There's no such thing as a free lunch:

A dialectical analysis of social cheating during

financial transactions among friends

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative investigation explores the act of *social cheating* during financial transactions in friendship groups. The authors identify social cheating as a pattern of communication behavior that contributes to perceptions of inequity during monetary decision-making among friends and family members. Grounded in a Baxterian (1988) dialectical theoretical framework, results suggest that social cheating can challenge not only the stability of an integrated social group but also influence the content and strategic nature of the communication occurring during the social cheating act itself. The contradiction inherent within the social cheating act builds upon Baxterian theory acknowledging one's propensity to act in a fair and equitable manner vs. one's tendency to take unfair financial advantage of friends – a contradiction providing insight into how social friendship groups use communication to manage the negative consequences of the social cheating act.

Keywords: Dialectical Theory, Oppositions, Contradictions, Relational Tensions, Social Exchange, Social Cheating, Retaliatory Communication, Benevolent Communication

Introduction

Friends and family members regularly dine out as a ritualized form of social interaction. Issues of fairness and equity often arise when the financial transaction to cover the costs of such a get-together occur. Scholars have examined issues of equity and fairness that contribute to tensions and relational deterioration in organizational, group, and interpersonal contexts (Aisha & Azzman, 2018; Baxter, 1982; Karau & Williams, 1993; McDaniel, et al., 2018; Savigny, 2016; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This investigation provides a qualitative assessment of what the authors will refer to as *Social Cheating*, a pattern of

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communication behavior that contributes to perceptions of inequity during financial transactions among friends and family members, utilizing group participation in dining out as a case study. The social cheater does not offer fair or equitable contributions to the shared costs, thus imposing a financial obligation on other group members. The purpose of this article is to identify the intrinsic communication patterns occurring in episodes of social cheating and the impact of those patterns on social relationships. Further, this article seeks to apply Baxter's (1988) dialectical theory in examining the impact of the social cheating as a contradiction rooted in the absence of equity or fairness in a social relationship.

Literature Review

Social groups are characterized by relational tensions during social exchanges, or what Leslie Baxter (1988) describes as the "interplay or tension of unified oppositions, that is, two or more factors, forces, or themes that are interdependent with one another at the same time that they function to negate or oppose one another" (Baxter & Erbert, 1999, p. 548). Researchers have further examined the tensions at play within both social and professional relationships to understand how complementary themes of equity and fairness, when absent, contribute to relational dissatisfaction and change (Baxter, 1990; Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Murphy, et al., 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). To consider the relationship between financial and social tensions inherent in dining out, one must first consider the theory of dialectical tensions that underlies oppositional concepts such as relational costs-benefits.

Dialectical Theory

Dialectical theory illustrates the feelings of relational tensions which are at once simultaneous yet oppositional or paradoxical (Baxter, 1988; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter & Norwood, 2015; Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Galanes, 2009). Baxter & Erbert (1999) argue that these oppositional forces or tensions motivate relational change and development as individuals oscillate between poles. Furthermore, Baxter (2004) argues that contradictions are produced and reproduced through joint communication activities. Several dialectical contradictions have been empirically developed in the literature, beginning with Baxter's (1988) three fundamental relational tensions, *including openness vs. closedness* – the conflicting desire in relationships to both express feelings and thoughts while not divulging too much; *autonomy vs. connection* – the tension surrounding relational intimacy and independence; and *predictability vs. novelty* – the contradiction between behavioral spontaneity and dependability/reliability (Baxter, 1988; Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Bridge & Baxter, 1992).

