

INTIMACY TODAY

By

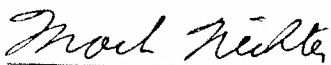
KELLY LEEHEY

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor's degree
With Honors in
Anthropology

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

May 2009

Approved by:



Mark Nichter
Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

Today, the place of intimacy in romantic relationships is in question. The ever-increasing use of communication technologies and the recent phenomenon of social saturation may not lead to true intimacy. Instead, extended opportunities for communication may contribute to a false sense of intimacy, to a reliance on technology, rather than more intimate contact, in mediating romantic relationships. The hookup system on college campuses is a pertinent example of the way in which this decline in intimacy contributes to a growing trend of transitory and impermanent connections. However, despite the current elusiveness of intimacy, persistent hope remains that love, intimacy, and romance can and will still exist together.

“Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. ‘Pooh!’ he whispered. ‘Yes, Piglet?’ ‘Nothing,’ said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. ‘I just wanted to be sure of you.’” Although in his children's story, *The Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, A.A. Milne writes of the relationship between two stuffed animals, he captures the essence of many human relationships. The simplicity of this passage highlights the question, the uncertainty that exists in so many interactions. Relationships are continually under construction. Their frameworks are in flux, threatened and changed by new ways of relating and new opportunities for connection. This tendency for change is linked to understandings and expressions of intimacy. Intimacy is both sought after and avoided, both mediated by communication technology and thwarted by it. Intimacy is the question that Piglet asked Pooh. In romantic relationships it is both an ideal and a goal, both an impossibility and a requirement.

What is a relationship? According to Randy Solis's article, “Mobile Romance,” in the journal *Media/Culture*, a romantic relationship is unique among those involving friendship, family, and the physical (2006). Romantic relationships involve interdependence. The behavior of one person affects the other. However, the behavior of a stranger can also alter a person's life. The difference here is history. In a relationship, a pattern of interaction develops which acts as an outline, a guide for the future. Solis also alludes to the importance of disclosure, commitment, network convergence, and understanding as key aspects of a romantic relationship (2006). Without a mutual acknowledgement that a relationship will continue, it becomes casual, even transitory and empty of meaning. Two people in a romantic relationship will eventually begin to unite and bring together two social networks. This is the idea of network convergence. In this merging of worlds, two people create something unique together, each person is changed, is forced to adapt at multiple levels, including both the social and the personal. In Blumstein's

article, "Personal Relationships," he further illuminates the definition of a relationship. Even though romantic relationships exist within a social climate, they are between individuals. However, in the present society, alive with technology, with modernization, with globalization, it is becoming more and more difficult to cultivate a relationship that fits this description, one that moves beyond institutionalized rules and norms. A romantic relationship is many layered and complex, however, its context will always remain important (Blumstein 1988).

Interdependence is key in every definition of a relationship. Habit and scripts influence the way in which a relationship operates (Solis 2006). Ways of being and doing become specific to that relationship, creating a unique subculture. Two people in a relationship develop a mutual self, or an idea of the way a person should be that provides direction for, approves, and creates behaviors and beliefs (Blumstein 1988). Of course, not all personal relationships are able to develop to this degree, especially among young people. According to sociologist, Peggy Giordano, romantic relationships are the "last frontier of adolescent relationships" (2003). The degree of interdependence and mutual understanding characteristic to these kinds of relationships easily remains superficial, idealized, and unrealistic. The difficulty of relationships across gender lines may be related to the roles and ways of relating that are indirectly enforced in social networks. If girls and boys want different things, stepping into intimate romantic relationships, may involve giving something up, in some sense backing down, a compromise.

