different  
 20 ((both laugh, 3.0))
- 21 J: but see it's always the guy they're always wrong (.) look at Jason he's  
 22 always wrong
- 23 B: I know but you [know I
- 24 J: [and even when he's right (.) he's wrong  
 25 ((laugh, 2.0))
- 26 B: cuz he's with you?
- 27 J: yeah cause I'm perfect
- 28 B: well then of cours(h)e's wr(h)ong ((laughing))
- 29 J: exactly
- 30 B: yeah but I don't know (.) it's just like it's like I feel like I did you know  
 31 I cuddah' done sumthin' else but he jus didn't gimme the chance to uh  
 32 you know (.) make up for it
- 33 J: like I'm saying dat is his bad (.) n' I's jus gonna take you to da' club  
 34 an' just show you's off

Beth formulates a barrage of small-scale equivocations concerning her alignment with the emotional caretaker repertoire. She characterizes her ex-boyfriend's threat that he could never be her friend if they broke up both as 'bullshit' and as 'fine' (lines 2–3). She admits that she wants to get back together with him ('god I hope so'), but then isn't sure ('I dunno') because it 'sort of' screwed her over, but 'not really' (line 6). She resists compulsory romance by admitting that she is romantically dissatisfied, but mitigates this with the qualifier 'exactly' (line 7). She displays resistance yet again by agreeing with Julie that seeing him for four more months is 'just nothing' (lines 13 and 15). Still, she admits that she con-

tinually thinks about the fact she feels she did something wrong (line 16). She even concedes that she is not perfect (line 18), despite Julie's remonstrance that she did not do anything wrong (line 17). This is where Julie's resistance to Beth's complicity with the emotional caretaker repertoire takes form, albeit in a light and jocular way. This jocularity seems designed to gently challenge Beth's self-flagellation while not exposing her insecurities. Julie formulates a series of tongue-in-cheek descriptions to parody (and thus resist) the notion of taking blame. The important point here is that the logic of the resistance is patently absurd sounding, as it involves idiomatic expressions with extreme case formulations ('it's always the guy, they're always wrong'; 'even when he's right, he's wrong') and tongue-in-cheek self-aggrandizing ('cause I'm perfect'; 'exactly').

Unlike the last excerpt, in which Sue formulates absurdity about her own actions, the target of Julie's absurdity is Beth's self-flagellation *as a woman*. Julie's basic point that 'women are always right and men are always wrong' is obviously formulated to sound absurd, and by extension, is designed to smuggle in the equally absurd idea that women (or anybody for that matter) are necessarily responsible for solving or accepting blame when things go wrong. It is a creative and counterintuitive way of subverting and thus resisting the traditional compulsory romantic norm of female subordination that is central in the emotional caretaker repertoire. Julie's colorful caricature of gender relations works as a gentle nudge that reminds Beth, albeit indirectly, of the controversy surrounding her complicit position. Interestingly, Beth resists this nudge, and equivocates back to a complicit position of self-blame (lines 30–32). To counter this yet again, Julie's code shifts to an African American Vernacular English dialect in lines 33–34 ('bad', 'da club', and the pluralization of pronouns) and promises to objectify Beth ('show you's off') as a way of empowering her. Ironically, Julie's idea of showing Beth off to men at a club, as a way of stifling her attachment to the emotional caretaker repertoire, repositions her within a discourse of subordination and thus complicity to compulsory heterosexuality.

## DISCUSSION

The young women in this study cycled between complicity and resistance to repertoires of compulsory romance while conversing with their female friends. We were particularly impressed with how the resistance was formulated, and with the ways this resistance was mitigated, qualified or displaced. A quick rejoinder might be that this finding is expected, since resistance is more likely as young women become more flexible and critical in their thinking, more experienced and therefore cautious, and thus less impressionable to traditional femininity norms. However, the discourse suggests that what developed was not a linear progression towards a consolidation of an ideological self, because complicity did not imply acceptance and resistance did not imply rejection.

For instance, 'resistance' did not typically reflect an unequivocal *rejection* of

compulsory romantic norms. Rather, these young women often oriented to these norms in a knowingly hesitant (but not rejecting) way, often marking resistance with qualifications, concessions and reprisals so that their resistance did not seem partisan or easily challenged. The young women in this study actively and volubly created positions of complicity and resistance, with all of the weapons of rhetoric at their disposal. As positions, acts of complicity and resistance were piecemeal and provisional. The complicit and resistant positions occasioned by these young women sprung up in a particular 'catch-up' conversational setting, did rhetorical work and then seemed to fade, leaving traces that can be improvised upon again in different settings and times.

Our discursive analyses were performed to flesh out what complicity and resistance looked like in practice. The thrust of these analyses thus concerned *how* these young women assimilated counter-positions to their complicity and resistance, as a way of making their positions rhetorically robust. In doing this, we have tried to point out some of the ideological dilemmas circulating within the discursive climate of compulsory romance. On the one hand, young women who resist compulsory romantic norms may appear independent, knowing and autonomous, as was apparent in Mara's story in Excerpt 3 about her overly eager suitor. Yet excessive resistance can be costly. An unqualified lack of interest in 'getting a man', for instance, may suggest that one is either deficient in some way or perhaps undesirable (see Reynolds et al., 2007), as seen in Sue's talk in Excerpt 4 about dressing up for Joe and repeatedly showing up at his house. Equally dangerous, however, is unchecked complicity with the 'desiring woman' position ingredient in the unrequited pursuit repertoire, which, if adopted too unselfconsciously, could make Sue appear overly promiscuous.

Resistance to the repertoire of sentimentality may satisfy the developmental imperative to no longer sound like mawkish adolescents, and may also double as a strategy for mitigating dissatisfaction about one's romantic endeavors (or lack thereof). Downplaying dissatisfaction with a problematic or non-existent relationship could be seen as a form of complicity with compulsory romance, since appearing happy about one's current romantic state tends to be interpreted either as an index of a woman's social capital or her individual self-confidence. Seen this way, discursive methods that downplay or resist sentimentality may ironically promote a loss of voice and subjectivity in romantic relationships (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002). On the other hand, appearing to care too much about romance, being overly eager to talk about romantic problems or too invested in 'making things work' can confer a sense of insecurity or co-dependency. Young women thus appear caught in an imbroglio of dilemmas concerning when and how to embrace and resist sentimentality.

This tension between complicity and resistance may be especially pronounced with respect to the emotional caretaker repertoire. On the one hand, Phillips (2000) has noted that the 'pleasing woman discourse', which is an ingredient in the emotional caretaker repertoire, is not only highly normative, as it endorses the feminine virtues of care and empathy, but is also strategically useful for getting

what one wants (e.g. a stable boyfriend) through docility and seduction. Enacting the emotional caretaker repertoire is thus a way of securing independence. On the other hand, it is a form of independence that (ironically) is subordinating insofar as it is expressly designed to attract men. Resisting this logic, however, has its potential costs, since the emotional caretaker repertoire is nevertheless very practical, particularly in light of the alternative of trying to be a completely autonomous agent in a culture where oppressive social structures continually stifle and punish women for expressing their own needs. Failure to transcend such societal strictures can cause women to feel that they are not strong or confident enough; when coupled with the illusory idea that they are able to be totally autonomous agents, such an alternative discourse can inadvertently lead women to blame themselves when they are victimized.

Dilemmas abounded within the local friendship constellation as well. Young women may employ resistance to their friends' excessive rumination or self-blame, thereby 'doing friendship' and building solidarity. This seemed especially evident in Excerpt 6, where Julie attempted to pull Beth out of the quagmire of self-recrimination. When female friends cooperate in making light of compulsory romantic norms, a sense of solidarity can emerge that can trump the feminine imperative to be heavily invested in pursuing a successful romantic relationship (see Walton et al., 2002). At other times, complicity may be expressly built so as to fish for resistance (and thus encouragement) from one's friend. In other words, there may be a routine present: Beth displays self-doubt (complicity) and in return Julie affirms Beth by resisting her complicit position. Ironically, Julie's display of resistance functions not as empowerment, but as an indirect reinforcement for future displays of complicity by Julie. The ideological landscape is obviously quite complex. Differentiating these multiple functions of complicity and resistance to compulsory romance is thus an important challenge for feminist research. Our hope is that studies like this can help to not only expose these dilemmas, but also to chart the discursive methods by which young women formulate controversial identity positions in ways that are insulated from easy rebuttals.

