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Journal of Social and Personal Relationships 2007; 24; 971

DOI: 10.1177/0265407507084193

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How late-adolescent friends share stories about relationships: The importance of mitigating the seriousness of romantic problems

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ABSTRACT

This narrative study explored how late adolescents ($N = 64$ dyads) jointly told stories about romantic relationships during casual conversations with same-sex friends. Stories about romantic problems were four times more prevalent than stories about romantic nonproblems, and relationship instability was the most frequent type of romantic problem. Furthermore, discussions of romantic problems (versus nonproblems) were particularly likely to be softened or mitigated by projecting a detached, relaxed, or unknowing stance. Case studies of such conversational mitigation vividly illustrate how these primarily White, heterosexual, late adolescents navigated the vagaries of developing serious and intimate bonds without appearing too invested or troubled by their romantic problems. The findings have implications for understanding the co-construction of social and personal identities.

KEY WORDS: discourse • identity • late adolescence • mitigation • narratives • problems • romantic relationships • stories

We are very grateful to our research assistants, Emalynn Robinson, Janelle Franco, and Sara Spowhn, as well as the UCSC Narrative and Identity Research Group. Preparation of this manuscript was supported by a postdoctoral traineeship from the National Institute of Health (T32 HD46423) to the first author, and a grant from Consulting Psychologists Press to the second author. Findings from this study have been presented at the Jean Piaget Society Annual Conference (June, 2006). All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Neill Korobov, Department of Psychology, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA, 30118, USA [e-mail: Nkorobov@westga.edu]. Laura Stafford was the Action Editor on this article.

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships Copyright © 2007 SAGE Publications
(www.sagepublications.com), Vol. 24(6): 971–992. DOI: 10.1177/0265407507084193

Adolescent romantic relationships develop in a web of relational contexts that are importantly shaped by friendships with peers (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Feiring, 1999a). In wading through the complexities of dating and romantic attachment, adolescents rely on friends for support and advice. Friends share in the vagaries of dating and romance by practicing intimacy skills, disclosing fears and uncertainties, and sorting through the subtleties of their romantic feelings – practices that may seem trivial or exhausting to adults (Eder, 1993; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992).

Despite a growing conviction that romantic relationships in adolescence are key sites for the coconstruction of identities, researchers are only beginning to explore how to study such peer contributions (see Brown, 1999; Feiring, 1999a; Connolly & Johnson, 1996). While surveys and questionnaires have been the most common strategy for charting the development of friendships over adolescence (see Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Feiring, 1999b), this study focuses on how late-adolescent friends *tell stories* as a way of negotiating the dilemmas of their romantic experiences. When telling stories about the highly charged experiences of romantic relationships, meanings get batted about and dilemmas arise, many of which reveal contradictory positions that must be managed *in vivo*. The back-and-forth maneuverings in conversational storytelling can offer glimpses into how friends work together to make sense of their romantic experiences. The present study thus used a local narrative focus to examine how same-sex college-age friends negotiated the meanings of their heterosexual romantic experiences. Beginning with the premise that identities are socially fashioned (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987), we expected that stories about romantic relationships would be fertile ground for exploring how identities emerge during the storytelling practices of Euro-American late adolescents.

Negotiating romantic problems with peers: Troubles-talk narratives

Although stories about romantic experiences are interesting in general, we take a keen interest in romantic stories about problems, or what has been termed “troubles-talk narratives” (Buttny, 2004; Drew, 1998, Edwards, 2005). We treat such narratives as speech events which directly or indirectly foreground troubles in which the problematic party or object is not present (Ouellette, 2001). While a number of traditional psychological frameworks suggest that the *internal* negotiation of problems can serve as a catalyst for identity development (Erikson, 1968; Sullivan, 1953), we take our cue from Bruner (1990), who has argued that identity development is driven by the *storied* negotiation and interactive resolution of problems that disrupt communal life. Studies of written self-defining memories have found that late adolescents more often explicitly make meaning of troubles than non troubles (McLean & Thorne, 2003; Thorne & McLean, 2003), suggesting that storying partly serves to drive the development of identity. To date, however, such troubles-talk has rarely been studied *in vivo*.

The premise of this study is that romantic troubles-talk is a ripe site to study how friends socialize each other's identities. Stories about romantic partners not reciprocating interest by returning phone calls, being unfaithful, nagging, or stifling one's social life, are different than nonproblem stories because troubles violate normative expectations and/or can be personally distressful. Troubles-talk is more than a venue for registering a complaint, because it involves the delicate interactive tasks of complaining and commiserating in recipient-designed ways. In talking about romantic problems with friends, late adolescents must selectively draw on (or resist) culturally and developmentally proscriptive norms regarding how late adolescents and young adults should formulate a problem and how listeners should reply to such romantic problems. The position(s) taken, both in acts of telling and responding, reveal not only what is at stake for late adolescents in terms of their current romantic concerns, but also reflect interpersonal dynamics. Although storied, and thus piecemeal and provisional, these conversational positions may consolidate into broader repertoires (ways of talking, reacting, coping, etc.) that friendship groups can selectively draw on to facilitate the development of their personal and social identities (see Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Thorne & McLean, 2003).

The importance of mitigation

Research on conversational interaction has found that problem-talk is a tricky and delicate project that involves what Goffman (1967) calls "gauging," which requires modifying one's positions in recipient-designed ways (see Buttny, 2004; Drew, 1998; Edwards, 2005). On the one hand, problems are ostensibly important matters that must be formulated in believable ways so as to be taken seriously. On the other hand, and in a way apposite for this study, problems must not be formulated in ways that seem *too* serious, implicating speakers as over-reacting, overly sensitive, or overly absorbed in their problems (see Drew, 1998; Edwards, 2005). The essence of this dilemma was captured nicely by Sacks (1992), who noted that talking about our problems is something we love to do, but love to avoid being characterized as doing. It is a dilemma aptly reflected in research on the rhetorical uses of "mitigation" (Caffi, 1999; Fraser, 1980; Holmes, 1984).

In research on conversational interaction, mitigation refers to the rhetorical softening or attenuating (but not negation) of a potentially negative hearing, thus allowing the speaker to "save face" (see Brown & Levinson, 1978). We borrow specifically from Caffi's (1999) relational approach to mitigation, in which acts of mitigation not only help the speaker save face, but also smooth the interaction by reducing the threat that speakers will misalign, contradict one another, or become adversarial. Mitigation, therefore, is a crucial component of keeping friendships well oiled, particularly around face-threatening topics like romantic difficulties.

