



Vol. 13, No. 1, 2020

DOI: 10.2478/jgp-2020-0001

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Transparency dilemma in interpersonal relationships

ABSTRACT. Humans as social animals move from being strangers to becoming intimate by taking risks of engaging in self-disclosure—from sharing insignificant bits of information to details about their beliefs, opinions, lifestyles, prejudices, and values. Romantic and intimate relationships come about when players peel away their outer layers and allow others to get closer to their core. However, as couples become more familiar, they experience certain tensions known as relational dialectics. These are autonomy versus connection, novelty versus predictability, and openness versus transparency (openness). This paper presents the findings of a survey of the perceptions about these tensions among the Hispanic-America college students (N=108). The subjects rank-order these tensions in terms of their importance, and the level of difficulty in dealing with the tensions.

KEYWORDS: interpersonal communication, interpersonal relationships, gender communication, relational tensions, inconsistency of social needs

Introduction

The desire for meaningful friendships and relationships is a basic need among humans. In most of the western countries, children's first interaction with people other than their family members occurs on the first day at the nursery school or the kindergarten. Almost instantly, children begin to make friends. For adults, social needs follow immediately after physiological and safety needs (Maslow, 1954). While social closeness, intimacy, belonging, and marital bonding are dictated by cultures and their traditions, the desire for forging romantic relationships transcends all cultures and value systems.

Although people's choices in making friends and selecting romantic partners are voluntary, these actions are governed by cultures (individualistic vs collectivist), cultural traditions (Hall, 1959) and display rules (Saarni, 1993;

Soto, Levenson & Ebling, 2005). One of the best-known models for the development of relationships was proposed by Knapp, Vangelisti, & Caughlin (2014). Knapp et. al. proposed a 10-step model from “initiating” to “termination”. Other interpersonal communication scholars (Mongeau & Henningsen, 2008; Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009) have argued that a relational model ought to include relational maintenance for keeping a relationship running smoothly. Rehman (2015) offered a three-stage model that included the formative stage, maintenance stage, and a dissolution stage.

There is a common agreement in all relational models. Every relationship begins with physical attraction. Appearance is a critical factor in the initial stages of any relationship (Mehrabian & Blum, 2003; Swami & Furnham, 2008). In the “hook up” phenomenon of recent years, physical appearance is the primary basis for attraction for “speed daters” (Luo & Zhang, 2009).

Once past the point of physical attraction, both players want to determine the potential for a relationship. This exploration is accomplished through safe and harmless self-disclosure (Petronio, 2002; Erwin & Pressler, 2011). If both partners sense reciprocity in disclosure, it is likely that both may disclose more of their opinions, beliefs, and fears by peeling off the outer layers (Altman & Taylor, 1973). During such an exchange of sharing, the individuals are trying to forge a relationship that becomes a source of strength and security. However, in trying to gain such strength one must expose one’s innermost feelings, fears, and weaknesses. In so doing, an individual may feel a sense of vulnerability. Thus, a relational tension: emotional strength comes at the cost of becoming vulnerable.

Based on the works of several communication scholars (Gamble & Gamble, 2014; Adler & Proctor, 2016; McCornack, 2016), it may be concluded that for most of the people, six relational needs are important in interpersonal relationships. These are:

Autonomy (a desire to retain one’s identity and freedom.)

Connection (a desire to connect with another.)

Novelty (a desire for new experiences.)

Predictability (a desire to be certain what the other person will do.)

Transparency (a desire to be open with the other about important things.)

Protection (a desire to conceal somethings from the other in order not to become vulnerable.)

These six needs lead to three relational tensions. For instance, the need to connect with another comes at the cost of one’s autonomy; desire

for novelty threatens the need for predictability, and the need for transparency (openness) impends one's need to protect personal/intimate information. Three relational tensions are:

Connection vs. Autonomy, Novelty vs. Predictability, and Transparency vs. Protection.