Baxter & Erbert (1999) expanded upon this discussion of oppositional forces in relationships to include the parallel notions of *integration vs. separation* – the need for individuals to remain connected with one another as opposed to their recognition that a need for separation is preferable; *stability vs. change* – the conception of a relationship as

stable while also being cognizant of a need for change; and *expression vs. privacy* – the need to be honest and to self-disclose information to others as opposed to remaining silent in light of a perceived need. Bridge & Baxter (1992) contributed additional tensions of workplace friendships, including *judgement vs. acceptance* – offering an honest appraisal of someone's behavior as opposed to accepting the tension they have introduced into the dynamics of a relationship, and equality vs. inequality. These tensions explain how members of social relationships communicate to acknowledge, respond to, and evaluate destabilizing influences and, perhaps more importantly, illustrate how such tensions influence a social unit towards relational deterioration. Though the aforementioned dialectics offer guidance in categorizing relational tensions, they are by no means exhaustive; Baxter (1990) encourages future research to extract new tensions as they are relevant.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

If relationships are characterized by simultaneous tensions, which may be used both to describe and evaluate relationships, so too may cost-benefit analysis be understood as an interplay between opposing relational forces (i.e., the desire to obtain the most while exerting/sacrificing the least). Thus, Baxter's (1988) dialectical tensions may theoretically complement the economic evaluations of the worth (both socially and financially) of a relationship. Indeed, *Social Exchange Theory* (SET) posits that individuals initiate and maintain relationships with those capable of providing tangible support (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Behavioral patterns are routinely influenced by social controls including rewards, payoffs, or other forms of reinforcement (Hare, 1960, Murphy et al., 2003) – articulating the tension between tangible rewards reinforcing a desire for the continuation of a relationship and tangible costs outweighing the benefits of maintaining relational ties. According to SET, individuals may reciprocate actions according to perceived levels of interactional justice/injustice (Murphy et al., 2003). If in a dyadic/team setting with high interactional justice, individuals may reciprocate beneficially; by contrast, individuals with poor perceived levels of interactional justice may engage in social loafing, possibly as a means of retaliation against unfair group members (Gouldner, 2016; Murphy et al., 2003). Bridge & Baxter's (1992) dialectical tension of equality vs. inequality, then, may serve as an instrument of relational development or deterioration.

Free Riding and Social Loafing

The economic constructs of free riding and social loafing may too be enriched by their relation to dialectical theory. *Free riding* occurs when one benefits "from a collective good without having incurred the cost of participating in its production" (Savigny, 2016), thereby maximizing individual benefits while avoiding individual participation/cost (Bhat, 2010; Matzat, 2009; Olson, 1965). Costs evaluated by free riders include *finance* (Olson, 1965) including the act of paying gratuities/tipping for services rendered (Boyes, et al.,

2004), *opportunity costs* such as time and effort expended (Matzat, 2009), and the *social costs* of friendships or camaraderie (De Paola, Gioia, & Scoppa, 2019; Ding & Ding, 2008). A related theory – *social loafing* – explains the loss of individual effort to group endeavors (Karau & Williams, 1993; Murphy et al., 2003). Scholars have noted that, similar to free riders, the presence of stronger social ties provides an added cost to social loafing which may impair relationships (Lam, 2015). Underlying both free riding and social loafing is an inherent tension between contributing one's fair share as opposed to benefitting from the contributions of group members. Both theoretical perspectives describe patterns of behavior that would influence communication contributing to relational development or deterioration as influenced by the costs of group participation.

Dialectic Management Strategies

Baxter & Montgomery (1996) articulate two response strategies employed to navigate dialectical tensions, including *recalibration* and *reaffirmation*. Recalibration involves the determination of a strategy that transcends the contradiction, while reaffirmation involves accepting the contradiction as a meaningful part of a relationship. Implicit in this dialectical model of ongoing relational change are *turning points*, or "transformative event[s] in which the relationship is changed in some way" (Baxter & Erbert, 1999, p. 550; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), with either positive or negative impact on relational status (Johnson et al., 2004). These turning points (resulting from the strain of relational tensions) explain the ebb and flow of relational closeness and distance/separation, and the potential termination of a relationship (Duck, 1982; Johnson et al., 2004; Sias et al., 2004). Thus, several scholars construct relational development and deterioration not as a linear, traditional model, but instead as a dialectical model (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Johnson et al., 2004; Sias et al., 2004). The act of social loafing during a group meeting, for instance, may be interpreted as a negative turning point to relational deterioration.