For our purposes, we approach mitigation in the form of rhetorical devices which attenuate knowledge claims or emotional investment by projecting a detached, relaxed, lighthearted, unknowing, or distracted stance. For

example, in posing the problem of one's romantic partner being overly critical, speakers can lighten the problem through the rhetorical construction of vagueness ("s/he just said some stuff"), by claiming ignorance ("I dunno what s/he said"), or by diluting the problem with certain kinds of idioms ("whatever," "that's cool"). These rhetorical devices are useful in at least two ways. First, they allow speakers to air serious romantic problems while simultaneously showing that they are not inclined to make heavy weather of them. This not only saves face in the moment, but may also satisfy the pressure to appear concerned but not consumed by the capriciousness of romantic experiences. Second, displays of mitigation are interactively insulating; the listener may respond with concern, but need not. Mitigation is thus preemptively face saving for the listener, revealing a level of other centeredness by the problem teller.

Mitigation during late adolescence

Mitigating the seriousness of romantic troubles may be particularly salient in the conversations of late adolescents. Unlike early adolescent romantic relationships, which are often tentative, transient, and characterized by rumination and the ratcheting up of drama (Rose, 2002), romantic relationships in late adolescence are more often freighted by sobering and identity-formative questions like "can I be committed to this person?," "are we compatible?," and "can I tolerate his/her short-comings, values, and life-style?" (Arnett, 2004; Brown, 1999). Yet, as societal strictures in western cultures loosen and psychological moratorium becomes more normative as a viable identity status well into young adulthood, there is less pressure on late adolescents to definitively answer such questions. Instead, this protracted period of intimacy exploration tends to normalize exploration and mandate social versatility and a tolerance for uncertainty.

What seems especially relevant during late adolescence, then, is the need to enact a style of self-presentation that avoids the appearance of either over- or under-indulging in adolescent or adult norms for talking about romantic troubles. Late adolescence thus becomes a peculiarly unique time for exploiting the luxury of discussing adult-like problems with friends, but in ways that are nevertheless carefree and exploratory. The use of mitigation to position one's identity while discussing romantic problems appears to be a finely tuned discursive practice that allows late adolescents to transact more than one age-developmental position within a variety of situations and in the midst of a variety of expectations that swirl within conversational interactions.

In sum, acts of mitigation are highly revealing of what is normative for late adolescents as they talk about romantic experiences. Presumably one would not mitigate what is of little concern. Mitigation reveals that the topic (e.g., romantic problems) is sufficiently cumbersome so as to be relationally threatening if mishandled. By examining this handling in real-time storytelling, we see not only what is at stake for these late adolescents, in

terms of what counts for them as a romantic problem, but we also see how they rhetorically finesse positions about such problems, and in so doing, how they socialize each other's identities as part of the overall maintenance of their friendships.

This study was guided by several key questions. First, would late-adolescent friends, if left to talk in a predominately unstructured environment, spontaneously tell stories about current or past romantic experiences? Second, since problems tend to drive story telling (Bruner, 1990), would the romantic stories that did emerge be about problems, or would they center on positive, neutral, or otherwise nonproblematic occurrences? And finally, when romantic problem (and romantic non problem) stories do emerge, are there differences in the ways they are interactively managed? While there are myriad ways of answering this question, we were specifically interested to know if positions engendered during the telling of romantic problem and romantic nonproblem stories were mitigated, and if so, to what extent and via which types of rhetorical devices. We believe answers to these questions will provide new avenues, both methodologically and theoretically, for understanding how peers influence the meanings that are made of their romantic relationship experiences.

Method

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 64 same-sex dyads (32 male; 32 female) between the ages of 18 and 22 ($M = 19.5$ years, $SD = .9$ years) who were living away from home at a public university in Northern California. One member of each dyad took part in the study in order to satisfy a course requirement in psychology. The research was described as a study of friendship dynamics, and participation was restricted to native English speakers and same-sex friends. Because some of our participants were first-year college students, each participant was asked to bring along a friend whom s/he had known for at least 6 months. Six months was chosen to increase the possibility that they had been friends with this person for at least half of the year. Dyads reported having been friends (as opposed to merely acquaintances) for a median of one year ($M = 22$ months; $SD = 25$ months; range = 5 months to 12 years). The large majority (90%) of the sample self-identified as either "Caucasian" or "White." More information about the sample can be found in Korobov and Thorne (2006).

Catch-up conversations

Each dyad participated in a 10-minute, audio-recorded "catch-up" conversation behind closed doors 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. They were 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 preemptively

frame these conversations or introduce researcher expectations. Understandably, the conversations usually sputtered for the first few moments, as the participants were likely adjusting to the somewhat odd request of the researcher to “be natural” and “talk freely” within a constrained time period. Nearly every conversation, however, quickly approximated casual-sounding banter, replete with everyday expressions such as the use of common slang, personal stories, and jokes.

The conversations were transcribed and then parsed into utterances. Utterances were defined as self-contained thought units, often taking the form of simple sentences or clauses (e.g., “I ran fast,” “oh yeah,” “then I stopped,” or “what’s that?”). Utterances were used to assess the length of the stories and were also the unit of analysis for coding mitigating positions.

Coding for stories, romantic-relationship stories, and problem stories

Coders were the first author and three undergraduate women, one of whom coded at the molar level for stories, while the other two coded for mitigating rhetorical devices within stories. Each coder was trained for approximately 40 hours. Approximately 25% of the cases were reliability coded, and reliability checks occurred intermittently to prevent coder drift. Disagreement was settled by consensus (after reliability was computed). Percentage agreement was used to index the reliability of the story category, and *kappa* was used to index reliability for the other coding categories; the statistical rationale is presented in Korobov and Thorne (2006).

All of the conversations were initially coded for the presence of stories. A story was defined as a series of temporally bounded narrative clauses phrased in the simple past tense or in the historical present tense, such as “he ran, then he fell” or “she was skipping, then she was running” (see Coates, 2003). To achieve an acceptable rate of agreement, only stories that contained at least six narrative clauses were included. The reliability of the story category was 86%.

Each story was then coded as either a “romantic-relationship story” or as a “nonromantic-relationship story”. A romantic-relationship story was defined rather broadly as any story that made relevant the romantic status of one or more of its characters, described the event as something done as a couple (a date, a hook-up, hanging out together), or focused on one’s own or another’s sexual or romantic involvement or interest (hypothetical or real) in another, where such involvement or interest was clearly non-platonic. Simply reporting what opposite-sex peers did over the weekend would not count as a romantic relationship story unless the characters were somehow described as being romantically involved or interested, either by denoting their status or by characterizing their actions as happening the way they did in a way that culturally indexes possible romantic or sexual interest. Stories concerning homosexual involvement or interest were originally included, but were ultimately excluded due to a very low base rate (only one story). The reliability for romantic versus non romantic stories was *kappa* = .96.

