“It Strengthened My Core Relationships, and Filtered Out the Rest:” Intimacy Communication During COVID-19

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Abstract
Informed by scripting theories and Relational Dialectics Theory, this qualitative study used interviews, focus groups, and friendship pods conducted during the summer of 2020 in the COVID-19 pandemic to explore how 29 cisgender women and gender minorities made sense of, communicated about, and maintained their intimate relationships during COVID-19. Findings reveal a discourse of scripted intimacy reflecting normative relational patterns such as the heterosexual life script and the discourse of co-created intimacy, both of which legitimized and challenged the existing relational scripts by generating new ideas of what intimacy could look like in a relationship. Sub-themes included tensions of stability v. growth, comfort v. discomfort, and physical risk v. relational risk. Implications and avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords Sexual activity · Sexuality · Intimate relationships · Dialectics · Scripts

Introduction
As the world found itself managing a chaotic new-normal during the COVID-19 pandemic, research suggests women and LGBTQ people may bear more of the burden (Craig & Churchill, 2020; Moore et al., 2021). In addition to more public disparities manifesting and worsening during the pandemic, women managed a changing
landscape for their intimate lives and relationships. As part of a larger study on communication and intimacy, the present study will explore the role of communication in maintaining, managing, and exploring new means of intimacy during the COVID-19 crisis. Scholarly definitions of intimacy tend to treat it as either a relative synonym for closeness or to indicate romantic and/or sexual relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1996). The current project treated intimacy as the forms of communication that characterize intimate relationships, which we consider as any close relationship (e.g., romantic relationships, close friends, family or kinship networks). We frame the study in sexual scripts theory and relational dialectics theory.

**Intimacy Discourses: Sexual Scripts and Relational Dialectics**

**Normative Scripts and Intimacy**

In a given culture, scripts provide guidelines for behaviors and tell people how to act and communicate in social situations (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Within North American culture, dominant scripts involve the heterosexual script (Kim et al., 2007) and the traditional sexual script. Commonly identified scripts within these frameworks include the relational scripts emphasizing that sexual activity fosters (and is often the only acceptable measure of) intimacy between romantic partners, and procreative scripts that assert sexual activity is for having children (between married, opposite sex partners; Seabrook et al., 2016). Intrinsically related to the traditional sexual script (TSS), which positions men as sexual initiators and women as sexual gatekeepers who preserve a morally sanctioned version of sex (Wiederman, 2005), the heterosexual script sets heterosexual sexual activity in monogamous, opposite sex pairings as the only socially or morally sanctioned version of sex and sexuality (Kim et al., 2007). The heterosexual script further describes the ways that men and women (also positioned as the only genders) hold complementary but starkly unequal roles for romance and sexual interaction (Seabrook et al., 2016). Scripts are a reflection of the power dynamics embedded in cultural norms and behaviors, including the norms that privilege men over women and those that perpetuate cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and mononormativity. Thus, scripts reflect heterosexism, and a hierarchy of relationships that privilege romantic over platonic relationships (Rose, 2000), thereby minimizing the importance of friendships.

An important component of these scripts is their positioning of women as passive, both sexually and socially. Scripts differentially position cisgender men and women within a power hierarchy that sets different standards for acceptable expressions of sexuality by gender (Kim et al., 2007; Seabrook et al., 2016; Wiederman, 2005). Sexual socialization through family and educational communication often mirrors and endorses these scripted expectations. Scripts are important because they provide guidelines for behavior and both instructions for as well as a comparative measure to how we understand our intimate relationships. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted much of intimate life (Alexopoulos et al., 2021; Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Wignall et al., 2021), and as we will elaborate on in the next section, relational discourse, which was situated amid these dominant scripts
and discourses. Therefore, re-examining if or how these scripts may be altered is warranted.

**Relational Dialectics Theory**

Although not fully framed by the theory, RDT (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) provides a useful sensitizing theory alongside scripting theories that enables us to attend to different levels of discourse in intimate life. According to RDT, often competing or contested norms and expectations enacted through discourse characterize relational experiences (Baxter, 2011). Discourses may be dominant (e.g., heteronormative discourses) or marginalized (i.e., deviating from dominant discourses) (Baxter, 2011; Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019; Scharp & Thomas, 2018). For example, recent findings suggest that the dominant discourse of motherhood as innately desired among women may exist in contrast to the marginalized discourse of motherhood as learned, which also serves as sensemaking devices for new mothers (Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019). RDT helps explain the way dominant and marginalized discourses intersect and help people make sense of their relational life and experiences.