Many would like to believe that boys and girls are on an even footing. That the differences between them are immaterial, barely there, and that revolution and social change has eradicated constraints and expectations that once existed. In Giordano's article, "Gender and the Meaning of Adolescent Romantic Relationships," she comments on the differences between the way that girls and boys relate to others. Girls cultivate supportive friendships, close

relationships, whereas boys lean toward restrictive friendships, spending their time in larger groups (Giordano 2006). These tendencies contribute to the choosing of roles when romantic relationships begin to be formed. Although, norms are becoming more and more unclear, challenged more and more frequently, certain dynamics remain prevalent. Girls often approach romantic relationships hopefully, stressing being in love and separating sex from that feeling. On the other hand, boys tend to focus on the physical, seeing girls as accessories and finding it difficult to express commitment and emotion (Giordano 2006). The age-old idea that girls want love and boys want sex is still alive and well. Same-sex friend relationships usher in the dynamics for opposite-sex romantic relationships. However, females cannot be labeled as unassertive or as ineffectual. In fact, women often aspire to deepen relationships, to push and strive for change. Both genders can be forward and confident, can make choices and prompt relationship development. However, it is still very common for women to assume the "role of the pursued" (Giordano 2006). In this first stage of a romantic relationship, initiation, men often take the lead (Solis 2006). There is an ever-present idea in Western culture, that men should make the moves and women should give the answers. The guy asks for the girl's phone number, he sends her the first text message, he asks her to be his girlfriend, and he goes on one knee and proposes marriage. These steps all move a relationship along its cycle, from initiation, to maintenance, and even to deterioration (Solis 2006). However, the woman is also very present in each of these steps, even if she is not labeled as the one in control, in power. These steps are prompted by an increasing degree or perhaps desire for interdependency. In this cycle, in the life of a romantic relationship, intimacy is created.

Intimacy, like relationship, is difficult to define. In his article in the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, Yifeng Hu offers two requirements for intimacy. He writes that being

intimate requires both giving oneself and becoming aware of another (2004). The idea of sharing and of mutuality is crucial here. Unlike love, intimacy cannot be unrequited. It cannot be achieved independently. In his article, "Defining Intimacy in Romantic Relationships," Barry Moss, delves further into the idea of intimacy. Intimacy requires communication, closeness, expressiveness, commitment, and interaction and exchange (Moss 1993). All of these aspects of intimacy can be achieved through face-to-face interaction, when two people are in the same place at the same time. In recent times, communication technologies make it possible for intimacy to occur in other, more removed arenas. Using technology, two people can approach intimacy in less traditional ways. However, there are those that argue that intimacy arrived at in this manner is somehow less whole, less real, and perhaps not even intimacy at all.

Communication technologies create paths between people, building bridges and forging connections. They are constantly being improved upon, being altered to fit into shifting situations. In "Social Construction of Communication Technology," Janet Fulk comments on the nature of the interactions made possible by these pathways. She writes, "the medium is the message" (1993). This observation is very relevant in regards to intimacy development. The diversity of technologies makes choosing which to use significant. The choice reveals that there are rules and implications underlying the usage of each communication technology. The connotation of receiving or sending a text message, a phone call, an email, or a Facebook wall post is singular. Also, the context of the communication is critical. What is being said? Why is it being said that way? Is one pathway better than the other, more appropriate, perhaps, easier? The application of these technologies offers a concrete way to talk about and to critique a vital part of intimacy, communication.

Through the use of technology, it is possible to remain in constant contact with social networks and individuals. This contact, however, is not the same as physical contact. Although, it varies in degree, depending on the technology choice, communication is always less complete. Face-to-face interactions involve a myriad of cues, including both the physical and the verbal. Gestures, touching, facial expressions, and volume and tone of voice all create depth and environment (Solis 2006). In these situations, there is nothing missing. On the other hand, making a phone call instantly disables all visual cues, while sending a text message obliterates the verbal and the visible, leaving only the written word. In this loss of information, lies the idea that communication technologies are insufficient, are lacking in that which leads to intimacy. The use of technology to forge and maintain relationships is seen in two ways. The first is as a source of loss, as an illusion (Hu 2004). Here, that which communication technology lacks is emphasized. In subtracting the physical and/or the vocal from an interaction, part of the context of that interaction is being demeaned, even destroyed. Hand in hand with this loss of context walks desensitization (Hu 2004). In order to build intimacy a person must be in touch with the whole being of another person. The limiting nature of these kinds of interactions decreases awareness of the other person, making him or her less accessible and less real. However, a second approach sees communication technology as liberating, as opening up new avenues for interactions, as offering new, expanded methods to build intimacy (Hu 2004). In this line of thought, decreasing the power of physical and verbal cues may lead to a newfound ability to get things said, perhaps even to cross boundaries that would be more solid, more formidable in a face-to-face encounter.