The next step was to differentiate romantic problem stories from romantic nonproblem stories. The notion of a “romantic problem” is largely a normative and vernacular category that eludes technical definition. Despite this challenge, and given the fact this was an exploratory study in an under-researched area, we defined romantic problem stories as stories centering on current or past problems involving the persons or emotions in the relationship; further, there needed to be evidence that the ‘problem’ was a problem for the speaker or for a character in the story. A speaker casually mentioning that she broke up with her boyfriend and that it was the best thing she ever did would not count as a romantic problem story unless she somehow indexes a past, currently lingering, or potential future problem. Seen this way, stories that seem redemptive (being happy about the end of a bad relationship) are romantic problem stories when they emphasize the process of overcoming something problematic or painful. In contrast, romantic nonproblem stories did not index past, currently lingering, or future potential problems; rather, these stories were often about funny or random episodes that happened on dates, such as sweating a lot during a yoga session or going to see a great concert with one’s girlfriend. Independent coders reliably differentiated stories about romantic relationship problems from stories about romantic relationship nonproblems ($kappa = .86$).

Because we were primarily interested in romantic problem talk, we wanted to know what kinds of problems were storied. Coders were therefore asked to sort romantic problem stories by type of problems. To generate problem types, coders collectively worked through a random subset of stories (ones not used to obtain reliability) and were asked to generate captions that described the gist of each story. These captions were used to generate a smaller list of probable problem categories, which were eventually winnowed to five types in order to avoid redundancy between insufficiently dissimilar categories and to make coding manageable. These types were: (i) Problems involving *general relational instability* (“he just threatened our relationship and I feel really weird about it”); (ii) problems stemming from an *asymmetry of interest*, or physical or emotional desire, between partners (“I don’t understand why I feel it and he doesn’t”); (iii) problems of *infidelity or trust* (“she was like yeah I don’t know if I like trust you”); (iv) problems with *others interfering* with one’s relationship (reports of jealousy and competition; e.g., “she likes him and she’s not telling me about it”); and (v) *other* (“Cathy was really sick and I had to take care of her”, “he gets piss drunk a lot”). Independent coders reliably differentiated these types of romantic-relationship problem stories ($kappa = .82$).

Coding for mitigation

Like the notion of ‘romantic problems’, acts of mitigation are highly normative and vernacular in nature, thus eluding technical definition. To identify acts of mitigation, we therefore began broadly by defining mitigation as the effect of certain rhetorical devices which attenuate knowledge claims or emotional affect by projecting a detached, relaxed, lighthearted, unknowing, or distracted stance. To flesh this out, we began by combing through the

extant discourse analytic literature to compile a list of conversational phenomena that have been identified (to varying degrees) as rhetorical devices which allow speakers to mitigate their affective or epistemic positions with regard to problematic or sensitive topics. We generated a list that included the following rhetorical devices: The use of cultural idioms (see Potter, 1996), ignorance formulations (see Edwards & Potter, 1992), vagueness tokens (see Bird, 1996), laughter, sighs, and moans (see Goffman, 1981), topic displacements (Edwards, 2005), profanity, “dudespeak” (Kiesling, 2001), irony (Clift, 1999; Korobov, 2005), hedges, and disclaimers.

Admittedly, this list was not exhaustive, but it did provide a rich and very complex entry point for preliminary inductive coding on a subset of the data (not used for reliability). In this preliminary phase, coders were given examples of these rhetorical devices from the literature and were instructed to use them as guides for identifying methods of mitigation in the practice subset of data. After many rounds of discussion, we retained a subset of these devices to use in our analyses. We retained only those devices which seemed to be actually doing mitigation (and not blatant “disinterest,” blatant “cool stance”, etc.), had distinct boundaries from other devices (so as to avoid redundancy), and which had somewhat recognizable methods of formulation that coders could reliably seize upon.

The mitigating rhetorical devices used in this study were: *Idiomatic expressions* – the use of colloquial expressions (“whatever,” “it is what it is,” “that’s not cool”) that specifically attenuate epistemic or emotional positions so that the speaker appears nonchalant, as opposed to more prosaic types of idiomatic formulations (“it’s raining cats and dogs”) that do not necessarily attenuate one’s stance; *displays of casual ignorance* – formulations of a generalized not knowing (“I dunno,” “I have no clue”) where it is a diffused “not knowing” rather than ignorance about a specific referent (“I don’t know where my shoe is”); *laughter* – formulations of laughter as an accessory activity within expanded affiliative sequences (see Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987) – that is, laughter as a way of dressing up, inoculating or affiliating with a position so as to stymie speaker misalignment and avoid impropriety; *systematic vagueness* (see Bird, 1996) – the use of nonspecific descriptors or fillers (“she’s doing her stuff,” “he’s all blah blah blah”); *response cries* (see Goffman, 1981) – the use of gutturals, sighs, or moans that culturally index exasperation or indifference (“egghgh,” “pssshht”); and *displacement* (see Edwards, 2005) – focusing on something incidental to the main problem being discussed (“oh my feet are gross”). Because some of these rhetorical devices are paralinguistic, coding was conducted by listening to the audiotapes while reading the transcript.

Since we were interested in mitigation as a constellation of rhetorical devices that had a cumulative force within stories, we did not ask coders to differentiate among these subtypes. Instead, coders were first asked to inspect each utterance in the story to identify whether any of the subtypes were present in the utterance. The reliability of this general presence–absence category of mitigation was $kappa = .85$. Utterances that were identified as mitigations were then discussed collectively in order to determine

which rhetorical device most aptly described the form of mitigation that was used. The following excerpt is parsed by utterances in order to convey the general feeling of a range of mitigating rhetorical devices, which are italicized:

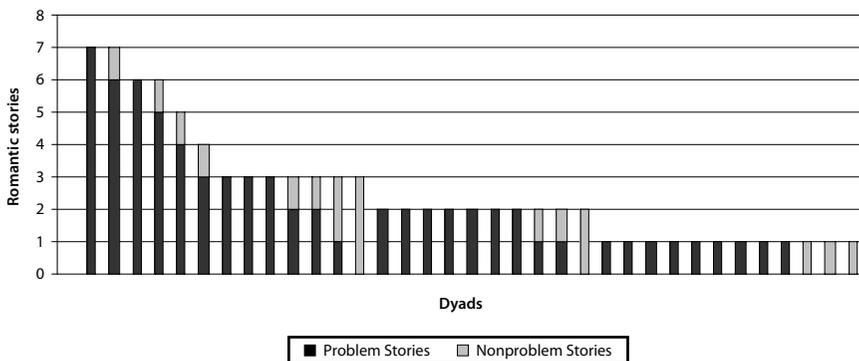
well *I don't know* if he does or not/he I mean/he doesn't allude to it/or say anything/you know/*but I just can't understand/I don't/I don't know* how/like when I-cuz when I look into his eyes/it's just like *this thing/you know/*and like *I dunno* know/he can't feel it at all/*eh psh/I dunno* he does'r not/*but whatever/anyways/...* and I was like what are you doing this weekend/*what are you doing/blah blah (.)/just shooting the shit/whatever/an' he's like* yeah maybe we should hang out this weekend/*an' I'm just like yeah whatever/you know/.*

Results and analysis

Prevalence and length of romantic problem and romantic nonproblem stories

A total of 248 stories were identified across the 64 conversations. Of these 248 stories, 65% were nonromantic stories and 35% were romantic stories. Of the 88 romantic stories, 80% were about romantic problems, and 20% were about romantic nonproblems. These percentages, however, do not take into account the fact that only about half of the dyads (35 of 64) told romantic relationship stories. Figure 1 is a case graph providing a detailed look at the distribution of romantic problem and romantic nonproblem stories told by the 35 dyads who told at least one romantic relationship story. Each column represents one dyad, and is ordered from the dyads with the greatest number of romantic stories, 7, to those with the fewest, 1.

FIGURE 1
Case graph of romantic problem and romantic nonproblem stories for dyads who told at least one romantic story ($n = 35$)



Note. Each column represents one dyad.

Prevalence of types of romantic problem stories

Figure 2 shows the proportion of each type of romantic problem that was storied. Stories about *relational instability* (50%) were the most common problem, and were over twice as prevalent as other problems, including problems of *asymmetry of interest* (21%), *infidelity* (11%), and *interference from others* (9%). Stories about relational instability emphasized the vagaries, flux, and unpredictability of one's own and others' romantic relationships, typically because of something chronic, like personality differences, communication failures, feelings of being controlled or stifled, or incompatible values or lifestyles. Because of their prevalence and relevance for the period of late adolescence (see Arnett, 2004), examples of *relational instability* will be used in the narrative descriptions of mitigation.

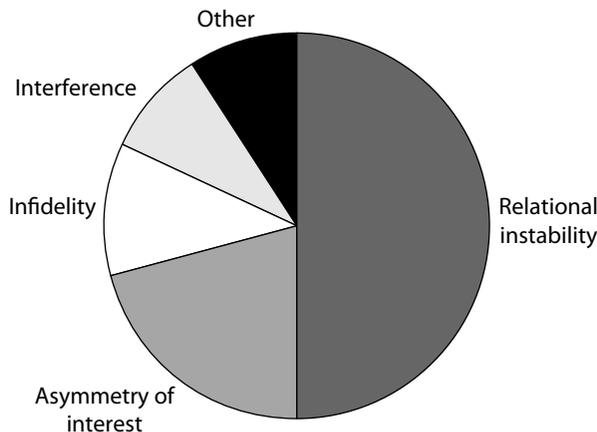
Mitigation in problem versus nonproblem romantic stories

To examine whether mitigation was more prevalent in romantic problem than nonproblem stories, we focused on the nine dyads who told both kinds of stories. Because the number of mitigation utterances can be expected to vary with the number of utterances in a story, we controlled for story length by dividing each dyad's total mitigation utterances by their total story utterances, separately for their romantic problem and nonproblem stories. A paired *t*-test confirmed that mitigation was significantly more prevalent in romantic problem stories, $M = .17$, $SD = .06$, than in romantic nonproblem stories, $M = .07$, $SD = .04$, $t(8) = 7.33$, $p < .001$.

Narrative analyses

To illustrate these findings, we offer a narrative analysis (see Bamberg, 2004, 2006; Korobov & Thorne, 2006) of select stories; we augment our analyses with discourse-analytic transcription in order to focus more subtly

FIGURE 2
Romantic problem stories ($n = 70$): Proportion of each kind of problem



on the uses of mitigating rhetorical devices (see Appendix for transcription conventions). Our analyses will specifically focus on the uses of mitigation in romantic problem versus romantic nonproblem stories in both male and female conversations; when illustrating romantic problem stories, we have chosen exemplars of the most salient problem type (*relational instability*). Stories were selected not only as clear or representative examples of said categories, but also because they displayed a range of mitigating devices, which makes for a more economical use of cases. Italicized portions of each story mark the presence of mitigating devices and their density over the course of a story. The rhetorical device itself is noted in the right margin to illustrate the texture and form of such devices.

Story 1 was produced by Carl and Mark (all names and places have been changed), who had been friends for 9 months. The story is about relational instability, at least in the eyes of the storyteller, Carl, who is critical of Mark's girlfriend, Chrissy. A surge of mitigating devices ensue, mainly from Carl (the storyteller), as they negotiate whether this is a serious problem or not.

Story 1

Romantic Problem/Story type: Relational Instability

Participants: Carl (C) and Mark (M)

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| 1. C: one time when we were all in the hall talking er <i>whatever</i> | <i>idiom</i> |
| 2. an Chrissy goes like "oh yeah that's why I don't date popular | |
| 3. guys" er <i>something</i> (1.0) <i>that</i> was like <i>fu(h)ck(h)ed (h)up</i> | <i>vagueness / idiom</i> |
| 4. ((<i>laughter</i> , 1.0)) dude (.) I was like <i>wha::t</i> ((<i>laughter</i> , 1.0)) | <i>laughter (2) / ignorance</i> |
| 5. I was like "man <i>that's not cool</i> " an' you were like " <i>pssht</i> | <i>idiom / response cry</i> |
| 6. <i>whatever</i> " (.) like " <i>whatever</i> " | <i>idiom / idiom</i> |
| 7. M: ((<i>laughing</i>)) ye(ha)h | <i>laughter</i> |
| 8. C: I was like "you should probably let him go to some parties" | |
| 9. M: [yeah | |
| 10. C: [an like ((<i>laughing</i>)) uh <i>I dunno</i> | <i>laughter / ignorance</i> |
| 11. M: yeah <i>I don't know</i> (.) she makes a lot of <i>cracks</i> like that | <i>ignorance / idiom</i> |
| 12. C: yeah(ha) ((<i>laughs</i>)) | <i>laughter</i> |
| 13. M: but she's joking so | |
| 14. C: yeah | |
| 15. M: <i>that's cool</i> though | <i>idiom</i> |
| 16. C: she (.) <i>I don't know</i> (.) se::ems like a nice girl though | <i>ignorance</i> |
| 17. like she's fun to talk to <i>and stuff</i> | <i>vagueness</i> |