Specifically, RDT is well suited to examine dialectical tensions and their points of immersion, which according to RDT is socially constructed and co-constructed through communication (Baxter, 2011; Scharp & Thomas, 2018). In RDT, the utterance chain, reflecting larger discourses, involves: proximal already-spoken and proximal not-yet-spoken (i.e., those discourses voiced in the talk of relating parties); and, distal already spoken and distal not yet spoken (i.e., cultural discourses that are actually in existence and those expectations arising from cultural discourse; Baxter, 2011; Scharp & Thomas, 2018; Suter, 2018). These utterances comprise a chain because each both responds to, anticipates, and is a part of those utterances that come before and after it (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Norwood, 2015). Dominant and marginalized discourses may interplay in three ways according to RDT: through discursive transformation, diachronic separation, and synchronic interplay (Baxter, 2011). Discursive transformations describe when new meanings emerge or are created through the interplay of discourses, so discourse has been transformed through dialectic tensions rather than the discourse remaining in opposition to each other (Baxter, 2011). In contrast, diachronic separation and synchronic interplay describe types of dialectical tension that may emerge through competing discourse. In diachronic separation, discourses occur in separate spaces (e.g., locations, texts, times) and may reflect how dominant discourse changes over time (Baxter, 2011). For example, if and how the COVID-19 era may create its own discourses of relational intimacy compared to before and after COVID-19, as we suggest in the remainder of this manuscript. Synchronic interplay describes when discourses counter, negate, and/or entertain each other within the same utterance and/or the same time/space (Baxter, 2011). For example, synchronic interplay may describe situations in which dominant compared to marginalized discourses might reject one another, legitimize but in a limited scope, or present both discourses as co-existing. As women and people of diverse genders move to make sense of the changes to relational life and develop, maintain, or terminate relationships with intimate others through a
sequence of communication, their meaning-making processes that occur in communication warrants attention.

RDT, particularly RDT 2.0 (Baxter, 2011), encourages scholarship to pay particular attention to how opposing or competing discourses operate through various degrees of power to construct meaning (Baxter & Norwood, 2015; Suter, 2018). Specifically, Suter and colleagues have called for scholars to not focus only on the identification of dialectical tensions, but to use scholarship to explicate how power operates in both privileging and marginalizing different discourses (Suter et al., 2014). For instance, per RDT, centripetal discourses, or those that are positioned as normative through the culturally dominant ideology, are typically privileged over centrifugal discourses, or those that the dominant culture marginalizes or positions as non-normative or deviant (Hintz & Brown, 2020; Suter, 2018; Suter & Norwood, 2017). For example, rather than only identifying the kinds of tensions or dialectics that emerge in communication as people struggle to maintain and form intimate connections during a time of physical separation and increased social distancing, RDT enables an examination of how those tensions both reflect and sometimes counter dominant discourses of gendered relational expectations.

RDT has been applied in a plethora of different communication and relational contexts. Of recent work exploring the gendered power dynamics through an RDT perspective, RDT has explored how women make sense of discourse related to motherhood (Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019; Hintz & Brown, 2020). RDT encourages attention to the emergence of discourse that characterizes and challenges relational experience. We attend to these discourses through normative scripts, focusing particularly on the ways that scripts manifest in gendered power dynamics within intimate contexts.

**Shifting Intimacies During COVID-19**

As the impact of COVID-19 and the precautions surrounding it led to social distancing mandates and recommendations, more scholarship has emerged on the ways that relationships are being impacted. This paper reflects a snapshot of relational life during the first summer of the pandemic in 2020. At the time, COVID-19 recommendations and mandates encouraging people to remain in contact only with those in their household or to shift their contact behaviors with those outside their household impacted intimacy. Although many people were impacted by this, cisgender women and other gender minorities¹ may be an important focus. These groups experience higher rates of depression and anxiety (Moore et al., 2021), intimate partner violence (Döring, 2020), and inequitable demands in work and home responsibilities (Craig & Churchill, 2020; Leibert, 2020).

¹ We use the phrase cisgender women and gender minorities to describe our sample, who were predominantly cisgender women with a few participants identifying as genderfluid or nonbinary. The phrasing is meant to refer to our sample, not generalized claims about the entire population of cisgender women and people of diverse genders.
Maintaining well-functioning close relationships is situated within a number of dominant discourses, influenced by many external stressors during COVID-19, including the heightened impact of economic distress, demanding work-from-home conditions, and other outside factors (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). These external factors may adversely impact relationships, and recent research suggests that increased COVID-19-related external stressors may increase harmful dyadic processes and result in less responsive support, increased hostility, and increased withdrawal behaviors (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). These factors are exaggerated by the broader social context within which a couple exists, like social class, sexuality, and race (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). Newer research suggests the introduction of COVID-19 lockdown, social distancing, and other restrictions may provide both alternative narratives and important challenges for interpersonal relationships (Goodwin et al., 2020). Initial, exploratory studies find that relationships in general did not improve during the early stages of the pandemic (Goodwin et al., 2020). However, for relationships beyond a romantic partnership, people may experience positive impacts, especially for younger people (Goodwin et al., 2020).

COVID-19 and Sexual Intimacy

The pandemic disrupted the ways that individuals in social relationships negotiate their interactions. One of the ways in which individuals must negotiate their intimate interactions involves how they seek and receive sexual gratification. Researchers offered comprehensive recommendations for people who were isolated alone, in steady relationships but not living together, and to those who were isolating together (Lopes et al., 2020). Among these, an emphasis on leveraging communication technologies like Zoom, facetime, and even text-messaging, emerge (Watson et al., 2020).

For individuals who were single during COVID-19 lockdowns, recommendations thus far focus on expanding comfort with masturbation and other solo sexual activity. For instance, a person who was isolated alone should be comfortable with masturbation, sexual fantasy, and subjective desire as a means of receiving a fulfilling sexual response (Döring, 2020; Lopes et al., 2020). For people who are in a committed relationship while living apart during COVID-19, sharing intimate photos or videos may enhance their sexual connections (Lopes et al., 2020). Even sexting, or sharing sexually explicit materials over text messages with each other, can be a useful outlet to manage their physical distance (Döring, 2020; Lopes et al., 2020). Lopes and colleagues (2020) argue: “it is possible to ensure personal safety and contribute to the control of the pandemic while reinventing intimacy with each other” (p. 2736). Lastly, for partners who are isolated together, open lines of communication are imperative (Lopes et al., 2020).