Relational Deterioration

Scholars have approached relational deterioration through a variety of frameworks, including Knapps' (1984) model, social penetration theory, and Duck's (1982) four-stage model of deterioration; Conville (1991) utilized dialectic tensions and turning points to explain five cyclical stages of relationships. Baxter (1982) presented four principle relationship terminating strategies – *withdrawal/avoidance*, *manipulation*, *positive tone*, and *open confrontation*.

Previous research indicates that individuals infrequently use direct communication (i.e., telling a partner the friendship is over) to undertake friendship deterioration (Baxter, 1985; Blieszner & Adams, 1992). Instead, individuals rely primarily on indirect tactics such as general avoidance and withdrawal strategies (Sias et al., 2004). *Cost-rendering* and exclusion are two such avoidance mechanisms which may be employed, for instance, when Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) recalibration/reaffirmation strategies fail to overcome dialectical tensions. Cost-rendering occurs when one partner makes

participation in a relationship more costly or unpleasant for the other. This deliberate imposition of cost on another group member may be construed as evidence of the reciprocity norm, or individual perceptions of equity in relationships (Baxter, 1982). The resultant *exclusion* describes partners who consciously choose to spend less time together. Other avoidance strategies include other-negation (the individual is offered signals suggesting they are not liked), difference, disinterest, and self-presentation (Sias et al., 2004).

In a preliminary study by Baxter (1982), positive tone was overwhelmingly employed, perhaps due to social desirability; indirect/nonconfrontational strategies such as withdrawal/avoidance were less likely to be employed in closer friendships. Baxter (1982) suggests that relational closeness is therefore a determining factor in how relationships deteriorate, and positively related to more direct and open terminating strategies. Attribution or cause of relational deterioration may also determine terminating strategies. An external locus of cause places blame on external contextual factors, while an internal locus of cause relegates responsibility to member(s) within a relationship (Albert & Kessler, 1976; Baxter, 1982). Findings from a second study by Baxter (1982) revealed that indirect strategies such as withdrawal/avoidance were less often employed within an external locus of cause than within an internal locus of cause. Curiously, though SET would predict that individuals in relationships may reciprocate-in-kind (i.e., the reciprocity norm), Baxter (1982) found that retaliatory behaviors by the relationship "disengager" were not prevalent. Instead, "the very act of initiating the termination may constitute adequate retaliation in the eyes of the disengager" (Baxter, 1982, p. 238).

Study Rationale

Baxter's (1988) dialectical tensions illustrate the relational contradictions inherent in group communication and provide a theoretical linkage between both social and tangible costs (such as those imposed by the free rider) and relationship status/change. Scholars have applied dialectical theory to the study of small group tensions (Galanes, 2009), workplace friendships/relationships (Bridge & Baxter, 1992), relationships (Altman, 1993; Baxter, 1990), and romantic relationships (Bridge & Baxter, 1992). Yet the authors have failed to discover research which has addressed tangible resources (such as money) as a form of dialectical tension in social relationships with resultant effect on relationship communication patterns. Baxter (1982) has further called for additional research on actual friendship deterioration strategies; we will explore how dialectical tensions can offer insights into the deterioration of friends and family members through a study of anecdotal tales of social cheating. More specifically, we engage the following research questions:

> RQ1:   How might the tenets of Leslie Baxter's dialectical theory be applied in examining the impact of social cheating as a contradiction rooted in the absence of equity or fairness in a social relationship?

> RQ2:   What communication acts distinguish a social cheating episode thereby facilitating either relational development or deterioration?

Method

Participants

The subjects in this investigation are participants in an online chatroom entitled, "How do you react if someone doesn't pay their share for dinner?" The digital comment thread was hosted by Quora, an online forum established in 2009 as a question-and-answer site generated and maintained by users, wherein users submit questions to the larger community of Quora users, who themselves submit, edit, and upvote/downvote answers and opinions.