The cascade of mitigating devices in this story seems to serve to manage the delicacy of the problem. Carl's initial turn is critical of Chrissy's attitude and, possibly, Mark's response, and seems strategically packed with mitigating devices. These devices partly seem to function to inoculate Carl from appearing to have a preconceived agenda for criticizing Chrissy. Carl's idiomatic use of "whatever" (line 1), the vagueness of "er something" (line 3), and his "wha::t" display of ignorance (line 4) inject vagueness and surprise into the story, making his claims appear spontaneous rather than calculated. In addition, Carl's use of laughter (lines 3–4) seems to soften his criticism, emerging right at the point where his most trenchant criticisms of Chrissy are launched ("fu(h)ck(h)ed up" and "wha::t"). From here, Carl juxtaposes his reaction ("that's not cool") with Mark's mitigating reaction ("pssht

whatever (.) like whatever”). Interestingly, Mark orients to this juxtaposition not as a challenge to which a defense must be mounted, but in an affiliating and nonchalant way, as he agrees and laughs (line 7). This move is highly important, as it stifles problem escalation and redirects the conversation to calmer waters. Mark’s mitigation displays that he is neither inclined to make much of Chrissy’s remarks nor of Carl’s criticism. Not only does Mark display that this is something he does not think much about (line 11), but he additionally characterizes it as harmless by calling them “cracks” (line 11) that are “cool” (line 15) and “joking” (line 13). Carl maintains this evaluative format (across lines 12–17), and projects a hesitant stance as well.

Story 2 is told by Chris and Seth, who had been friends for 1 year. The romantic problem discussed also fits the “relational instability” category, as it involves Chris telling a story about how his girlfriend, Stephanie, “walked out” on him the night before because she was purportedly “grumpy like usual.”

Story 2

Romantic Problem Story/Story type: Relational instability

Participants: Chris (C) – storyteller and Seth (S) – recipient

- 1. C: yeah so I have to find out after this what *the deal* is with *vagueness*
- 2. Stephanie and jus clarify everything with her
- 3. S: yeah (.) see *what’s up* *idiom*
- 4. C: hhhh. ((*sigh*)) she jus walked out last night *response cry*
- 5. S: really?
- 6. C: like *I dunno* (.) we were drinking a bunch of wine (.) *ignorance*
- 7. so I started falling asleep (.) and she was like (.) *I dunno* *ignorance*
- 8. on the computer doin’ *something* (.) an all of a sudden *vagueness*
- 9. she jus >got all up quick< and jus stormed out of the room
- 10. S: no wa::y
- 11. C: hhel-yea::h
- 12. S: do you know what it was bout?
- 13. C: ((*sigh*)) *pissh* *response cry (2)*
- 14. S: she was *jus(ah) (h)mad (ha)bout’* something? *laughter*
- 15. C: she was jus grumpy like usual
- 16. S: cause you were passing out↑ er=
- 17. C: =yeah no (.) she was jus grumpy
- 18. S: °*oh my feet are gross*° *displacement*
- 19. C: hh. yeah she jus enjoys being grumpy (.) she’s *psh* *response cry*
- 20. S: she gets a lot of attention out it
- 13. C: she gets a lot of attention

Chris employs a fair amount of mitigating devices in the first half of this story (lines 1–12) to formulate the problem in casual, sterile, and vague terms. He reports having to “clarify” “the deal” with Stephanie, which immediately characterizes the conflict in a nondescriptive, business-like, or transactional way. Seth’s use of “see what’s up” (3) is parallel in form and function. In lines 6–9, Chris offers a highly mitigated account of Stephanie’s storming off. While her exit is presented as sudden, Chris’s ignorance and vagueness formulations do very important work – they make her sudden exit appear spontaneous and uncaused by Chris, who seems (strategically) clueless as to what was going on. From here, Chris uses response cries to downplay the idea that her storming off was about something in particular, and instead repeatedly and matter of factly (15 and 17) claims that the cause

of the problem stems from Stephanie's general tendency to seek attention by being grumpy. Seth's displacement (18), where he seems to be pre-occupied with his gross feet, does not signal that he is not listening to Chris, but rather that he is on board with the preferred nonchalant format for evaluating this problem. In other words, through Chris's own use of mitigating devices, he has signaled to Seth that momentary digressions are perfectly acceptable. As such, these young men display a fluid friendship dynamic in which Seth colludes in maintaining the jocular evaluative climate that Chris initiates and controls.

The above two romantic problem stories are striking when compared with the following nonproblem story (Story 3) involving a humorous incident about Frank and his girlfriend. Frank told this story to his friend Dale; they had been friends for 8 months.

Story 3

Romantic Nonproblem Story

Participants: Frank (F) and Dale (D)

1. F: so I'm gonna tell you how much I sweat (.) right
2. (.) no seriously (.) like I was uh (.) have you ever
3. heard of Berkum Yoga?
4. D: no
5. F: allright well (.) it's this yoga place and they like
6. turn the temperature up to like 110 degrees (.) it's
7. supposed to simulate the heat of India er *whatever* *idiom*
8. (.) anyway we're down in LA (.) like my
9. girlfriend turned me on to it (.) so we both went to
10. *this place* (.) and like for some reason I sweat an *vagueness*
11. enormous amount (.) like it's freaky (.) so you know
12. you have to put your towel down on the ground and
13. like you do all these crazy yoga poses *and stuff* (.) and *vagueness*
14. stretch (.) right but like the sweat is dripping off
15. of you (.) and most people (.) they just you know
16. get the healthy glow er *whatever* (.) but I was sitting *idiom*
17. there (.) I was holding this pose (.) and there's just this
18. steady drip drip drip off me (.) and like my girlfriend
19. started laughing (.) you know (.) she started like (.)
20. anyway so by the time it was over (.) like we went
21. outside and rung out my towel (.) I swear to god like
22. a half a gallon of wate(hr) came out(h)of it (*laughing*)
23. (.) it was so funny
24. D: you have to watch out for those southern California
25. girlfriends

This story is not about a romantic relationship problem but about how Frank's girlfriend took him to do yoga (an event he ostensibly did because of his girlfriend) and how he ended up sweating a lot. The sparse use of mitigating devices in the story serves to make the sweating comedic, to develop the humor of the story. The problem in the first story, in contrast, is much more relational and much more serious, and the dense display of mitigation seems to soften the accusation that Mark's girlfriend is sadistic.