The present study attempts to determine the importance of each of these relational needs, and the (difficulty) in the management of the three relational tensions by college-age, Hispanic-American men and women. The data are analyzed for three variables: gender, age, and relational status.

Sample and Methodology

The sample consisted of 108 undergraduate students at a state-supported, regional, mid-size campus in a central-southern state where the student body is composed of 96% Hispanic Americans. The students were enrolled in four different sections of an introductory course in Interpersonal Communication. One section met twice a week on late mornings of Tuesdays and Thursdays, another group met in the afternoons. Two additional groups of students met once-a-week in evening classes. The rationale for this choice was to obtain a cross-section of day and evening students. All four sections were chosen randomly.

The participants completed a 12-item self-administered paper and pencil survey. The subjects were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they were not required to write their names or other identifying information on the survey, and that the topic of the survey related to one of the chapters in their textbook for the course. The principal researcher visited the classes personally, explained the study to the students and collected the data.

Since all items on the instrument were either close-ended demographic questions or Likert-scale items, it is safe to say that there was no coder bias in interpreting the responses. The data, for the most part, were treated either as nominal or ordinal in nature. Only the nonparametric statistics (*t*-test and Spearman's Rank Order Coefficient) were used for the analysis¹.

¹ The author used GraphPad: <https://www.graphpad.com/quickcalcs/ttest1/?Format=SD> for *t* test analyses, and Social Science Statistics: <https://www.socscistatistics.com/tests/spearman/default2.aspx> for Spearman's Rho calculations, and, <https://www.socscistatistics.com/tests/chisquare2/default2.aspx> for Chi-Square calculations.

The survey instrument included six Likert-scale items about the importance/significance of the six specific relational needs. The subjects expressed their opinions on items using a five-point scale: 5 as “very important” and 1 as “not at all important.” Another item asked the respondents to identify the relational need that was the easiest for them to manage. The next item asked which was the most difficult to manage. The final question asked which the most difficult dialectical tension was to manage. The aim was to uncover any difference among men and women in regard to the importance of relational needs and management of relational tensions. Similar analyses were undertaken for age and relational status. Primarily three sets of assumptions were tested. These were:

1. Gender and the importance given to relational needs.
2. Gender and management of relational tensions.
3. Age and importance given to relational needs.
4. Age and management of relational tensions.
5. Influence of marital status on the importance placed on relational needs.
6. Relational status and management of relational tensions.

The data and findings are presented in the following four sections. The first section presents the data for the entire sample. The next three focus on the three variables being analyzed.

Sample Profile

The sample consisted of 35 males (32.4%), and 73 females (67.6%). As expected, most of the undergraduate students 58 (54%) were 20-years old or younger. 40 (37%) of the respondents were in the 21–25 years group, and 10 (9%) were older. For the purpose of this analysis, the second and the third group were combined to form the ‘over-20-years group. Among the respondents, forty-four (40.7%) were single, 52 (48%) stated they were in a relationship, and 12 (11%) were married. The individuals who reported as being in a relationship or married were combined and treated as one group labeled as—In-a-Relationship.

Importance of Relational Needs

The questions asked: *How important is this need for you?* The scores ranged from 1 to 5. Table 1 presents the sample’s average scores and ranking of these needs.

Table 1. Importance of Relational Needs as Ranked by the Sample

Relational needs	Average	Ranking
Transparency	4.519	1
Connection	4.389	2
Novelty	4.241	3
Protection	4.019	4
Autonomy	3.648	5
Predictability	2.982	6

For the overall sample, transparency (openness) and connection ranked at the top; while autonomy and predictability were ranked as less important.

Managing Relational Needs

When asked which one of the six relational needs was the easiest to manage, the three most favored needs were *Connection*, *Transparency*, and *Autonomy*. The data are presented in table 2.

Table 2. The Relational Need Easiest for me to Manage

Ranking	Relational Need	Raw Score	Percent
#1	Connection	46	42.6
#2	Transparency	26	24.0
#3	Autonomy	22	20.4
#4	Protection	6	5.6
#5*	Novelty	4	3.7
#5*	Predictability	4	3.7
	Total	108	100

* Novelty and Predictability are tied in the fifth place.