In the past few years, text messaging has come to the forefront of communication technologies. Text messaging, like any other form of communication, has its own rules and

expectations. To many, the brevity and silence of the text message, makes it an ideal way to keep in touch, to feel close to someone while not in close physical proximity to them. In his article, "Texting Love," Solis observes that text messaging made people more dependent on each other. The expectation of receiving texts led to disappointment when none came (Solis 2007). Many people reported attachment to sending and receiving text messages. This attachment suggests that text messaging creates a world alongside daily life, a place to go to be with an absent person, to be kept updated and in touch, when physical and verbal communication are both out of reach. The text message provides an opportunity for immediacy and accessibility, while maintaining privacy (Solis 2007). Cell phone conversations are often overheard, loud, and obtrusive. A quick text message is restricted to the screen of the phone. The screen becomes like a safety zone, allowing individuals to say things they might not be able to get out in person, to ask questions to which they might not want to hear the answer. Although a text message is sent immediately, it can be crafted, worked on, and edited. A 160-character message can drip with sarcasm, mask a plea, disguise unsaid feelings, or harness anger. On the other hand, a text message can be a simple status update, a direction for a meeting, or just a reinforcement of known feelings. Whatever its specific purpose, a text message enables a connection to develop.

In two focus group organized by three students at the University of Arizona, Victoria Penunuri, Cecile Dinh, and Kelly Leehey, both men and women discussed their use of communication technology in their relationships. The women agreed that each different communication technology was tailor made for a specific purpose, to be used to supplement different relationships. Here, text messaging was designated as a useful way to keep in touch with close friends. However, it was stressed that it was specifically an initiator of communication and ideally should not be used to carry on in depth conversations. In the men's

focus group, text messaging was talked about as a preferred method of keeping in touch, the best way to “get things done,” rather than as just one way to communicate out of many (Dinh 2009). Comfort and privacy were involved in this preference, as was the idea that text messaging was both faster and easier than other forms of communication. For these men, the gratification of a quick straightforward response made the anonymity of the medium irrelevant. Through a comparison of these two groups’ responses to questions about text messaging, it was evident that both genders valued the communication offered by this technology. However, women were more likely to talk about the ways in which a text should and should not be used to maintain relationships and in specific situations, whereas men focused only on its general practicality. This contrasting emphasis reflects the difference in men and women’s relationship styles. Women approach romantic relationships with the hope of deepening them, with the intent of working on them, of supporting and maintaining them in the best way that they can. While men may initiate romantic relationships, there is often a lack support, a holding back, a reluctance for intimacy. The thought that women put into choosing a communication technology echoes their concern for relationship building and improvement. On the other hand, the men’s choice is based on a need for ease and speed rather than on the specifics of the relationship.

The importance of the text message is often most relevant in the initiation stage of a relationship. Communication can, at this stage, be difficult, awkward, or stilted (Giordano 2006). A text can ease the process of getting to know someone. It can bolster and speed up the path to understanding a partner’s reactions, thought processes, and behavior patterns (Solis 2007). Some kind of safety lies in being able to type out a text message, send it out, and then wait on a response. There is simplicity and distance in this action, an anonymity that is missing from verbal telephone conversations (Solis 2007). Texting also offers its user an intensified

power and control. Meaning can be selected carefully and intentionally, which is much more difficult to accomplish in direct verbal conversation. Although the ability to text fulfills a growing need to communicate, to be in touch, plugged in, it can also build a relationship. However, the nature of this relationship frequently falls into question. Is it a weaker relationship than would have formed through other encounters, encounters with more complex context? Even the language in text messages is abbreviated and controlled. When “you” becomes “u” and a loud laugh becomes “hahahahaha” is meaning and value lost?