The same type of pattern is apparent in romantic problem and nonproblem stories told between female friends. The romantic problem in Story 4 about relational instability was shared between Beth and Julie, who

had been friends for 1 year. The romantic problem concerns the apprehension and uncertainty Beth feels over her recent break-up with her boyfriend.

Story 4

Romantic Problem Story/Story type: Relational instability

Participants: Beth (B) and Julie (J)

- 1. J: I still think you guys will get back together (.) but that's
- 2. just my opinion
- 3. B: god I hope so (.) but then *I dunno* (.) see then *I dunno* (.) *ignorance (2)*
- 4. cause (.) because (.) you know (.) it sort of *screwed me* *idiom*
- 5. *over* (.) not really (.) but you know (.) I'm not exactly
- 6. happy right now
- 7. J: yeah yeah obviously (.) he pulled that out of nowhere (.)
- 8. but then you think about it in like (.) like I said perspective
- 9. (.) he's leaving next quarter right (.) isn't he graduating?
- 10. B: he's graduating (.) yeah next quarter (.) spring
- 11. J: spring (.) interesting
- 12. B: eh four months *it's nothing* *idiom*
- 13. J: yeah (.) I know that's true (.) that's true
- 14. B: that is (.) that is (.) *it is just nothing* (.) and it's just *eighth* *idiom / resp. cry*
- 15. but *I keep going through my head* (.) what did I do wrong *idiom*
- 16. J: but you know you didn't do anything wrong
- 17. B: I know (.) well that's cuz (.) you know (.) I'm not perfect
- 18. J: neither is he (.) *I mean I am but that's different* *displacement*
- 19. *((both laugh, 3.0))* *laughter*
- 20. J: but see it's always the guy (.) they're always wrong (.)
- 21. *look at Jason* (.) he's always wrong *displacement*
- 22. B: I know but you [know I
- 23. J: [and even when *he's right* (.) *he's wrong* *idiom*
- 24. *((laugh, 2.0))* *laughter*
- 25. B: cuz he's with you?
- 26. J: yeah (.) cause I'm perfect
- 27. B: well then of cours(h)e's wr(h)ong *((laughing))* *laughter*
- 28. J: exactly
- 29. B: yeah but *I don't know* (.) it's just like it's like I feel like I did *ignorance*
- 30. (.) you know I could have done something else (.) but he just
- 31. didn't give me the chance to (.) you know (.) make up for it
- 32. J: like I'm saying *((in urban accent))* that is his *bad* (.) n' *idiom*
- 33. I's jus gonna *take you the club an' just show you off* *displacement*

In this story, Beth equivocates about two dilemmas: Uncertainty about getting back together with her boyfriend, and uncertainty about feeling responsible for their problems. She mitigates her eagerness to get back together (lines 3–4) and to position herself as able to tolerate the next four months of having to see him (lines 12–14). She thus downplays the appearance of being needy, restless, or weak. She does not, however, mitigate the guilt she feels about having done something wrong (line 15), suggesting that there is something normative (for these young women) about displaying guilt about relational problems (see Tolman, 2002). Here is where Julie's use of mitigation, in the form of displacement (lines 18 and 21) and laughter (lines 19, 24), become instrumental for encouraging Beth to avoid self-blame. Julie effectively displaces the problem onto different issues, ones that involve ironic exaggerations (lines 18, 21, 26–27), appeals to stereotypical gender scripts (lines 20 and 23), and idiomatic coping activities (line 33). These

displacements do not trivialize Beth's problems, but rather offer a lighter perspective on them, one that effectively positions Julie and Beth as women who are able to be playfully aloof and ironic about their insecurities. All of this is brought off expressly through the subtle use of mitigating devices.

Story 5 is told by Angie and Jen, who had known each other for 9 months. The romantic problem discussed also fits the "relational instability" category, as it involves Jen discussing the uncertain state of her relationship with Steve following their "break-up" conversation.

Story 5

Romantic Problem Story/Story type: Relational instability

Participants: Angie (A) and Jen (J)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. A: did you and Steve work out your uh <i>stuff</i> ? | <i>vagueness</i> |
| 2. J: yeah yeah (.) pretty much (.) I mean it's still to me kinda weird cause it's the first time we've ever had that kind of conversation (.) where like (.) you know I wanna break up with you <i>kinda thing</i> (.) like almost threatening our relationship (.) like that's never happened (.) an I know it's just his immaturity you know (.) but= | <i>vagueness</i> |
| 8. A: =oh yeah (.) he wants to know how much you= | |
| 9. J: =exactly= | |
| 10. A: = really (.) <i>eighh</i> = | <i>response cry</i> |
| 11. J: =exactly (.) you know he (.) I mean he basically wanted me to cry about it (.) you know (.) he even said "that's exactly what I wanted to hear" an all <i>this stuff</i> an it's like <i>give me a break</i> | <i>vagueness</i>
<i>idiom</i> |
| 15. [...] | |
| 16. A: uhum | |
| 17. J: I mean everything will work out (.) I mean I asked you know (.) Marcie about it an she said um (.) that you know it's normal <i>and stuff</i> (.) so | <i>vagueness</i> |
| 20. A: oh | |
| 21. J: you know (.) that you know it's like the threatening relationship <i>thing</i> is like <i>no big deal</i> (1.0) I'm just like (.) oh I guess not but I= | <i>vagueness / idiom</i> |
| 24. A: no it isn't (.) <i>I-I played a trick on my ex</i> (.) we went out junior year (.) and was like saying all <i>these things</i> to try to make me jealous (.) "oh:: this girl wants me this girl wants me" (.) and I was like "you know once this guy used to tell me about all these girls just to (.) and they weren't even true (.) just to see how I'd react" | <i>displacement</i>
<i>vagueness</i> |
| 30. J: OH was that that Alex guy? | |
| 31. A: ((<i>laughing</i>)) YEAHP(hh). | <i>laughter</i> |
| 32. J: ((deep voice)) "my name's ALEX MARTINES" ((<i>laughs</i>)) | <i>laughter</i> |
| 33. A: ALEX (.) he should be on Buffy the Vampire Slayer ((<i>laughs</i> , 2.0)) ((mocking voice)) "my name is ALEX (.) ALL these girls want me" (1.0) yeah that was him he was a ridiculous one | <i>laughter</i> |
| 37. J: yeah (.) I mean they're so insecure like that | |