In response to the most difficult need to manage, the need for transparency topped the list. The respondents' rankings are displayed in table 3.

A possible explanation that there isn't a perfect, or near-perfect inverse relationship between the easiest and the hardest needs to negotiate may stem from the differences due to gender, age, and relational status. However, the respondents do show consistency in their responses. For instance, when asked, which need was the easiest to manage, Connection was at the top of the list. When asked which was the most difficult, Connection was at the bottom of the list.

Table 3. The Most Difficult Relational Need for me to Manage

Ranking	Relational Need	Raw Score	Percent
#1	Transparency	36	33.3
#2	Protection	22	20.4
#3	Autonomy	20	18.5
#4	Predictability	14	12.9
#5	Novelty	10	9.3
#6	Connection	6	5.6
	Total	108	100

When asked: Which is the most difficult rational tension to cope with, most of the respondents said that Transparency vs. Prediction was the most difficult, and Connection vs. Autonomy was the easiest. Table 4 presents these data.

Table 4. The most Difficult Relational Tension to Manage

Relational Tension	Raw Score	Percentage	Ranking
1. Transparency vs. Protection	54	50	1
2. Connection vs. Autonomy	38	35	2
3. Novelty vs. Predictability	16	15	3
	108	100	

It is apparent from the descriptive data that the respondents desired transparency in a relationship and yet it was the most difficult to manage. It is, therefore, not surprising that Transparency vs. Protection seemed to be the most troublesome relational arrangement to navigate. A closer look at gender, age, and marital status, revealed some interesting (statistically significant) differences

Gender

The sample consisted of 35 men and 73 women. An analysis of the importance of the relational needs based on gender revealed that Connection, Transparency, and Novelty were the top-three choices for men. These were also the three top-choices for women. Protection, Predictability, and Autonomy were ranked lower by both groups.

Table 5. Gender and Importance of Relational Needs

Relational Needs	Men (N=35)		Women (73)		T =	Two-tailed P-value
	\bar{X}	St. Dev	\bar{X}	St. Dev		
Autonomy	3.66	0.84	3.64	0.95	0.1062	0.9156
Connection	4.37	0.77	4.40	0.72	0.1981	0.8433
Predictability	2.80	0.93	3.07	1.02	1.3238	0.1884
Novelty	4.23	0.81	4.25	0.64	0.1392	0.8896
Transparency	4.69	0.47	4.44	0.65	2.0327	0.0446*
Protection	2.66	1.21	3.19	1.06	2.3217	0.0222*

* The difference is statistically significant.

The analysis reveals statistically significant differences for two relational needs—Transparency which is deemed more important by men, and protection which is considered more important by women.

To analyze the perceptions of ease in negotiating the six needs, Spearman's rank correlation (Spearman's rho) was employed. The differences between men and women were not significant. Both groups ranked Connection, Transparency, and Autonomy as the top-three, in the exact identical order. The only difference was that men ranked Predictability at the 6th place while women placed Protection in the bottom. Both groups placed Novelty at # 5.

In ranking the hardest need to manage, men and women ranked these differently and the differences were significant. Both groups reported that transparency, Autonomy, and Protection were difficult to manage. Table 6 presents these data.

Table 6. Gender and the Hardest Need to Manage (#1 being the hardest)

Difficult to Manage	Ranked by Men	Ranked by Women
Transparency	1	1
Autonomy	2	3
Protection	3	2
Predictability	4	4
Novelty	5	5
Connection	6	5

Spearman's rho $r_s = 0.97276$; p (2-tailed) = 0.00767.

As per table 1., the need for transparency was perceived as the most important by the overall sample and yet it was also perceived as the most difficult to manage by both men and women.