Social saturation is the idea that communication technologies have made the boundaries of time and space inconsequential, even invisible (Solis 2006). This state reflects the prevalence of constant communication with others and an unwillingness to be separate, to be alone. An aspect of commitment, a fundamental part of a romantic relationship, is the time spent working on the relationship, the time spent with the other person. Electronic communication allows for this kind of commitment to take place even in the absence of that person. Technology mediates relationships by reinforcing presence, by increasing contact between two people (Solis 2006). Intimacy can be achieved more quickly, if those involved can work on it all day. Through texts, emails, phone calls, and social networking sites they can publish and emphasize their feelings, thoughts, opinions, and even existence. Unfortunately, often with speed comes a sense of the incomplete. Although there are fewer boundaries and fewer barriers between people, perhaps this kind of relationship building leaves something to be desired. A complete understanding of an individual cannot be arrived at without intimacy at every level, not simply in the written word or in verbal conversation. Although this kind of intimacy is not meaningless, it is insufficient. While communication technologies do offer “foreplay” for intimacy, if a relationship is going to

continue to develop, to be maintained, intimacy must be developed farther and in greater depth (Solis 2006).

In Laura Stafford's research regarding long distance relationships, she examines the idea of idealization and superficiality arising from insufficient communication. Her findings illustrated that long distance couples were more satisfied in their relationships than those living in the same place (Stafford 1990). However, these were also the couples that had less interaction on a whole. Although relationship satisfaction is often said to increase with increasing communication, in this case it was the opposite (Stafford 1990). Sole reliance on communication technology facilitated the formation of a false sense of satisfaction. Because long distance couples did not have any face-to-face interaction they were able to separate themselves from the negative in their partners. While this situation did allow for temporary happiness, it set the scene for deterioration, as true intimacy was ultimately absent in these relationships. In this case study, those people in long distance relationships were shown to have failed in developing complete understandings of their partners. Here, the inability to maintain a complete connection through communication technologies suggests that, although it may be supplementary, the intimacy that can be achieved through electronic contact is not a replacement for physical presence. However, communication technologies are constantly being developed and molded for the times, therefore, the long distance romantic relationship of today, is drastically different, and possibly much more viable, than that of the past.

The times and the social environment shape that way in which romantic relationships form and the vantage points from which they are viewed. In Kathleen Bogle's book, *Hooking Up*, she illustrates three changes in the formation of romantic attachments in the twentieth century. She connects these fundamental changes in relationship style to the spheres in which

the relationships are formed. The first sphere was the family (Bogle 2008). Gentlemen callers were invited into family homes by fathers and mothers looking to marry off their daughters. These romantic relationships were formed with a clear intent and purpose, marriage. Calling reflects the times by placing the power in the hands of the head of the family, in a patriarchy. Men and women had strict roles and expectations to fulfill (Bogle 2008). Eventually, calls transitioned to dates, and women began going out with men, escaping the supervision of their careful parents. Dating placed men and women together in public, out in the open, mirroring the increasing agency of women, their entrance into more and more diverse social roles and situations (Bogle 2008). In dating, romantic relationships were judged, approved, and disapproved by peer groups rather than solely by parents. With women's increasing presence in the public sphere, especially in universities, a new path for romantic relationships has branched off from dating, hooking up (Bogle 2008). Hooking up came into its own as university students began to spend their free time in larger groups, to party and drink together (Bogle 2008). The goal of these romantic relationships is no longer the clear-cut one of the calling era, marriage. It has become blurry and undefined, and often non-existent.