In the selection of the Quora forum, the authors were guided by Eysenbach & Till (2001), who established guidelines in determining whether a chatroom may be considered public or private. Both the absence of any login or subscription to enter the Quora chatroom and the magnitude of the Quora community indicate a public space. In addition, Bailey (2017) acknowledges that chatroom comments are relatively anonymous with participants providing online usernames and making voluntary contributions to a discussion without responding to specific questions from an interviewer – thus also limiting the potential impact of researcher bias. Furthermore, we adhered to established ethical guidelines in our research by completing the mandatory NIH Human Subject Training. The project does not include any interaction or intervention with human subjects or include any access to identifiable private information – hence does not require IRB review. The data is drawn from a publicly accessible environment intended to be public by those participating and inviting the participation of others.

The content of individual contributions suggests an age range that includes young to middle aged adults from diverse backgrounds – but no factual confirmation of these characteristics is available, as usernames could not be correlated with demographic information or identifying markers. The Quora chatroom thus provided a "safe space" for individual subjects to disclose the kinds of behavior they have encountered and their responses to that behavior.

Procedure

50 anecdotal accounts were randomly selected for purposes of analysis. The accounts varied in length – between 155 to 909 words each. The accounts chosen may be described as episodic in nature including (1) an initiating behavior, (2) a response to that behavior, and (3) a final outcome. Each episode includes comments and perspectives offered by a participant in a dining out experience with friends who believed there to be an absence

of fairness or equity in the concluding financial transaction that occurred. These accounts were downloaded, and all entries were provided continuous line numbers for purposes of qualitative analysis. It is important to mention at the outset that there is no chatroom data that offers the perspective of the social cheater – an issue that will be addressed in the quantitative investigation planned as a follow-up to this study.

The 50 individual accounts were analyzed using established qualitative procedures (Berg, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). We used the process of open coding. During this process, individual comments are first tagged with conceptual labels and then grouped according to similarity of theme – with the themes being derived inductively from the actual words and phrases used by the subjects in providing illustrations of their respective experiences. Our research team then compared each member's individual initial coding of data samples in order to approach inter-coder reliability with our coding choices.

In responding to the first research question, two central categories of contradiction or opposition became evident in the data. Following the identification of these oppositions, we used Leslie's Baxter's Dialectical Theory to conceptually frame how such oppositions might function within the context of a dinner group including friends and family members.

Results

Stability vs. Change and Integration vs. Separation

Recall that Bridge and Baxter (1992) framed integration vs. separation as conceptually paralleling stability vs. change. In social relations there can be an opposition including one's perception of a relationship as stable and integrated/connected vs. a felt need for a specific behavioral change or actual separation from the other. These Baxterian contradictions become clear in the analysis of social cheating episodes.

While all of the social cheating episodes provide only the perspective of those who have been cheated on, each acknowledges dialogue occurring not only between the cheated and members of the online chatroom, but also suggest communication between the source of the episode and other members of the friendship group affected by the pattern of social cheating that occurred. These accounts demonstrate that social cheating is a reoccurring pattern in social groups, and – as expressed in the communication of those affected by the cheating – there is a clear desire for a change to occur in the social cheater's behavior. The tone of each comment offered in the discussion suggests the escalation of tension paralleling group interaction with the social cheater, while the comments imply what needs to be done in order to stabilize the social interaction among the friends involved.

One participant commented, "This one person would always wait until the end of dinner to mention that she didn't bring her wallet because she is trying to save money by

not having access to it at all times, or she can't afford the meal because her paycheck hasn't gone through. She generally ordered something rather expensive..." A second participant noted, "We four friends made a pact for having dinner one day every week together, and now it seems that just the two of us are paying the bill. The other two are always broke. How can we ask them to pay?" Consider a third account, "We had already agreed that we'd be paying for ourselves beforehand. To suddenly find ourselves covering her bill, after she'd already stated she would cover it herself, was frustrating. And she never offered to pay us back and never tried to pay us back." Each of these comments begins by establishing the integrated/connected nature of the dinner groups. Each description suggests an ongoing pattern among friends who dine together regularly. Yet, the integrated nature of each group is being challenged by the cheating behavior described. Secondly, each description of the act of social cheating implicitly defines what needs to be changed in the communication behavior of the offender. The cheater should not offer excuses, should not impose unfair pressure on friends for compensation and be clear as to when they will honor the debt incurred. These data suggest a reoccurring pattern of social cheating in friendship groups; that is, a clear contradiction between wanting to stay connected/integrated but wanting to be treated fairly while, at the same time, questioning how that might best be accomplished. Their participation in a chatroom is an effort to begin seeking answers or, as Baxter would argue, recalibrating one's perception of the relationship – seeking advice pertaining to the communication that should occur and could contribute to reaffirming the stable and connected nature of the group itself.