COVID-19 also impacts relational environments. In a recent study, 34% of people in relationships reported more conflict with their romantic partners due to COVID-19 (Luetke et al., 2020). These conflicts reduced the rate of both partnered sexual activity and solo sexual activity (Luetke et al., 2020). For individuals in romantic relationships, research shows that life-threatening events like COVID-19 can lead to
the deterioration of the relationship quality because of various stressors and conflicts (i.e., increase rate of divorce), alternatively they can increase relationship quality and intimacy (i.e., increase in marriage or births) (Marshall & Kuijer, 2017). Thus, absence of productive communication surrounding intimacy can be highly destructive, but its presence can provide potential for creating and nurturing closeness.

**Bubbles: Negotiating Intimacy in Shared Spaces**

In addition to changes in intimate scripts within the intimate relationship, sexual relationships and individual sexuality may be shifting amid COVID-19 for individuals who cohabitate with people outside their romantic relationship, as well as affecting friendship and other close platonic relationships. One such social shift introduced *social bubbles*. Social bubbles, a strategy implemented first in New Zealand, is the process which allows easing of social distancing to facilitate close contact with those from another household (Leng et al., 2020).

For individuals who shared housing, establishing quarantine bubbles entails intricate and often elaborate communication negotiation whereby the collective creates new social norms for their living environment (Leng et al., 2020; Okabe-Miyamoto et al., 2020). Conversations about who can be in the bubble or pod and how each person moves in and out of those boundaries had become the new norm (Stieg, 2020). For instance, one person might live in a home with four other housemates, where one of the housemates has an intimate partner who lives with their housemates in a different location. While spending the night had previously not required household negotiation, the pandemic has shifted what used to be an individual or relational behavior as one that could now impact all of those living in both houses.

**Negotiating Intimacy Within Families and Kinship Relationships**

In the fabric of one’s intimate relationships, familial and kinship connections are also important to consider. Current research shows that a larger than expected number of single adults moved back into their childhood home during the COVID-19 pandemic for a variety of reasons including college closure, financial stability, and companionship (Pew Research, 2020). The Pew Research Center (2020) notes that the pandemic pushed millions of American young adults to move in with family members. While the cultural norms in the United States of autonomy and individualism perceive living with your parents in your adulthood as a mark of irresponsibility, the pandemic may have shifted that view, providing new discourses around emerging adulthood in relation to family and independence (Pinsker, 2020). For many single adults, particularly millennials, living with parents might mean that sheltering-at-home includes a familiar social network while concurrently possibly quelling other intimate relationships with friends or romantic/sexual partners, and as with other aspects of the pandemic, minimizing access to casual sexual encounters (Döring, 2020), while providing opportunities to connect with family.
The Present Study

In sum, COVID-19 disrupted relational life in a variety of ways for a variety of people. While some of these relational disruptions are obvious and public, the ways that COVID-19 has shifted more private aspects of our relational lives, like how we negotiate love, intimacy, and sex amid rapidly changing home lives, warrants additional investigation. Adapting to new living circumstances, employment statuses, relational situations, and physical environments presents a complex set of challenges for all. Conversely, this time is bringing some people closer together, both physically and emotionally. Growing scholarship during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic offers valuable overviews of the current state of social distancing and its impact on different relationships. However, much of this scholarship has yet to explore the nuances of how cisgender women and gender minorities, typically marginalized genders who experienced a number of relational inequities pre-pandemic, negotiate their communication discourse in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic by which they are both privately and publicly differentially impacted (Döring, 2020). Thus, we posed the following exploratory research questions: How do cisgender women and people of diverse gender identities (1) make sense of, (2) communicate about, and (3) maintain various forms of intimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodological Intimacies and COVID-19

Sample and Recruitment

Participants were recruited from a variety of social media spaces including the personal accounts of the research team, and the /women forum on Reddit.com. Of 29 participants, 25 chose to provide demographic information. Participants were predominantly white (n = 19, 76%), as well as Latina or Hispanic (n = 4, 16%), or identified as two or more races (n = 2, 8%). All participants described their assigned sex as female, and the majority (n = 22, 91.7%) as cisgender women, with one participant identifying as genderfluid (n = 1, 4.17%), another identifying as nonbinary (n = 1, 4.17%), and one not disclosing their gender identity. Participants reported diverse sexual orientations as bisexual or pansexual (n = 9, 36%), heterosexual (n = 8, 32%), gay or lesbian (n = 4, 16%), on the asexual spectrum (n = 3, 12%), and queer (n = 1, 4%). Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 51 (M = 28.21, SD = 7.10). Fifteen participants said they were currently in a relationship, with 10 participants identifying that they were currently single, and one of those participants identified as polyamorous, and seven participants said they were a member of the BDSM community. Eleven participants currently cohabitated with a partner.