Angie and Jen both use mitigation to soften problem formulation and evaluation. There is an elegant symmetry from lines 7 to 11 where they seem to complete each other's thoughts, displaying a synchronicity in problem construction and evaluation, and by extension, friendship dynamics, which is nicely capped off with Angie's response cry of "eighh" (line 10) and Jen's

immediate agreement (“exactly”). Additionally interesting is that the way mitigation is used in the terminal environment of this story (lines 24–35). In line 23, Jen displays uncertainty (“I guess not but I”) about whether she really agrees with Marcie’s statement that all of this is really “no big deal.” Jen’s uncertainty occasions Angie’s displacement and terminal run of nonchalance. Angie displaces the focus onto a second story about her ex-boyfriend, Alex, and uses it to expose the insecure games that guys play to provoke reactions from their girlfriends. By caricaturing Alex’s gamesmanship (lines 33–35) and by calling it “ridiculous” (line 36), Angie suggests that men’s relational threats are facile, thus aligning herself with Marcie’s sentiments that this is all, in fact, “no big deal.” The effect: Jen colludes (line 37) with Angie’s mitigating work. Again, by coupling problem talk with mitigation, an elegant friendship synchronicity is established.

It is interesting to compare the prior two female problem stories with a nonproblem story between Erin and Tessa, who had been friends for 8 months (Story 6). The story involves Erin and Tessa talking about giving and receiving massages with their boyfriends, and centers specifically on a story by Tessa about scratching her boyfriend’s back.

Story 6

Romantic Nonproblem Story

Participants: Erin (E) and Tessa (T)

1. E: I just want someone to massage my feet
2. T: Mark doesn’t massage my feet (.) I don’t want him to
3. massage my feet (.) I’m afraid like I=
4. E: =that he’ll tickle you?
5. T: well yeah (.) my feet are ticklish (.) but like I mean
6. there’s other things I’d rather he massage (1.0) I’d like
7. a back massage more than a foot massage
8. E: I would like a full massage (.) like a leg massage up to
9. my knee (.) like first you give me a massage and then
10. you know (.) you paint my toenails
11. T: ((*laughing*)) ye(h)a(ha) *laughter*
12. E: I think that would be the *most* romantic thing if a guy
13. actually painted my toenails
14. T: I never thought of *that* before
15. E: oh: come on (.) you have to admit (.) you know (.) he
16. grabs::: your feet and (.) mmm
17. T: now let’s um::: (.) think (.) actually I really like scratching
18. his back (.) he really likes it (.) like he’ll just be laying
19. down on the sofa bed watching TV and sports and I’ll
20. come over and sit next to him (.) I’ll star::t (.) especially
21. when my nails get long (.) and he’ll be like “lower higher
22. lower” (.) and I’m like don’t get picky or I’ll stop
23. E: I just like the whole skin on skin
24. T: yeah
25. E: like if I was just you know (.) doing patterns on
26. someone’s back (.) I’d love it when you like=
27. T: =totally (.) yeah
28. E: like don’t stop (.) it’s just=
29. T: =it’s so go:::od

The contrast between this story and the female romantic problem stories is apparent. This nonproblem story shows almost no “trouble” and hence

very little mitigation. The laughter in line 11 is affiliative laughter (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987) which treats Erin's request not as a selfish demand but as an ironic or playful and thus potentially idealistic suggestion. Although they allude to several nonromantic problems, such as Tessa being afraid of having her boyfriend massage her feet (line 3), and Tessa's boyfriend potentially getting too picky (line 22), neither reference is mitigated. Like Frank's sweating problem, these seem to be trivial problems that do not require face-work or much interpersonal cushioning.

Discussion

Several findings were key for this study of how late adolescents positioned themselves with regard to romantic relationship problems. First, when left to talk in a predominately unstructured environment, one-third of the stories produced by these late adolescents were about romantic relationships, an amount strikingly similar to the proportion of romantic relationship stories found in a study of late adolescents' self-defining memory narratives (McLean & Thorne, 2003). Second, the vast majority of these romantic stories were about problems, suggesting that romantic problems are a major concern of Euro-American late adolescents, and a central way in which romantic experiences are endowed with meaning in conversations with friends. And finally, evaluations of romantic problems were particularly likely to be mitigated or softened, both by the storyteller and listening friend. In this discussion, we consider the age-developmental meaning of the findings, and their implications for how storytelling between friends can contour personal and social identity.

The most common type of romantic problem story concerned the instability of the romantic relationship. Case analyses of such stories suggested that friends participated in deciding whether a romantic problem was worth worrying about, and in cyclically softening the seriousness of the problem. This softening seemed to serve personal and social development in that the softening served to save face about a delicate topic (e.g., being dumped by one's boyfriend), and to grease the "doing" of friendships by keeping interpersonal dynamics fluid and inoculated from misalignment. Some of the softening of troubles seemed to approximate an adult-like strategy by stifling problem escalation (minimizing it through agreement and laughter) and reformulating the problem in playful terms. In another example, friends worked together to normalize the problem of an impending break-up, while encouraging the protagonist to avoid self-blame. The problem of taking responsibility for romantic problems loomed large in the storytelling, and was both an individual and a shared project, jointly negotiated between friends. Being able to put a problem into perspective by normalizing it and not personalizing it is arguably a useful strategy for handling complex adult romantic problems. As such, the prevalence of romantic instability stories may reflect the pull of the burgeoning adult imperative to develop romantic relationships that are anchored by stability, mutual understanding, sustained commitment, and shared values (see Arnett, 2004).

The finding that mitigation was more prevalent in telling romantic problems than nonproblems suggests that it was important for these late adolescents to present (and extend as a position to be taken up) a cavalier stance about the instability of romantic relationships. Although some mitigating strategies certainly begin to get tried out earlier in adolescence, mitigation seems to be a well-developed and stylized friendship practice for late adolescents as they “catch up” with each other’s problems. By softening the threat of the uncertainty and confusion of romantic relationships, these late adolescents were able to present themselves as concerned but not burdened by the vagaries of romance. Peppering one’s problems with mitigation seemed to afford a dip back into adolescence just enough to appear relaxed or carefree, and not to overwhelm one’s friends with heavy problem talk. Mitigating devices did not negate so much as filter the seriousness of the problems, thus making the problems safe for casual consumption. What we seem to be witnessing here, at a very nuanced level of discursive detail, is the kind of straddling and vacillating between adolescent and adult norms that are presumed to be characteristic in young adult romantic identity development (see Arnett, 2004; Côté, 1996).