Expression vs. Privacy and Judgement Given vs. Acceptance

Baxter and Erbert (1999) also created a parallel relationship between expression vs. privacy and judgement given vs. acceptance. In social relationships there can be an opposition between sharing information and offering judgements of the behavior of another as opposed to keeping relational concerns private and accepting behaviors that could be construed as oppositional. Four subcategories of this dialectical tension emerged via the analysis of data: 1) accounts exploring the motives of the social cheater; 2) accounts suggesting benevolent communication strategies; 3) accounts offering retaliatory communication strategies; and 4) accounts weighing the value of friendship against the controversial behavior in question.

The Social Cheater: Underlying Motives

The point of emphasis changes in each of the following accounts. Each source goes beyond a description of what occurred to offering a critical appraisal of the motives underlying the behavior of the cheater. One participant mentioned, "I have no problem helping friends with paying the bill, but I'm no bank and don't like friends who take advantage of me ... because it clearly shows that *the person doesn't care as much about the ability of their friends to pay for him* and basically forces them to do so." Similarly, a

participant declared, "This is more of a problem because *they seem to have an unspoken expectation for free food*. Most people would/should have made an offer to contribute…" Finally, "I think that everyone has faced the same situation, but *are the friends really broke or are they cheap*?" In terms of the motivation for social cheating, participants acknowledge an absence of empathy, a sense of entitlement as well as selfishness. The ongoing enactment of social cheating behavior influenced by these perceived motives could clearly constitute a challenge to group stability and feelings of connectedness.

The Social Cheater: Benevolent Communication Strategies

Further accounts suggest that both the tension and concern surrounding the behavior of the social cheater influence the targets of the social cheater to go beyond an assessment of motivation and actively plan communication strategies geared toward the Baxterian notion of recalibration and reinforcement. Furthermore, the benevolent accounts clearly suggest a desire for recalibration in the relationship – transcending the difficulty at hand and reinforcing the stability of the relationship itself.

      One source commented, "Hey, I'd like to start splitting the dinner bill more exactly as *I need to watch my spending*." Another, "*Hey is everything ok*? I don't mind spotting you for lunch, but it seems like something is wrong?" A third mentioned, "*I call them up and ask them about it*. A true friend won't have any issues with that." Each account suggests a courteous strategy containing simultaneously an expression of concern for both self and other. By asking questions and honestly acknowledging personal circumstances, the target of the social cheater depicts themself as a problem solver – a role central to facilitating recalibration – thus motivated by a desire to not only solve the problem created by the social cheating but to also reaffirm the stability of the friendship itself.

The Social Cheater: Retaliatory Communication Strategies

These data suggest that an ongoing pattern of social cheating in friendship groups contributes to heightened emotionality. Irritation clearly turns to anger and influences the enactment of punitive communication strategies that are retaliatory in nature. These strategies attempt to teach the social cheater a lesson, make an example of the social cheater as well as induce a sense of self-awareness with regard to the impact of their deceptive behavior.