Procedures

To address COVID-19 intimacies and our research question, we engaged a series of in-depth, qualitative, and intimate methods of data collection that include semi-structured focus groups, friendship pods, and interviews collected during the months of July and August during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focus groups and friendship
pods with 3–5 participants each ranged from 1 h and 40 min to 3 h and 10 min in length. Interviews ranged from 45 to 70 min in length. Combined, all of these totaled 537 pages of transcripts. All interviews and focus groups were conducted via Zoom and recorded and transcribed verbatim including vocal pauses. Friendship pods are a type of focus group in which the facilitator knows, or is friends, with the other participants, generating a more intimate conversation. All sessions utilized the same semi-structured interview guide, which asked questions about family and partner communication about sex, sexuality, sexual health, and reproductive health. One question explicitly asked the participants how circumstances related to COVID-19 had affected their intimate lives—but participants discussed the pandemic and its impact on intimacy throughout the interviews. The present study employed multiple methods to collect the qualitative data in effort to triangulate the findings. Triangulation describes the use of multiple methods, usually in qualitative research, to investigate some phenomenon (Carter et al, 2014; Patton, 1999). Three different methodologies, all employing the same interview guide, were used to collect the data analyzed in this manuscript to embed rigor into the process.

**Data Analysis**

We engaged a thematic analysis informed by contrapuntal analysis to address our research question. An extension of critical discourse analysis, contrapuntal analysis is well suited for analyzing “the discursive/ideological struggles of power at play in the talk of relating” (Suter, 2018, p. 128). Specifically, contrapuntal analysis examines the discursive tensions between dominant and marginalized discourses, privileging the explication of the role of power in the emergence of dialectical tensions rather than the mere identification of dialectical tension (Suter, 2018). Contrapuntal analysis, in the present study, was used as a second-order analytic technique. That is, rather than engaging the data from the start, we determined this was an appropriate technique after a first-order reading and second-order thematic analysis of the data. Contrapuntal analysis contains both the identification of discursive competition as well as micro-linguistic analysis in utterances. Attention to microlinguistic analysis was outside the scope of this project’s research questions, thus we did not fulfill a complete contrapuntal analysis, but rather a thematic analysis informed by the principles of contrapuntal analysis.

After participation, each interview, focus group, or friendship pod’s recording was run through the transcription software Otter.ai. The facilitator of the particular session read through the Otter produced transcript while listening to the interview to ensure accuracy of the transcription. Transcripts were compiled both separately by interview, focus groups, and friendship pods as well as with the three types of data combined for triangulation. In both sets of transcripts, the data was blinded prior to the research team reading through them. The first four authors read through the transcripts in their entirety twice to become familiar with the data. Next, the first four authors independently generated first-order codes of the entire data set, generally preserving participant language. After this, the first four authors met virtually to discuss only the data related to COVID-19 and generate a second-order analysis.
utilizing contrapuntal analysis. To begin the thematic analysis informed by contrapuntal analysis, both the independent reading of the data by each author and our virtual convening to discuss the data focused on identifying primary and marginalized discourses (Baxter, 2011). Contrapuntal analysis also makes space for privileging the discursive interplay within a text or data set, enabling an exploration of how different themes might compete for dominance. Similar to other RDT research (Hintz & Brown, 2019), the four coding authors considered discursive interplay as a sensitizing device as we read and discussed the data, considering how discourses interact with one another. Importantly, Suter (2018) highlights that relational talk, per RDT and contrapuntal analysis, is “ideologically saturated” (p. 126), and privileged ideological discourse tends to mute more marginalized discourses (Suter, 2018). In other words, alternate discourses are marginalized by dominant ideology, rather than some innate state. Our analysis focused not only on the thematic tensions that emerged and how they reflect the utterance chain, but on the ways that discursive interplay highlight power dynamics and the ideological nature of relational life. Once we fully generated our analytic categories, all four authors independently read through the data again to determine if the second-order themes really represented the data. The authors virtually convened to discuss and resolve any discrepancies. Then, each author again read through the data set to validate the co-created themes with the data. The findings presented in this paper reflect complete agreement between all authors.

**Intimacies and Data Collection**

Out of precaution during the COVID-19 pandemic, all data collection took place via the video-conferencing software Zoom. Although it was not a requirement for participation, all participants were within their own homes during time of data collection. Given the nature of data collection, participation in an already intimate subject became more so, with participants joining from inside their home. Likewise, the researchers conducting the interviews were also in the comfort of their own homes—creating a type of closeness for discussion.

Per Suter (2018)’s call for author reflexivity, we acknowledge our location in the data collection and interview process. Laura notes that this reflexive method among other characteristics like “linking research to relevant theory,” self-examination and critique; values care, love, and solidarity (p. 229). We as authors situate ourselves in the discourse and in the power dynamics present in data collection and analysis. All authors on this project identify as cisgender women. The first author is a White, married, lesbian woman, who was able to work remotely and maintain employment during the COVID-19 pandemic, and was in a household with her spouse, a genderfluid queer person, who also remained employed throughout the pandemic. The second author is an African American evolving woman, in a 26-year monogamous marriage who was also able to work remotely and maintain employment during the pandemic. She was in a household with her African American male partner who also remained employed throughout the pandemic. The third author is a white, single, heterosexual woman, who shifted focus on her career as a choreographer and
theater performer during the COVID-19 pandemic—spending several months living with her parents and currently residing with one roommate in New York, exploring new dating norms. The fourth author is a Latina woman, currently in a monogamous partnership and living in a household with several family members in Los Angeles. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she lost one job, but was also able to work remotely and maintain employment. The fifth author is Latina, in a long-term monogamous relationship, who was able to work remotely and maintain employment during the pandemic. Living part-time between the East and West Coast of the country—she mainly sheltered in place, with her male partner, in a multi-generational Latinx home in Los Angeles. Notably, as research scholars, each author brings these positions and identities to our collective understanding of the data, to our relationships with the participants, and ultimately to the intimacy of this work.