Given our modest sample size and its demographic homogeneity – largely white, middle-class, heterosexual, California college-age students, there are limitations regarding the generalizability of our findings. There is evidence that some non-white young women (particularly working-class African American) may be less concerned with romance than non-working-class white women, since some groups of non-white women have historically been less dependent on men than have white women for economic support (see Taylor et al., 1995). Additional research is thus needed to explore how resistance to compulsory romance surfaces in a variety of conversational contexts between female friends from different social, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Conversations from married and older single women would also serve as an illuminative contrast (cf. Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003).

Finally, as developmental psychologists, we believe that a critical discursive

approach to compulsory romance offers a relatively novel answer to the question ‘what is developing?’ in terms of these emerging adult women’s identities. We believe that women’s negotiation of compulsory romance is best viewed as relational and discursive reflexes to ideological tensions within their larger society that are brought to life in their conversational interactions. We thus seek to answer the ‘what is developing?’ question by drawing attention to the active and interactive patterning of a complex ideological field, rather than to the internal drive of the self to achieve coherence in its self-narrative. Development thus reflects the dexterity to display discursive agility in the midst of conversational trouble, or the skill to maintain multiple ideological positions within a variety of situations and in the midst of a variety of potential challenges (Korobov and Bamberg, 2004a, 2004b).

Seen this way, talk of young women becoming increasingly more or less complicit and resistant to compulsory romance is potentially misleading. More apt is the idea that these emerging adult women seem to be honing the discursive ability to resist and comply with compulsory romance without rejecting or complying with it entirely. We are not suggesting the cynical view that these women are simply becoming artful dodgers or ideologically promiscuous. Rather, they are (skillfully) doing what comes naturally over the course of language socialization. They are displaying ‘social fluency’ as members of a culture, doing what is required to appear rhetorically responsive to a wide range of disparate ideological tensions. We hope that this type of focus will spur new thinking on questions regarding young women’s development, where notions of ‘ideological dexterity’ and ‘social fluency’ are central. A feminist and critical discursive approach to the development of compulsory romance will hopefully stimulate future explorations of the discursive positioning of romantic ideologies among diverse cohorts of women.

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#### APPENDIX A: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

(.)	Short pause of less than 1 second
(1.5)	Timed pause in seconds
[overlap]	Overlapping speech
?	Rising intonation/question
°quieter°	Encloses talk that is quieter than the surrounding talk
LOUD	Talk that is louder than the surrounding talk
<u>Underlined</u>	Emphasis
>faster<	Encloses talk that is faster than the surrounding talk
<slower>	Encloses talk that is slower than the surrounding talk
((comments))	Encloses comments from the transcriber
Rea:::ly	Elongation of the prior sound
=	Immediate latching of successive talk
[. . .]	Where material from the tape has been omitted for reasons of brevity.

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Neill KOROBV is an Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department at the University of West Georgia, USA. He is interested in natural language use and the implications of patterns in people's talk for the study of identity and ideology, particularly with respect to gender. His work is grounded in critical discourse analysis and hermeneutic frameworks for social science inquiry. Currently, he is studying the stories that young adults tell about their romantic and sexual experiences, with a special focus on 'troubles-talk', i.e. the way speakers formulate problems about ostensibly private matters, such as romantic experiences.

ADDRESS: Department of Psychology, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA 30118, USA.  
[email: Nkorobov@westga.edu]

Avril THORNE is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She studies identity development in the context of spontaneous storytelling with family and friends.

ADDRESS: University of California, Santa Cruz, 277 Social Sciences 2, Santa Cruz, California 95064, USA.  
[email: avril@ucsc.edu]