      In one account a group member stated, "I discovered her type of behavior and *I would call her out in front of people on several instances*." In a second account the group member remarked, "As we entered the restaurant, I realized she wasn't carrying her purse…I decided I was tired of her using us like that…. I asked him (the host), '*Oh by the way we'd like separate checks*'…*She just stared at me*." In a third account, "One fine day, I wanted to teach him a lesson, so I decided to go to dinner at an expensive restaurant. *Once we reached the restaurant, I told him that I forgot the wallet*. He said let's go to some

cheap place where the food will be less!" These accounts demonstrate efforts to embarrass the social cheater, put the social cheater on the spot forcing a payment, and to have the social cheater personally experience the same deception that they have used. There were no accounts of successful recalibration and reinforcement of group stability following the retaliatory communication strategies. However, there were multiple accounts suggesting that retaliatory communication was often followed by both avoidance and deterioration in the relationship between the source of the account and the social cheater. In one account, the source stated, "If they don't pay their fair share, do not press them. Just stay as far away from them as you can. They will probably cause bigger trouble down the road." Secondly, "I was disgusted and annoyed by his behavior and never hung out with him again." In a third account, "My other friend and I just decided to just not go out with him anymore." Finally, "Needless to say, he was never invited again and if he asked, we said we weren't going to lunch." Each account suggests that in social dining groups there exist efforts to recalibrate the contradiction of social cheating vs. equitable treatment of friends. Ultimately, however, group members do have a limit and determine that the cost of maintaining the relationship outweighs the potential benefits.

The Social Cheater: Transcendence and Friendship

Consider accounts whereby the group participant acknowledges that social cheating occurs but goes on to offer a reflection geared toward transcending the incident and reinforcing the friendship itself.

One group member commented, "*Please try to look at it from their side*. You think they like not paying? Believe me, it bothers them more than it bothers you. They are embarrassed. They may not say so or ever seem like it, but trust me, they are humiliated every time that the check arrives." Further, "*The most important thing is that you spend quality time together* without stressing anyone out about who is picking up the tab. Maintaining your friendship and enjoying your time together doesn't have to cost money." Finally, "The best thing you can do is to *imagine yourself in the shoes of your broke friend* and think honestly about how you would like them to handle this situation if it were the other way around." Each account clearly underscores the importance of empathy as well as communicates the notion that the value of friendship itself should transcend the act of social cheating – thus accepting and reinforcing the friendship between the social cheater and the person affected. By refusing to judge their friends, while simultaneously accepting their behavior and weighing the value of the friendship, these accounts demonstrate how recalibration can transcend the potential impact of a contradiction – reinforcing the stability and connectedness of the friendship itself.

The data suggest that expressions of discontent become much stronger as social cheating persists in social groups. Furthermore, the accounts demonstrate that the existence of social cheating as a contradiction/opposition in friendship groups influences both subtle/indirect as well as overt/direct strategies to recalibrate.

Discussion

In the first research question the authors explored the extent to which the tenets of Baxterian theory may be applied in examining the impact of social cheating as a contradiction rooted in the absence of equity or fairness in a social relationship. At the outset it became clear that one's propensity to act in a fair and equitable manner vs. one's tendency to take unfair financial advantage of friends can be an ongoing tension felt by participants in social dinner groups. Baxter's oppositions between stability vs. change and integration vs. separation provide a useful framework in which to contextualize the act of social cheating. The data indicate that an ongoing pattern of social cheating challenges both the stability as well as the integrated (connected) nature of the group structure. Group members become aware of a pattern of behavior that they believe to be unjust and unfair and begin acknowledging what must be done to reinforce stability and connectedness. Group members assert that social cheaters must stop providing excuses for their behavior, stop pressuring group members to take care of them financially, and be proactive in terms of paying back those to whom they owe money. Implicit within their suggestions is the notion that these behavioral changes are needed to maintain group stability. As the pattern of social cheating persists in a social dinner group, the data not only suggest that emotionality becomes heightened but also that a change must occur in the communication among group participants.