Findings and Discussion

The dominant discourse most prominent throughout participant dialogue was the Discourse of Scripted Intimacy. Scripting refers to the normative patterns in relationships that typically include privileging romantic relationships over friendships (Rose, 2000), normalizing the heterosexual life script (i.e., dating, marriage, cohabitation, easy and desired reproduction between opposite sex, monogamous partners; Seabrook et al., 2016), minimizing relationships that are not romantic or family of origin (Rose, 2000), and the societal infrastructure that enables these scripts. We term this the discourse of scripted intimacy, which also described participants’ understanding of what they were supposed to do in relationships. In contrast, the Discourse of Co-Created Intimacy both legitimized and challenged the existing relational scripts by generating new ideas of what intimacy could look like in a relationship. We will describe each discourse, and explore their interplay through the interrelated sub-themes of stability v. growth, comfort v. discomfort, and physical risk v. relational risk.

Scripted Intimacy

Reflecting dominant discourses of scripted intimacy, participants described understanding that they were supposed to express affection to a romantic partner, engage in sexual activity, and feel excited about that relationship. In addition, they described the often-intentional prioritization of romantic and family relationships during COVID-19. The discourse of scripted intimacy was reflected in several interrelated dialectic tensions throughout participants’ discussions. For example, Giselle said:

I definitely had an uh experience where I got a lot closer to a lot of people. And that in ways I that uh I wasn’t exactly expecting to due to COVID. Such as my current, my current partner I switched from being in what I would consider a friends with benefits or fuck buddies relationship to dating because of COVID. . . I had been planning on having a hot girl summer because of past trauma [laughs]. And then COVID came around and it was partly because of,
and it was partly, mainly because uh they expressed interest and that made it, uh COVID made it difficult um to follow through on my plans and expectations. . .

Giselle’s initial plans, a “hot girl supper,” an idea popularized by Megan Thee Stallion, an American rapper, singer, and songwriter, encouraged her listeners to challenge dominant discourse by reclaiming (Black) female sexuality and women embracing themselves, having a good time, encouraging their friends, and flaunt their sexuality (Jennings, 2020). This initial plan to deviate from the heteronormative script were interrupted by COVID-19, which made it easier for her to lean into a discourse from which she was initially planning to step away. Giselle added that she had other positive relational experiences because of COVID-19. Specifically, the increased normalization of communication technology like Skype and Zoom to connect with people who live at a distance allowed her to strengthen relationships with close friends and family.

Other participants highlighted the same idea that while less interdependent relationships might fizzle out, the pandemic was a space to invest in and prioritize relationships sanctioned by the normative relational scripts (Rose, 2000). For example, Mallory said, “It strengthened my core relationships, but then like, it kind of filtered out the unnecessary.” Marla made a similar comment, saying:

Um, I think I cut ties with a lot of people that I knew socially but didn’t realize I didn’t consider them friends or close so was just people I knew out of a chance or coincidence because we move in the same circles. And I think with the pandemic... that makes you realize the ones that are there to stay and the ones that were there just to have a drink. Once you have the separation, then you can strengthen those links with the ones that you realize actually matter the most.

Similarly, Lorri said:

COVID um, yeah, so in terms of family relationships, I weirdly got super close with my parents and my sister. So my family, my family unit, um, I actually lived with my parents for like the first three months of the pandemic, which I thought was going to turn out to be a disaster. But it actually was amazing.

Making space to invest relational resources in especially close relationships, which participants typically indicated were romantic partners, immediate family, and occasionally (but less frequently) very close friends, is reflective of normative intimate scripts because according to those scripts women are supposed to invest their time and energy in romantic relationships (Rose, 2000).

Other participants highlighted how COVID-19 might have disrupted their scripted relational plans. For example, Stephanie and her husband were planning to try and conceive. She said:

. . . Um, we’re not going to try and have a baby right now, because there’s just so much that we don’t know. And COVID-19 is a big scary monster that no one understands fully. Um, but I think what’s interesting specifically with
COVID-19 and my husband and I have been talking about this, I think it’s like, you know, how many months are we in now?

Stephanie noted elsewhere during the discussion that she felt like she was not “Getting any younger,” and did not want to put her life on hold. Having kids when a woman reaches a particular age, and a relationship reaches a particular stage, is common among normative life scripts (Döring, 2020; Rose, 2000). Stephanie’s discussion reflects an awareness that COVID-19 was putting a strain on her ability to participate easily in such scripted behavior. For example, the dominant script of the master mother narrative suggests that once married, heterosexual women will easily become and sustain a pregnancy (Horstman et al., 2017). Lorri, Mallory, and Stephanie all highlight the competing demands of balancing physical risks and relational risks, or maintaining relational stability compared to growing the self or relationship through change and challenge.