The instrument included the question: Among the three relational tensions, which one do you find the most difficult to manage? Both men and women reported that Transparency vs. Protection was the most difficult to manage. For both groups, the smallest percentages reported that Novelty vs. Predictability was the most difficult. The data are displayed in table 7.

Table 7. Gender and the Most Difficult Relational Tension

Relational Tensions	Men (35)	Women (73)
Transparency vs. Protection	19 (54.3%)	35 (48%)
Autonomy vs. Connection	14 (40%)	24 (33%)
Novelty vs. Predictability	2 (5.7%)	14 (19%)

It is obvious that Transparency vs. Protection tension poses a greater challenge for both groups than Autonomy vs. Connection or Novelty vs. Predictability. The present data suggest that men and women seem to have similar perceptions of the importance of relational needs, as well as the management of the relational tensions.

Age

As stated earlier, 58 (54%) of the participants were 20 years of age or younger, the remaining 50 (46%) were grouped into “over 20-years of age” category. For both groups, Transparency was the most important need, and Predictability was the least important. For five out of the six needs, the two groups were identical, i.e. no statistically significant differences. However, in the case of Autonomy, the older group valued it more so than the younger group. This difference is significant.

Table 8. Age and Importance of Relational Needs

Relational Needs	\bar{X}	20-years or younger (N=58)	\bar{X}	Over 20 year (N=50)	$t =$	Two-tailed P-value
		St. Dev		St. Dev		
Autonomy	3.48	0.80	3.84	0.90	2.2006	0.0299*
Connection	4.35	0.85	4.44	0.58	0.6323	0.5286
Predictability	2.86	0.97	3.12	1.01	1.3627	0.1759

Novelty	4.17	0.79	4.32	0.56	1.1212	0.2647
Transparency	4.55	0.68	4.48	0.50	0.6010	0.5491
Protection	2.90	1.20	3.16	1.06	1.1845	0.2389

* The difference is statistically significant.

When asked which the easiest relational need was to manage, the two groups differed significantly. The rankings by the two groups are presented in table 9.

Table 9. Age and the Easiest Need to Manage (#1 being the easiest)

Easy to Manage	Ranked by Under-20	Ranked by over 20
Connection	1	1
Transparency	2	3
Autonomy	3	2
Predictability	4	5
Novelty	4	5
Protection	4	4

$r_s = 0.8933$; p (2-tailed) = 0.0165

The difference in the ranking by the two age groups is statistically significant. The younger group claims that Transparency is easier to manage while the older group reports Autonomy as an easier need to manage. The rankings for the hardest need to manage also reveal statistically significant differences. These data are presented in table 10.

Table 10. Age and the Hardest Need to Manage (#1 being the hardest)

Difficult to Manage	Ranked by Under-20	Ranked by over 20
Transparency	1	1
Autonomy	2	3
Protection	3	2
Predictability	4	3
Novelty	5	5
Connection	6	5

$r_s = 0.8827$; p (2-tailed) = 0.0198

The difference in ranking of the needs of the two age-groups is statistically significant. In regard to the management of the three tensions, both

groups reported that Transparency vs. Protection tension posed a greater challenge than Autonomy vs. Connection or Novelty vs. Predictability. In this regard, there was no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of the two groups.

Table 11. Age and the Most Difficult Relational Tension

Relational Tensions	20 years old or Younger	Over 20 years of age
Transparency vs. Protection	31 (51.7%)	24 (48%)
Autonomy vs. Connection	21 (38%)	16 (32%)
Novelty vs. Predictability	6 (10.3%)	10 (20%)

The chi-square statistic is 1.985. The p-value is .3707. The result is not significant.

The differences are not significant however, the tendency to identify Transparency vs. Protection as the most difficult to manage holds true regardless of age.

Relational Status

The sample consisted of 44 (41%) respondents who reported as being single, and the remaining 64 (59%) were in a relationship. The perceived importance of relational needs is presented in table 12.