In the second research question the authors explored the specific communication behaviors occurring during episodes of social cheating by examining the communication behaviors of those impacted by the social cheating. Results point to a clear progression of behaviors paralleling levels of emotionality occurring between participants in the social group. What began as the acknowledgement of what needs to be changed in the behavior of the social cheater evolved into an analysis of the social cheater's motives, the planning of constructive and benevolent strategies for addressing the acts of social cheating, the decision in some cases to seek retaliatory measures, and finally, a reflection on the values of the friendship itself. The planning of constructive and benevolent communication strategies clearly parallels Baxter's argument that recalibration and reaffirmation occur as a means of managing contradictions. Similarly, when participants espouse the value of friendship as outweighing the act of social cheating, they are clearly expressing a judgement pertaining to the social cheater's behavior while acknowledging their desire to remain connected and to maintain the stability in the relationship. The value of friendship transcends the lack of fairness and equity typifying the behavior of the social cheater. Finally, the retaliatory measures demonstrate how a final cost rendering can lead to the termination of the relationship itself.

Recall Baxter's description of the dialectical contradiction as both paradoxical and oppositional. Maintaining a friendship with a social cheater and socializing, while being aware of issues of equity and fairness that need remediation, clearly illustrates this dialectical tension. The social cheating contradiction contributes further to our understanding of Baxter's notion of cost rendering. Social dinner groups provide a context

where individuals are given an opportunity to actually assess the real costs of maintaining a relationship. Patterns of social cheating clearly prompt emotional responses and trigger patterns of verbal interaction geared toward recalibration of the status of a friendship and reaffirmations of stability. But patterns of social cheating also prompt retaliatory measures demonstrating that cost rendering occurs, thus leading to avoidance, relational deterioration, and subsequent termination. Finally, allowing the value of friendship to transcend the act of social cheating itself demonstrates Baxter's claim that dialectical contradictions constitute an ongoing communication process in relationships where individuals negotiate and renegotiate the status of the relationships in which they are involved.

Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative investigation illustrated what constitutes social cheating, while offering a preliminary assessment of the communication strategies that typify patterns of communication influenced by the contradiction itself. At the outset, the authors acknowledged that the investigation does not include insight from the perspective of the social cheater themself. Hence, the motives underlying the act of social cheating may only be inferred from the perspective of those impacted by the behavior itself. The authors believe that an empirical investigation of the social cheating construct is essential to not only better understand the motives underlying the construct from the perspectives of both the "cheater" and the "cheated," but to offer substantive reflection on the development of those communication strategies that would best facilitate the recalibration and reaffirmation needed in the relationships where the social cheating occurs.

Conclusion

Our study responds to Baxter's (1990; 2004) call for researchers to find new contexts in which relational dialectical tensions occur as well as to find new dialectical tensions. Our results point to a new dialectical tension for which communication scholars have not yet identified strategies with which to negotiate said tension.

First, we expand the notion of cost rendering to take into account the social cheater as well as the socially cheated. In our case, the cheater imposes too high a cost on the friendship, which was not addressed in Baxter's theory. Second, we point to a model that moves the socially cheated to talking about the motives of the social cheater (e.g., why would they do this?) in order to figure out communication strategies to deal with the cheating. When the individual who has been the target of social cheating and employs communication strategies with the social cheater that simply do not work (e.g., talk to the social cheater, ask the social cheater what is wrong, etc.), the cheated may move to retaliation strategies – and when even retaliation strategies do not work, the cheated sometimes moves to relational termination. Key here is to note that there is an alternate path of not terminating the relationship, in that the cheated recognizes that

having the friendship is worth more than the social cheating itself. (This connects to Baxter's recalibration and reaffirmation.) And, in the end, sometimes the circle starts again.

Thus, a narrative evolves that explores the tensions and motives of the cheater with decision-making trees along the way. The cheated may a) attempt to figure out the social cheater's motives; and either b) employ benevolent communication strategies with the cheater (e.g., talk with the social cheater); and/or c) employ retaliatory communication strategies with the social cheater (e.g., confront or humiliate the social cheater); then either d) terminate the relationship; or e) transcend the imposed cost and keep the friendship. In many cases, there is an interplay between steps in that the socially cheated may skip steps or move back to repeat a previous step. Thus, the cycle is not linear, but rather dynamic, and the dialectical tensions present in social cheating episodes serve as a rich resource for communication scholars to better understand relational dynamics and dialectical management strategies.

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