Co-Created Intimacy

In contrast to the more dominant discourse was the Discourse of Co-Created Intimacy. Countering dominant understandings of relational life and specifically women’s role in relationships emerged stories about using the pandemic as an opportunity to reinvest and redefine their relationships, think about what intimacy could mean without sex, challenge tolerance for discomfort, and rethink their close social networks. These tensions reflected thinking of relational stability sometimes as in tension with personal growth, understanding communicating through discomfort, and the parallel physical and relational risks that occurred throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

While many participants described that they spent much of the pandemic investing in their very close relationships and letting those who were less close filter out, often reflective of endorsing dominant intimate scripts, others noted that they intentionally chose to terminate relationships of varying degrees of interdependence because of physical risk or how a person treated the COVID-19 pandemic. Often, these highlighted the power dynamics within particular relationships, like workplace relationships, or the amount of perceived closeness in intimate relationships. For example, Sadie said:

I feel like eventually I have to figure out how to assert more intimacy boundaries. . . It’s like power dynamics. I think I think about power dynamics constantly. So it’s like, I’m new at my job... I can’t tell the CEO at my job not to hug me because I’m new and I have a certain like, you know, I’m still like in this weird phase of my job. So like, I let those things get to me, but I’m like, I have to figure out a boundary at some point to say like, I am not comfortable with this. . .

Sadie’s discussion of feeling like she cannot assert boundaries in a workplace, where power dynamics are explicitly embedded, reflects a desire to create space for
co-created scripts, but an uncertainty for how to proceed. Similarly, she describes a similar tension among friendships:

I feel like I need to change the way I’m communicating about it, but I still haven’t figured out how to do that, because I still feel like some people are just like, the world is normal. And I’m sitting here, like, did I hallucinate that there was a pandemic, like, did it did it happen? Did it just not happen... just like am I a crazy person. So there’s a lot of that internal, like, you know, contrasting thoughts to myself that is making it difficult for me to rethink how I want to communicate with people. So I want to but I don’t really think it has changed just because I am dealing with so much internal strife with it. But again, it’s that weird, like relational intimacy, where it’s like, do we have a good enough friendship where I can confront you on this and we’re still gonna be friends afterwards or not? Because like, our friendship is in that kind of like gray space where I’m like, I might confront you on this and you don’t want to be friends anymore. And I feel weird about it.

Sadie was worried that asserting her boundaries regarding safety, or physical risk, might cause relational problems in her personal friendships and in her workplace relationships, where she was not sure she had enough relational history to communicate her boundaries.

The interplay here reflects the tension of both relational v. physical risk, whereby Sadie believed she was putting herself in some degree of danger to preserve personal and professional relationships, as well as comfort v. discomfort. Sadie described a vivid awareness of her discomfort in both her relational space and history and in a relational partner’s COVID-19 precautionary behaviors. In the traditional discourse of scripted intimacy, which reflects the ways in which we socialize women to tolerate discomfort, especially in relational contexts, Sadie would be expected to find strategies for managing these discomforts that are either internal (e.g., just stomach it), or to dissolve those less interdependent relationships for investment in marital or family relationships. In contrast, Sadie described wanting to find ways to communicate this discomfort, but was not sure how to broach the subject without alienating friends or jeopardizing her job. In the context of the workplace, the added power dynamic of supervisory relationships places additional pressures (with additional consequences) on Sadie to minimize her discomfort.

Similar to Sadie’s discussion with her friends, Sam expressed their frustration with a friend’s behavior, and while the friend remained in their life, it caused tensions in their relationship:

I see him out on social media like being out with people not in his network, not wearing face masks like doing really bad practices. And I get angry and then I feel like I can’t. I like try to talk to him and I feel like I can’t talk to him. There’s kind of created some turbulence in our intimacy because I just kind of feel like I can’t share this with him. I can’t even talk about other things that I’m feeling and frustrations about like my family not doing things with um their like safe health practices.
These dilemmas are significant through the lens of RDT and scripting theories, where friends hold a more precarious place in the dominant life script for women. While Rawlins (2008) argues that the dialectics emerging from friendship have the potential to transcend the limitations of many less voluntary relationships, the dominant discourse positions friends as less important than romantic and familial relationships (Rose, 2000). Here, Sadie highlights an additional tension, physical risk v. relational risk. COVID-19 forced many to acknowledge what kinds of risks they were comfortable taking. For some, the physical risks of violating social distancing recommendations were perceived as more dire than the relational risk of challenging others’ behavior or disengaging from relational partners whom we perceive as unsafe.

Another aspect of normative relationships is the expectation that women will do the relational “work” (Ramvi & Davies, 2010). Participants discussed that in their space to think about the kinds of intimacy they wanted that COVID-19’s disruptions offered, they were able to consider the kind of “work” they wanted to put into relationships, that for them was worth the effort, and that that which wasn’t. For example, in a focus group, Karen and Sam said:

Karen: I feel like this whole situation has weeded out people that . . . may have acted or pretended as if they were important parts of my life but when you are this separated and communication and connection takes this, not as much effort because I actually think that like video it takes less . . . I’m learning a lot about the people that are actually showing up for me and the people that I feel compelled to show up for. [Sigh] and I’m also learning, I actually think the quarantine has taught me that I can make more of an effort to reach out to my people and that it actually takes more of an effort.