In her article, "Hookups," Elizabeth Paul defines a hookup as "a sexual encounter that may or may not include intercourse, usually occurring between strangers or acquaintances" (2000). This definition highlights the variability of the hookup. Its versatility also expands into the expectations that come with it. Generally there are three possibilities, nothing, a romantic relationship, and another hookup. Hookups can fall under the category of casual sex. Casual sex is uncommitted sex (Paul 2000). Therefore, sex loses its intimacy and becomes a hollow act, simply entertainment. However, when at least one of the participants is hoping or expecting something to come out of the act it gains a different meaning, it is no longer casual. When

hookups become avenues to a romantic attachments or relationships, they are given a new meaning (Bogle 2008). These kinds of hookups are more akin to dates, or at least precursors to a possible date, than to casual sex. Regardless of its outcome, a hookup lacks intimacy. Although physical attraction and physical response are present, communication and mutual understanding are missing. Much like a heavy reliance on communication technology, hookups sidestep intimacy, by creating a false sense of closeness, an incomplete relationship. Even repeated hookups, do not fulfill the definition of a romantic relationship. Although there is consistency in the partnership, and perhaps even exclusivity, a relationship cannot form based solely on physical love.

An interesting example of physical love is the booty call or text. Like in romantic relationships, traditionally men initiate this type of communication and women answer (Bogle 2008). In hookup culture, booty calls or texts often lead to repeated hookups. An online dictionary defines "booty call" as:

A communication made with the sole intent of engaging in sex or other forms of sexual release with the person being contacted. Traditionally this social practice, especially the term *booty call*, is associated with a person calling another person for a sexual encounter after having already established either a casual or more serious relationship involving sexual relations. (Dictionary.com)

An unofficial, casual, and at least initially meaningless meeting could describe a booty call. With the advent of the text message, booty calls have transitioned largely into texts. The purpose of a booty call, a sexual relationship without communication, is appropriately mediated by a text message. A text message is straightforward, to the point, and somewhat impersonal. A text is words without a tone of voice, words somewhat out of context. The recipient of a booty text can

believe whatever he or she wants to believe, she or he can make anything out of it. One can pass it off as a drunken mistake, or believe it is a sign of real feelings. Intimacy in this kind of relationship is very limited. However, in an attempt to find their way in a system of romantic relationship formation that does not value relationships, both men and women choose to be in this kind of situation (Bogle 2008). Perhaps these men and women hope to become an exception to the rule, to find romance in a situation initially devoid of intimacy and meaning.

The possibility of relationship formation encourages the continuation the hookup system (Bogle 2008). What does this hopefulness say about the current state of love? In his article, "The End of Romance: The Demystification of Love in the Postmodern Age," James Dowd considers this question. He compares the treatment of romance in real life interactions to the idealization of romance in the media, especially in movies. Today, many loves are decisions, solutions, rationalized and thought out (Dowd 2000). Romance tends to exist only in the impossible, the inappropriate, and the unlikely. This separation of love and romance promotes a longing for the past, posing the present as empty and imperfect. Sociologist Anthony Giddens calls the modern relationship a "pure relationship" (Gross 2005). The pure relationship centers on the idea of autonomy. The individuals involved in this relationship agree to be together, to be intimate, only as long as they can reap the benefits (Gross 2005). Giddens's pure relationship comments on the contractual nature of modern relationships, on the abandonment of the romantic ideas of love and forever. However, despite the seemingly unbeatable odds, the union of love, intimacy, and romance remains a possibility, even a goal for many.

Against these odds, people continue to form ties and connections to each other. These relationships often include a combination of communication, emotional attachment, intimacy, and reciprocation. They allow their participants to become integrated into a community, to join a

social network. The connections and relationships that make up these networks are bolstered by communication technologies and by a desire for intimacy, a willingness to take chances and to hope. Although the way in which people are able to connect depends on social climate and situation, the boundaries of time and place are quickly fading, becoming penetrable and easy to cross. Relationships are finding ways around the restrictions and patterns of the past and charging forward. However, the possibility exists that through this fast pace change, relationships are becoming less intimate, less real. Only by understanding the true content and context of a relationship, can individuals begin to ensure that virtual and casual connections do not replace those that are real and intimate.

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