Table 12. Relational Status and Importance of Relational Needs

Relational Needs	Single (N=44)		In a Relationship (64)		T =	Two-tailed P-value
	\bar{X}	St. Dev	\bar{X}	St. Dev		
Autonomy	3.73	0.87	3.59	0.95	0.7784	0.4381
Connection	4.00	0.86	4.66	0.72	4.3216	0.0001*
Predictability	2.82	0.72	3.09	1.02	1.5146	0.1329
Novelty	4.00	0.75	4.41	0.64	3.0485	0.0029*
Transparency	4.23	0.68	4.72	0.65	3.7777	0.0003*
Protection	3.14	0.98	2.94	1.23	0.8996	0.3704

* The difference is statistically significant.

The data indicate that people in relationships place a higher value on connection, novelty, and transparency than single people.

Table 13. Relational Status and the Easiest Relational Need to Manage as Ranked by the Sample

Relational needs	Single (N=44)	Ranking	In a Relationship (N=64)	Ranking
Connection	20	1	26	1
Transparency	10	2	16	2
Autonomy	10	2	12	3
Predictability	3	4	2	6
Protection	2	5	4	4
Novelty	0	6	4	4

$r_s = 0.7941$, p (2-tailed) 0.0592. The difference is not significant.

Table 14. Relational Status and the Hardest Relational Need to Manage as Ranked by the Sample

Relational needs	Single (N=44)	Ranking	In a Relationship (N=64)	Ranking
Transparency	4.23	1	4.72	1
Connection	4.00	2	4.66	2
Novelty	4.00	2	4.41	3
Autonomy	3.73	4	3.59	4
Protection	3.14	5	2.98	6
Predictability	2.82	6	3.09	5

$r_s = 0.9276$, p (2-tailed) = 0.0077. The results are significant.

The data suggest that people in relationships find it harder to cope with the novelty need than single people.

Table 15. Relational Status and the Most Difficult Relational Tension to Manage

Relational Tensions	Single	In a Relationship
Transparency vs. Protection	22 (50%)	32 (50%)
Autonomy vs. Connection	17 (38.6%)	20 (31.25%)
Novelty vs. Predictability	5 (11.4%)	12 (18.75%)

The chi-square statistic is 1.319. The p -value is .5171. The difference is not significant.

Statistically, there are no differences between the two groups—the singles and those in a relationship. However, it is evident from the data that Transparency vs. Protection is perceived as the most difficult relational tension to manage.

Discussion

The sample from the preset study lists transparency and connection as the key catalysts in forging an interpersonal relationship and the tension caused by the dichotomy of openness vs transparency as the most difficult to manage. These findings agree with previous studies (Petronio, 2002; Swami & Furnham, 2008). The biggest challenge to a relationship comes from the tension caused by the needs for transparency (openness) and protection (how much to disclose without becoming vulnerable). This was the tension identified as the most difficult to manage by the sample of the present study. This was also true when the data were scrutinized for variables such as gender, age, and relational status.

Historically, all social sciences research in anthropology, sociology, psychology, social psychology, political science, consumer behavior, and economics has treated gender as a major differentiating variable. With the changing gender politics and changes in career options, lifestyles, and financial independence, one can't help but notice that many of the gender-specific assumptions no longer hold true. As heads of families, as managers in workplaces, and decision-makers for major purchases, women have come to think, behave, and stereotype in the same ways as men. As a result, there are fewer studies that report significant differences based on gender. The data from the present study also hovers over the border of "no differences based on gender".

There are two factors that may explain the lack of difference among men and women in relation to our research question. First, American popular literature, as well as academic textbooks on interpersonal communication, put a great deal of emphasis on "honesty" and "openness" in relationships, making these as universal desirables rather than culture-specific that these are (Gamble & Gamble, 2014; Adler & Proctor, 2016; McCornack, 2016; Beebe, Beebe & Redmond, 2020). While greeting with a stranger with a smile, maintaining eye-contact while in conversation, and a firm handshake are signs of open communication in the American culture, in other cultures, refraining from smiling, not making eye contact, refusing to shake hands, and crossing one's arms across the chest are not codes of refusing an open communication. Similarly, "having no secrets" among intimate partners is not a requirement in all cultures.