Sam: Sorry. Um, yes. So I really quickly want to add. . . But kind of the flip side of what Karen was talking about was, you know, you’ve put the work in for the relationship. One thing I struggled with in Coronavirus time was I had to manage my relationships. For whatever reason, I’m very, I tend to friend introverted people who will never take the time to call out to me to ask, you know, to hang out, I always have to do the work. And I had to talk in therapy about like how I felt really exhausted by that and I was like, “Why do I always have to do the work?” and I kind of came to the well, it’s just, there’s nothing wrong with that. Like, if you want to, that’s good. If you don’t want to, then you shouldn’t have to, but like really trying to understand when you’re maintaining relationships in this way where you can’t just pass them by in the hallway, which is what I used to do with a lot of my relationships. That is going to require some intentionality and boundary negotiation of how do you know who’s responsible for checking in? How do you understand one another? Are you okay with radio silence?

Karen and Sam, building off of one another’s discursive and relational experience in talk, concluded that the pandemic highlighted the kinds of relational work that felt like work. Sam elaborated that they were able to take time for themselves during the pandemic to interrogate what kind of work they wanted and were willing to do in their relationships. Rather than tacit acceptance of a scripted role, Karen and Sam
highlight the discursive interplay of these competing needs and interrogated and co-created a type of intimacy in their relationships for which the pandemic made space or necessity.

In contrast to discourses that challenge scripted understandings of friends and friendship, among other less interdependent relationships, were discourses that challenged close romantic relationships or co-created a different kind of intimacy in those relationships. A particularly common story among participants who had cohabiting romantic relationships that had survived the pandemic was that they felt closer to their partner, but were having less sex. Participants cited a number of explanations for why they were engaging in sexual activity with less frequency, but most commonly they noted that either they were anxious and that reduced their sex drive; or, the pandemic had made it so they were unable to engage in the kind of romantic spontaneity and flirtation that they had previously depended on to prompt sexual activity. Despite the reduction in sexual frequency many participants reported, often in the same breath, they described feeling closer and more intimate with their partner. For example, Sadie said:

Like it was to the point where like, it was like sometime in June where I was just like, we have not had sex and forever. And my wife was like, is that... Is that a problem? And I was like, technically no, but like, I feel like it should be a problem. But I’m also just like, I see you all the fucking time so [laughs] it’s fine... So I was like, I feel like I need to like be away from you so that way I can long for you. But I cannot do that... because the world is exploding. So, like so now it’s like, because I never understand the people who like... schedule sex... And now it’s like, I feel like I have to schedule sex because I just see you all the time. But I’m not just like, spontaneously wanting to have sex because I miss you or would seem to you or like, I’m in the mood and just like constantly in the same fucking room all day, just with the same person.

Similarly, Candice said, “I’ve not been married that long, but we live together for like, a year. And I think we’ve become more like, intimate and close during COVID. But having less sex for sure.” Both Sadie and Candice noted that they were having less sex with the partner. Candice indicated that she was having sex less frequently with her fairly new husband because of anxiety. Sadie described the problem as spending too much time together. Similarly, other participants like Lee said that the nature of living with a partner and having to negotiate roommates who were also quarantining resulted in less space to engage in spontaneous flirtations.

The highlighting of spontaneity and romance is a reflection of a sexual script that positions sexual encounters as spur of the moment, heated, and romantic (Noland, 2010). Recognizing a deviation from this scripted expectation of spontaneous (and frequent) sexual activity, while often also explaining that they still feel close and intimate with their partner, exists in contrast to the dominant discourse, even when presenting alternatives. For example, Sadie explicitly notes in her discussion an awareness that the dominant discourse made her feel like something was wrong. One alternative that Sadie and others highlighted was scheduling sexual activity. Another participant, Marla, noted that they might engage in other activities to stimulate intimacy in their relationship, like learning new skills or interests together. Angela,
another participant, added that her husband, who worked in a factory that produced paper products, was exhausted during the pandemic, but they spent a lot more time cuddling and kissing, even if they were not engaging in sexual activities. Even though she noted that some intimacy “suffered” as a result of this, she still felt close to her husband. These non-sexual, intimacy building activities, whether affectionate like kissing and cuddling, or others like planning something together or engaging in a new activity, provide examples of co-creating a new kind of intimacy that even amid a difficult global crisis was offering space for growth in their otherwise stable relationships. Thus, in these cases, rather than simply existing in tension with a dominant discourse, these dialectical shifts produced new discourses that offer space for growth and closeness.

Another space for countering dominant discourses and co-creating new intimacies came from two participants who described their relationships as polyamorous, highlighting the particular difficulties COVID-19 imposed on managing multiple relationships. Polyamory inherently exists as a relational type in contrast to the norms of monogamy (Suter, 2018). For example, Evelyn explained that her cohabitating partner is an essential worker, which led to particular challenges in him seeing his other partner in person, as well as her ability to interact with her other partner, who she had not been with in person for several months. Evelyn explained that the polyamorous community has been framing this as a new kind of consent:

Like just like, um you know I, uh, it’s an impossible time. And, I, and I feel like um talking to poly folks…fortunately like everyone gets it like that, that subculture definitely talks about it and how hard it is and how you…you, this new type of consent that exists now.

Veronica, who also disclosed her polyamory, similarly explained:

We talk a lot about radical honesty, which means that little things that we wouldn’t have talked about in other situations have to come up. We have an agreement to talk about any little symptom, anything off, that we feel we have to communicate everything - everybody inside the bubble. Every time we go out like to grocery shopping, or medical appointments, we have to tell everybody since um like testing, STI testing, is not really feasible. . . we started using like condoms every time when we wouldn’t have before.

Veronica and Evelyn highlight the discourse of a new type of consent emerging from their polyamorous communities, which formed around a relational culture that exists in contrast to normative relational models. From the dialectical tensions of risk and comfort surrounding intimacy during the time of COVID-19, these participants highlighted that new discourses can co-create meaning around safety and comfort.

Outside of romantic relationships, family relationships also provided a site for discursive shifts. Importantly, other participants described across a variety of relationships an implicit (or sometimes explicit) understanding that discourses reflecting scripted and normative intimacies minimized the experience of their discomfort, assumed feminine compliance, or put their prioritization of physical safety in direct
conflict with a desire to maintain relational closeness. In other words, participants were often in a situation where they had to consider the physical risk of behaviors in light of COVID-19, including their health and safety or the health and safety of a loved one, and the relational risk of disengaging with certain others, choosing not to participate in events, or not visiting with friends or family who might take the virus less seriously than them. For example, Evelyn said, “I have regularly had to decline my father’s guilt trips to ‘why won’t you come see me? We live out here in the country. It’s not here. Yada yada, whatever.’” Like Evelyn, often this also meant having an uncomfortable conversation under a circumstance where they might have previously tolerated that discomfort.

Discursive Interplay in Reshaping Intimacy During COVID-19

We see for the predominantly White women and gender minorities in this study navigating relational life in the midst of COVID-19, choices to deviate from scripted intimacy, or to intentionally or unintentionally co-create new meanings of intimacy in their personal relationships, were understood within the larger sense-making structure of relational scripts, often in contrast to frequent sexual activity as a marker of close romantic relationships or an equivalent to intimacy. This represents a focus on interplay of these competing centripetal and centrifugal discourses. As Baxter (2011) notes, the processes of interplay emerge in the centripetal-centrifugal tension. This was most prominently demonstrated by participants who differentially explained how they managed their intimate relationships differently by relational interdependence. It was easier for many participants to just let relationships that were not as entangled and close, often those same relationships devalued by normative scripts (Rose, 2000), dissolve or to de-invest in them. Counter to this, some participants described the tensions that were present in trying to manage friendship and workplace relationships during a shifting intimate landscape. Others noted that their romantic relationships themselves provided a site to co-create new meanings and experiences of intimacy in the face of global and relational challenges. Intimate relational management during COVID-19 involved reconciling traditional understandings of closeness with the creation of new needs and norms.

Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusions

This research contributes to the emergent literature on how people are managing their relationships during COVID-19, and may extend RDT to account for the role of sexual scripts in informing dominant discourse. However, several methodological limitations warrant mention and should filter interpretation of these results. One of these limitations includes the racial makeup of the sample. While the research participants in this study were mostly White, we appreciate that they were from different sexual identities and a range of living situations and environments. However, future research must bring more racial/ethnic groups into the conversations, who were also impacted by shifting relational norms during COVID-19. It is also possible that the
employed methodology was likely to attract more White participants. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted people of different races differently, with people of color far more likely to experience the pandemic’s toll on economic instability or mortality (McLaren, 2021). The time and capacity to participate in a several-hour long Zoom interview was likely to minimize the experiences of people who were in general hit harder by the pandemic. Thus, the results of this study should be interpreted in light of this limitation, and the results not generalized to how all women might have experienced changes in relational life.

In addition, the nature of the online interviewing meant that those who participated had to have access to a camera via computer, phone, or a tablet. Unfortunately, this limits anyone who does not have the aforementioned technology, often leaving out individuals from lower income households. We also failed to collect socioeconomic status as a demographic variable; thus, the results of this study should be interpreted in light of that missing detail. Additionally, those speaking about the experiences and intimacies happening within the same space they are being interviewed lends itself to consider potential filtering or adjusting of language, when discussing the events in their personal space(s). Once it is safe to do so, future research may continue to interrogate these dynamics in face-to-face interviews and by providing additional data collection methods that may be friendlier to people like working parents or those without stable Internet connections.

This paper identified patterns of dialogically expansive discourse that focus on how normative (natural) scripts are both resisted and legitimized. For everyone, COVID-19 felt like a perpetual shifting of sand under our collective feet. The newness of this pandemic, the reality that there are new strains emerging and the implications of a vaccine halting the spread means that what is transpiring now will look very different in six to 12 months from today. While these changes bring many challenges to people’s personal and professional lives, their physical health, mental well-being, or relationships, a silver-lining emerging from our discussions with these cisgender women and people of diverse genders is that they are being encouraged, or encouraging themselves, to be vulnerable both intrapersonally and interpersonally. This has resulted in a shift and collective public and private conversation within numerous intimate relationships.

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**Code Availability** Not applicable.

**Declarations**

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Ethics Approval** This project was approved by Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board. (IRB # CPS20-04-02).
Consent to Participate  Participants consented to participate through an online questionnaire, clicking “I agree” in place of a signature.

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