We suspect that the mitigation that framed the production of romantic problems was partly driven by the social expectation to not burden friends by displaying heavy vulnerability. College students’ written autobiographical memory narratives, which are not directed toward an immediate audience, have been found to show considerable vulnerability (Thorne & McLean, 2003). For example, the tone of romantic stories in written memory narratives is often very serious and heartfelt (McLean & Thorne, 2003). However, written accounts of having told serious problems to family members and friends have shown that vulnerable self-presentations tend to be rejected by listeners, whereas accounts of having mastered the problem are more often accepted (Thorne & McLean, 2003). Thus, in the context of ongoing conversations between friends, positioning oneself in slightly jocular ways with regard to relationship problems may be a means of sharing a problem without unduly burdening the listener in the process.

Such relational acumen may be a burgeoning feature of late adolescence and early adulthood, particularly in comparison to the way romantic problems tend to be formulated in early and middle adolescence. Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin (1994) and Rose (2002) have found that early and middle adolescents (females in particular) tend to coruminate or escalate romantic problems in same-sex peer contexts. On the surface, this kind of boosting or upgrading (Caffi, 1999) seems to be the antithesis of mitigation, as it reflects dyadic forms of self-disclosure that involves excessive negative dwelling on problems. Rose (2002) argues that corumination practices may peak in friendships during adolescence, especially within the context of talk about romantic relationships. However, because corumination is also predictive of emotional problems (depression and anxiety), it is possible that late adolescents are working together to avoid such tendencies by developing social practices (i.e., the use of mitigating rhetoric) that can stifle the escalation of negative evaluations. Contrary to what we might

expect for younger adolescents, who seem more inclined to ratchet up the complexities of romance and dating, these late adolescents seemed skilled at attenuating their romantic problems in effortless and seamless ways.

Overall, there seems to be a dilemma at play for late adolescents. On the one hand, there is the emerging adult pull toward talking about serious romantic experiences, perhaps as a way of figuring out what one wants and does not want in a love relationship (see Arnett, 2004); conversely, the notion of settling down into a serious relationship can be perceived as a pull into dangerous waters, particularly for youth whose career prospects and social lives may be compromised by settling down too soon. In such circumstances, it may be normative to soften the appearance of being someone overly invested in settling down or taking things too seriously too soon. In so doing, young adults can venture into the uncharted waters of serious romantic problem talk with a familiar-enough tool-kit of mitigating resources to handle the inevitable ebb and flow of talking intimately, and thus securing interpersonal intimacy, without alienating oneself from one's friends by appearing excessively freighted by romantic difficulties.

Given our limited sample size and its demographic homogeneity – largely White, heterosexual college-age students – there are limitations regarding the generalizability of our findings. Currie (2005) has argued that the “whatever” attitude perhaps found in excessive mitigation practices is primarily a White, middle-class, adolescent phenomenon. As such, we suspect that there may be considerable variation in the use of mitigation by other racial and ethnic groups in discussing romantic problems (see Robinson & Ward, 1991; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). With regard to age, we believe that mitigation is a quotidian social practice that straddles the periods of adolescence and early adulthood, and is less prevalent in the romantic stories of older adults; this too, remains to be studied. It would also be useful to examine mitigation in conversations between mixed-gender friends, since such friendships become more salient across adolescence, and in conversations about homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships.

It is also important to consider whether the context of the conversations pressed for mitigation. The “catch-up” conversational format may have been an optimal climate for the expression of mitigation. Because the conversations were on the spot, and audio-recorded (albeit behind closed doors), we were frankly surprised that romantic relationship stories were told at all, let alone that such stories would comprise one-third of the stories that were told. Mitigating devices may not have been as apparent had we used interviewers, who tend to request elaborations of positions that are softened (see Puchta & Potter, 2002). Mitigation may have also been less apparent if the participants had not known that their conversations were being audio-taped, since knowing that they were being audio-taped may have led them to tread lightly and produce extraordinary amounts of mitigation. Clearly, future research will have to be more innovative in capturing casual conversations that are not produced for a microphone. It is also important to compare patterns of mitigation in other kinds of problem stories in order

to determine whether mitigation is specific to romantic problem stories, or more generalized. In general, we expect that mitigation will emerge in a variety of *relational* problem stories (of which romance is one category), but will less often emerge in nonrelational problem stories, for example car problems, computer glitches, and the morning commute.

Connecting a view of identity development with a nuanced analysis of late adolescent's storied negotiation and interactive resolution of romantic problems opens up an important realm for research in social development. A focus on the "fine-tuning" of romantic problems via mitigation during a pivotal period of protracted identity exploration offers a relatively novel method for exploring the coalescence of personal and social identities. No longer are we forced to fixate on static snap-shots of romantic attitudes or expressions isolated from social intercourse; rather, a narrative-processual approach shows us, in real time and with real talk, how late adolescents jointly attenuate their romantic problems and, by extension, delay full entry into adulthood. Exploring the turn-by-turn incremental mitigation of adult-like concerns in late-adolescent conversations is crucial for understanding onto- and socio-genesis in their full particularity. The story-telling space is therefore not a repository but an active and creative arena in which distinctively "late adolescent" identities are fashioned, repeatedly practised, and then consolidated into what may later appear to be emblematic or stable *personal* identities. It is thus in the unfolding of conversational practices where late adolescent's social and personal identities emerge. Although typically underemphasized, we believe this is a pivotal insight that stands as a vanguard for a new ontology of social identity, where conversational practices are posited as the basic unit of social development.

Overall, viewing acts of mitigation as routinely filtering the casual romantic problem stories of late adolescents suggests a new and rather innovative way of studying how peers influence the meanings that are made of romantic relationship experiences. The impact of peers on romantic experiences could be better understood by attending to the qualitative negotiation of problems and dilemmas that not only dominate romantic relationship talk, but also drive aspects of identity development. Late adolescents' frequent uses of mitigation to handle the negotiation of romantic problems with their friends emerged frequently in these stories, providing vivid examples by which to understand how romantic relationships are delicate psychosocial identity business. Exploring the nuances of romantic relationship storytelling is a rich area for narrative inquiry.

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