Second, in most cultures, male and female indiscretions are judged differently. For instance, a marriage, in its traditional form, comes with a patriarchal double-standard that portions women to life-long lack of per-

sonal and sexual contentment (Heyn, 1992; Geddes, 2000). Most societies tend to condone marital infidelity of men as if it's a birthright—something that makes men more manly. However, such an unremorseful attitude from women (about their affairs) is seen as abnormal and unacceptable. Literary classics such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Madame Bovary*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and *Anna Karenina* are grand examples of the domestic wreckage brought on by women's infidelity. Since, historically, openness has not served women kind well, women have learned to remain hushed about their "other" experiences. A woman's openness can threaten her relationship. Thus, a cultural double-standard becomes a barrier to openness and self-disclosure in a relationship. Ironically, men are more at ease with taking women's silence as an impression of innocence, than with their experience. Referring back to the Onion Theory of self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973), people will remain insecure revealing themselves due to fear of being judged unfairly.

As long as there is an excessive emphasis on "openness" and "honesty" and the double-standards prevail, the need for transparency and protection will keep causing the dialectical tensions in men and women.

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Appendix A – The Instrument

Friendships, serious relationships, and meaningful romantic relationships are neither easy to create not easy to maintain. Such associations need commitment and sincerity. This brief survey invites you to think about various factors that go into creating and sustaining a relationship. It is our hope that you will find this questionnaire thought-provoking and enjoyable.

Your participation is voluntary, and you are not required to disclose your identity.

Thank you for your cooperation and time.

Please respond to the items alone. This is not a group activity.

1. I am a male. I am a female.

2. Which age group describes you?

I'm under 20 years of age.

I'm in 20–25 years age group.

I'm in 26–35 years age group.

I'm over 35 years old.

3. Please check one of the following.

I'm single. I'm in a relationship. I'm married.

I was married, I'm separated. I'm divorced. I'm a widow/widower.

For each of the following statements, select and circle the most appropriate response. 1 stands for “strongly disagree”; 2 stands for “disagree”; 3 stands for “neither agree nor disagree”; 4 stands for “agree”; and 5 stands for “strongly agree”.

4. When I'm in a committed relationship, it is important for me to retain my autonomy, i.e., remain as an independent individual with my own identity. (*autonomy*)

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

5. When in a committed relationship, I like to connect with the other person so that the two of us become one pair or couple. (*connection*)

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

6. When in a committed relationship, I like to be able to tell what my partner is going to do and not surprise me. I prefer set routines. (*predictability*)

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

7. When In a committed relationship, I like to do try new things and seek novelty in my relationship. (*novelty*)

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

8. When in a committed relationship, I like openness, honesty from both partners. No secrets. (*transparency*)

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

9. When in a committed relationship, I like to keep some things private and secret. I feel protected by withholding some information. (*protection*)

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

The next two questions require one-word responses.

10. In your opinion, which of the above six is the easiest for **you** to manage?

11. And which is the most difficult for **you** to manage? _____

As you have guessed, relationships are complicated and often, we want contradictory things in our relationships. These contradictions (known as **relational dialectics**) can cause tensions and anxiety in the players in a relationship. There are namely three relational dialectics. These are:

Autonomy versus Connection Novelty versus Predictability Transparency versus Protection

12. Of these three, which do you find the most difficult to cope with? Please check only one.

Autonomy versus Connection

Novelty versus Predictability

Transparency versus Protection

Listed below are the six important elements in an interpersonal relationship.

Autonomy

Connection

Novelty

Predictability

Transparency

Protection

Thank you for your participation.

Among the men, 12 (34%) were in 20-years or younger age group, the remain 23 (66%) were in the Over-20 age group. Among the women, 46 (63%) were in the younger group and 27 (37%) were in the older group. single and 46 (63%) were in a relationship.