LDS Pathways to Marriage: How does communication play a role in relationship progression?

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Introduction:
The purpose of this study was to examine the role of communication in the relationship progression or regression between males and females at BYU along the pathway to marriage. For most Americans, mate selection follows a predictable process of acquaintance, build-up, and commitment leading to legal marriage (Levinger, 1983). This process is characterized by personal choice based on mutual physical attraction, growing interpersonal involvement, and interdependence, followed by commitment to marriage and actual marriage during the period of greatest relationship satisfaction (Gale & Lloyd, 1992). It was hypothesized that communication plays an essential role in the progression or regression of dating relationships.

Method:
Male and female participants were recruited from an apartment complex south of campus. We administered the READY and RELATE IRB-approved assessments to all willing residents. Using the quantitative data obtained from the READY/RELATE assessments, 24 unmarried females and males were chosen for in-depth interviewing.

Participants:
Sample size: 24 (12 males; 12 females)
Mean age: 21 years; std. dev. 2.2 years
Race/Ethnicity: All participants were Caucasian

Interview Protocol:
Semi-structured interviews were conducted around a list of topics relevant to the research. These topics included questions about their feelings and attitudes about dating, dating at BYU, and marriage. Over the three interviews conducted, questions were asked about their actual behaviors, how/why they initiated relationships, and the outcomes of any dating or relationship experiences.

Data Analysis:
Qualitative data analysis began with the transcription of audio recorded interviews. Inductive coding was used with interviews, following the grounded theory method as articulated by Corbin and Strauss (2008): open coding followed by focused coding, finally deriving a thesis and an argument.

Results:
In our analysis of the data, what became particularly salient was the role of open, clear, and honest communication in the participants’ attempts to further progress or regress in relationship stages. The data used mostly pertained to the stages of acquaintance, casual dating, and exclusive dating.

Regression: The following quotes illustrate how participants used open, clear, and honest communication to bring about relationship regression—to halt a relationship.

Quote 1:
Interviewer: What do you dislike? What frustrates you?
Hailey: How guys and girls don’t seem to understand each other ever. And girls are just so difficult and guys are just so “I don’t know what’s going on.”
(Smile) so yeah, that’s kind of frustrating but it’s easy to get past if you just focus on communicating. . . . oh,
Interviewer: Oh, and why the important focus on communicating?
Hailey: Because, there is no way that you’re going to be able to have a relationship that lasts at all that you’re happy in unless you talk about things. Cause when you talk about things that’s when problems get solved and you overcome the issues. So that’s why it’s important.

Quote 2:
Interviewer: And how do you think this relationship changed the way you view dating?
Samantha: Probably just in small ways. Just little things like communication skills. Just seeing the way that you’re able to talk to each other. And like seeing that that is more important, like really important, even on first and second dates. . . . I actually think we have a really good relationship because we’ve both been very open with each other and honest about different things. And if we’ve had concerns, we’ve talked about them. . . . We’re very honest; it’s one of the most important parts I guess.

Quote 3:
Jake: She texted me and was like, “Hey, I want to talk to you. Do you want to come over to my house when you get off work?” . . . So, I went over to her house. . . . We went on a walk and talked. . . . We decided we kind of liked each other still and we wanted to still spend time together. That’s how it started I guess.

Quote 4:
Interviewer: How do you think games affect people in dating relationships?
Brad: I think it just…it more or less just was a smooth flow. There was not any big, defining relationship moments, and I think that might be partially why it was able to end so easily. Just because we hadn’t talked about as much as we should have.

Discussion:
The goal of this study was to explore the role of communication in the relationship progression or regression of unmarried BYU students. It is evident that open, clear, and honest communication is often essential as a transitional tool in the progression or regression of a dating relationship.

This study has limitations. The sample size was relatively small and thus it limits any kind of generalizability. Participants may have also been hesitant to share their feelings, thoughts, and views. This may have been due to social desirability influences or overall discomfort in the interviewing process. Further research—possibly quantitative—might be necessary to reduce these limitations.

References: