Chapter 3
Communication About Communication in Love Letters: Addressing and Avoiding Failures, Mistakes, and Errors in Written Communication

Paul C. Rosenblatt

Abstract How do people build a relationship when communicating via love letters? Communicative failures, mistakes, and errors can occur in any relationship. Written communication is more at risk of failures, mistakes, and errors than face-to-face communication because it lacks the nonverbal information of face-to-face interaction and the opportunity available in face-to-face interaction for immediate clarifying exchanges about potential or actual failures, mistakes, and errors. What goes on in love letter exchanges to shelter the couple relationship from the challenges inherent in communicating, particularly in written communicating?

Thematic analysis was carried out with ten sets of published love letters from diverse eras (the 1820s to the 1940s).

Some lovers wrote about the potential of written communication for failures, mistakes, and errors. Some asked for clarity about what was said in a previous letter, particularly early in their relationship when they were still getting to know one another as people and correspondents. Most correspondents raised concerns about the meaning of gaps in communication, and most provided explanations when they were responsible for gaps. Most letter writers assumed brevity could be a problem for the other and offered explanations for brevity. In sum, the key strategy for addressing and avoiding potential or actual failures, mistakes, and errors inherent in exchanging love letters was communication about communication.

Keywords Couples · Interpersonal communication · Love letters · Misunderstandings · Written communication · Mistakes · Error · Failure

P. C. Rosenblatt (✉)
Department of Family Social Science, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN, USA
e-mail: prosenbl@umn.edu

3.1 Introduction

How do two people building a relationship via love letters avoid or address communicative failures, mistakes, and errors? The stakes are high in love letter exchanges, because with a positive and escalating relationship there is likely to be considerable vulnerability and hope for the future for both parties. With stakes so high, the need to avoid or address communication failures, mistakes, and errors is particularly great. What goes on in love letter exchanges to shelter the couple relationship from the failures, mistakes, and errors inherent in written communication?

When a couple communicates by letter, the only tool they have to avoid or address failures, mistakes, or errors in their communication is their letter writing. That means an important part of sustaining a relationship built on written communication may well be communication about communication. In the process of communicating about communication, the two correspondents can avoid, overcome, or correct potential or actual failures, mistakes, and errors. But do couples address relationship issues in love letter exchanges through communication about communication? Is communication about communication present and substantial in love letter exchanges? The research reported here investigated communication about communication in love letters.

According to communication theorists and researchers, any interpersonal communication is at risk of failure, mistakes, and errors (e.g., Bavelas et al. 1990; Grant 2007; Robinson 2006; Sillars et al. 2004; Weeks and Gambescia 2016). So of course there are risks in love letter exchanges of failures, mistakes, or errors. Those risks have not been systematically examined in research on love letters. In this report about love letters using qualitative research, I consider a communicative failure to have occurred or to be at risk of occurring if either correspondent considers that a falling short, deficiency, or lack of success has occurred or may have occurred in the correspondence. I consider a communicative mistake to have occurred or to be at risk of occurring if either correspondent believes a misunderstanding or miscommunication has occurred or may have occurred. Similarly, I consider a communicative error to have occurred or to be at risk of occurring if either correspondent believes that there has been or may have been a communicative inaccuracy, departure from what is right or proper, or falsehood in the correspondence. Although many collections of love letters have been published or are available to researchers in public archives, there has not been research on a sample of love letter collections exploring how love letter writers address or avoid potential or actual communicative failures, mistakes, and errors.

The literature on electronic communication indicates that written communication is more challenging than face-to-face communication in part because written communication lacks the nonverbal supplementary information (such as facial expressions and voice intonation) of face-to-face communication to address or avoid failures, errors, and mistakes (e.g., Hertlein and Ancheta 2014; Juhasz and Bradford 2016; Murray and Campbell 2015; Paldam 2018). In addition, written

communication with the inevitable time passage that comes with communicating by snail mail (unlike face-to-face communication and electronic communication between two parties who are both online and providing immediate responses to one another) lacks the capacity for immediate clarifying exchanges to address actual or apparent communicative failures, mistakes, or errors (e.g., Hertlein and Ancheta 2014; Juhasz and Bradford 2016).

Communication about communication has been understood since the early days of theorizing about problems in couple and family relationships to be a key to avoiding and addressing problems, including those arising from communicative failures, mistakes, and errors (Rosenblatt 1994, pp. 162–169; Watzlawick et al. 1967, ch. 2; Wilmot 1980). Communication about communication may be called "metacommunication." Whether through nonverbal behavior or through words said or written along with a communication, we may metacommunicate (communicate about our communication). When engaging in written communication, and thus lacking the capacity to metacommunicate nonverbally, people must use their written words to "metacommunicate." Thus, it seemed reasonable to explore communication about communication as an approach love letter writers might take to address or avoid potential or actual communicative failures, mistakes, or errors.

3.2   Research Methods

3.2.1   Sample

The sample of love letter collections was drawn from the University of Minnesota Library, which according to Wikipedia ("List of the largest libraries in the United States," accessed April 12, 2019) is one of the top 25 research libraries in North America. The university's online catalog lists more than 1400 books of or about love letters. I sifted through the books in the order presented by the catalog (which began with books in which the first words of the title are "love letters"). The criteria for a love letter collection to be included in the sample were love letters exchanged by a heterosexual couple who initially were not married to each other and eventually married, a total of at least 30 premarital letters, letters written in or translated into English, and letters from both parties. I put no limitations on the cultural background of the letter writers. My sample consisted of the first ten books of love letters found that fit the criteria.

The research analysis focused on the letters up to the time a couple married. The ten love letter collections are listed in the references for this chapter, with each book marked with an asterisk (∗). For the love letters of Woodrow Wilson and Edith Bolling Galt, I used three sources, Link et al. (1980a, b), and Tribble (1981), because Tribble's footnotes covered useful matters that the Link et al. footnotes did not, but the Link et al. books included more of the couple's correspondence.

The cases included a letter collection translated from German (Albert Einstein and Mileva Marić) and one translated from Russian (Anton Chekhov and Olga Knipper). Fourteen of the 20 letter writers were from the United States, 2 from Russia, and 1 each from Great Britain, Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Australia. The letters were written as early as the 1820s and as recently as the 1940s.

Some sets of letters were brief (not much more than 30 letters); others were extensive (over 1000 letters). I did not want to weigh the large letter collections more than the smaller ones in analyzing the data, so I created equal-sized samples of letters from each collection. Because I wanted to sample across the trajectory of the couple relationship, I chose the first ten, middle ten, and last ten letters before the couple married. I considered the middle ten letters to be those written half way between the date of the first letter in the collection and that of the last letter before marriage, with the first five of the middle ten being immediately before the midpoint date and the next five being immediately after the midpoint date. With the Sandburg-Steichen letters (Sandburg 1987), I respected the editor's opinion that the first Sandburg-Steichen letters were not love letters and chose as the first love letter the one the editor said was the one that marked the beginning of the love relationship.

3.2.2   Research Analysis Methodology

I photocopied the first middle and final ten letters before marriage in each letter collection and then read and reread every letter identifying each instance of what seemed to be communication about communication—for example, asking for clarification of something the other had written or commenting on the limitations of communicating through writing. The next step was to carry out a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the letter passages that seemed to involve communication about communication. The analysis was open to whatever the letter writers had to say that could be taken as communication about communication, but it was also informed by theoretical works on communication about communication in couples and families (e.g., Rosenblatt 1994, pp. 162–169; Watzlawick et al. 1967, ch. 2; Wilmot 1980) concerning the circumstances that would be likely to create a need for communication about communication (e.g., failures to communicate, misunderstandings, and communications that hurt the other's feelings). Categories were generated that were descriptive and linked closely to the words the letter writers used. The Findings section of this chapter offers illustrations of the themes, and that enables readers to check on the fit between the data and the themes that were generated in the analysis.

The presentation of the findings, driven as it was by what the letter writers had to say that seemed to be communication about communication, is descriptive, but it also is interpretative in that without any possibility of my communicating with the letter writers I have to rely on my interpretations of what they wrote. The interpretations are informed by the letter writers offering contexts for what they have written and interacting with one another about what they have written. But still, there are

interpretative stretches in the analysis, perhaps particularly in the analysis of letter writers thanking one another for writing.

3.2.3 Study Limitations

Participants in love letter exchanges need a reasonable amount of literacy and a functioning postal system or other means of conveying written communications (Ahearn 2000). Love letter writing is facilitated by social or physical contexts that keep couples apart—for example, norms that make it difficult or inappropriate for couples to see each other face-to-face (Ahearn 2000), norms that make arranged marriage relatively unlikely (Ahearn 2000), and occupational, family, or transportation barriers that keep the partners apart.

Another limitation is that because one partner wrote more letters than the other or one partner's letters were more likely to be saved, in some couples, one partner's writings provide more of the data about the issues researched.

Love letters are saturated with cultural rules, understandings, and practices (Janning 2018; Lyons 1999, 2013). That means in studying love letters one must be sensitive to the cultural contexts, values, and meanings that shape and limit the letters. Consider, for example, cultural standards about gender roles, the importance of marriage, and what one must say one feels about a potential partner in order to be attractive to that person. Furthermore, across eras and countries, writers of love letters have had the potential to use etiquette books and books on writing letters to shape what they chose to write in a love letter (e.g., Lyons 1999; Lystra 1989, pp. 13–14). That means that one limitation of research on love letters is that it may not be so much about human psychology as about what the cultural rules were for the letter writers. That also means that it is possible to mistake the requirements of letter writing etiquette for communications about concrete realities. Love letters, particularly those from diverse eras and cultures, confront the researcher with many interpretative challenges (Bergs 2014). It is not simply that there may be words and phrases that have meanings that elude one, but also there are cultural codes about what to write, and these codes may reveal and hide what people feel and mean. Perhaps the ten letter sets used in this research, spanning more than a century and located in a diversity of countries, allow for assertions that are not hopelessly culture bound and limited by culture. But perhaps all ten sets of letters represent a single love letter writing culture or a group of very similar love letter writing cultures, and that makes it possible that what I take to be communication about communication to address or avoid potential or actual failures, mistakes, and errors is often only an expression of cultural etiquette. Perhaps, for example, in the culture of the letter writers, the proper lover always apologizes for something. That means it can be risky to take the apologies in the letters on face. What I take as communication about communication may actually be an expression of a cultural code for epistolary politeness.

Another limitation of this research is that it is impossible to know how representative the ten letter collections are of all love letters, many of which are unpublished. One reason to be concerned about the representativeness of published letter collections, including those in the sample for this chapter, is that often at least one of the partners was famous or became famous. We can assume that the fame was a key reason why the letters were edited and published. For a researcher like me, having a letter collection in print makes the collection much easier to research. There are no problems, for example, with travel to archives or reading handwriting. But a limitation of working with published letter collections that so often involve letters by someone who was famous is that we then have less confidence about what goes on in love letters of couples in which neither partner is famous. Might fame or budding fame alter love letter writing? Perhaps whatever might make for fame, for example, ambition, outstanding verbal skills, and strong willingness to take risks, makes for unusual communication about communication in love letters.

This study was done only with love letters in heterosexual relationships and only with letters of couples who eventually married. One cannot assume that communication issues and strategies are the same for other relationships.

3.3   Findings

Findings of the analysis of the selected love letters will be described in the following by presenting these findings within nine constructed categories.

3.3.1   Writing Is Harder than Talking

Some letter writers complained that writing felt forced or unnatural and that speaking would be easier and would lead to better understanding. With writing it was harder to say all that was in their heart. There is, for example, this from Edith Bolling Galt to Woodrow Wilson about the frustrations and limitations of written as opposed to face-to-face communication, May 4, 1915:

> I wish you were here so I could talk to you—for then I know you would understand, and a written word is so cold, so capable of conveying more or less than we can express in speech. (Tribble 1981, pp. 8–9)

Mirroring that viewpoint Wilson wrote to Galt, August 5, 1915:

> This hand is so hard to manage when there's a pen it in and the pen lags so far behind the thoughts that run eagerly out to seek my Darling. It's a poor, slow substitute at best for the conversations with my sweet One that have filled the past weeks with joy and comfort. (Link et al. 1980a, p. 101)

Similarly, Alice Freeman wrote to George Herbert Palmer, February 27, 1887, how communication by letter was harder, especially during a relationship crisis they were having, than communicating face to face:

> Of all times in our joint history this is the one when we need to see each other, and talk frankly together. It is quite impossible to say on paper all I want to say. (Palmer and Palmer 1940, p. 118)

Another example of communication about the difficulty of written communication is this from Zelda Sayre to F. Scott Fitzgerald, March 1919:

> Maybe you won't understand this, but sometimes when I miss you most, it's hardest to write—and you always know when I make myself—Just the ache of it all—and I can't tell you. If we were together, you'd feel how strong it is. (Bryer and Barks 2002, p. 15)

Thus, for some writers, spoken communication was at times, if not always, easier, richer, and more accurate than written communication. In a sense statements about the challenges of written communication were warnings of and apologies for the inadequacy of written communication and for the potential in written communication for failure, mistakes, or errors.

3.3.2 Correcting Misunderstanding

There seemed to be more potential or actual misunderstandings (communicative mistakes) early in the relationship, or at least more writing about such misunderstanding, before the two correspondents had ideas as clear as they eventually did about how to communicate to and understand one another. To illustrate, here is something Sally McDowell wrote on September 12, 1854, early in her relationship with John Miller:

> My dear Sir, We are both in fault as to the style of our letters. I have found yours somewhat ambiguous and obscure; and mine, I know now, must have been as indeed you clearly intimate they were, in some parts, utterly unintelligible to you. The mistake has arisen from the fact that we, with limited personal acquaintance, have each presupposed such a knowledge upon the past of the other, of our character, principles, and opinions, as have led us to think the generalities and mere allusions we have used amply sufficient upon a subject which, in truth, demanded the most explicit and unequivocal language. To remedy this error, to some extent, I pray you bear with a very plain recital of my views upon the case at issue between us. (Buckley 2000, p. 8)

Similarly, there was insecurity in Wilson's early letters to Galt about whether he was being understood. For example, on May 5, 1915, he wrote:

> Forgive all errors in what I have said,— read it with your heart, as I know you can, and will, and know that whatever happens, you will have the companionship, the gratitude, the loyalty and the devoted, romantic love of Your devoted friend, Woodrow Wilson. What would I not give for words that would really make you see and feel what is in my heart! You could not shrink! How much of my life has gone into this note you will never know, unless, some day—. (Tribble 1981, p. 13)

However, misunderstandings were not limited to early correspondence. Some arose later in correspondence, particularly when new and difficult situations arose. For example, there was this in a letter of Palmer to Freeman, February 25, 1887:

> Forgive me darling, that I let a phrase slip into my letter which must have wounded you and seemed distrustful....I was thinking how little difference it could make to me what people might say—to me so rich a man possessing you—and I must have spoken this out in some way that implied that I had no such feeling. That would be cruel. I know you love me as genuinely as I you, though I can never see that you have the same cause for exultation. I did not mean to hint a deficiency. (Palmer and Palmer 1940, pp. 115–116)

3.3.3   Correspondence Gaps

In eight of the ten letter collections, at least one partner expressed concern at some time about a gap (potential or actual communicative failure) in the correspondence from the partner—for example, this from Carl Sandburg to Lillian Steichen, May 6, 1908:

> [Your] letters had been plopping in to me, two every 24 hours. Suddenly, I draw blanks, zeros, for all 48 hours. At 5 o'clock this afternoon I hadn't heard from you since last Saturday night--Sunday, Monday & Tuesday, unaccounted for! (Sandburg 1987, p. 180)

Similarly there was this from Chekhov to Knipper, June 16, 1899:

> What is happening? Where are you? You seem quite determined not to give us any news, so that we've been reduced to idle speculation—perhaps you've forgotten us, or have married someone in the Caucasus. If so, who is he? Will you give up the theatre? The writer has been forgotten, how awful, how cruel, how heartless! (Benedetti 1996, p. 6)

Then there was this from Eugene Petersen to Marian Smith, March 12, 1944:

> Thought that you had forgotten about me when I didn't hear from you for about a week. (Petersen 1998, p. 4)

Lyons (2013, pp. 57–58), commenting about the writing culture of ordinary people, said that gaps and delays are common in letter exchanges and may upset a correspondent whose expectations are violated by the failure to receive a letter. In fact, a gap in written communication can imply a breakdown of an implicit social contract about communicating regularly (Lyons 1999, 2013, p. 57; Teo 2005). In all ten letter collections, at least one letter writer at some point anticipated that their partner in the exchange might be upset about a correspondence gap and so explained to their partner why they had not written for a while. They thus addressed the apparent contradiction between their expressions of great love for the partner and their not having written recently. There were three common explanations letter writers offered for a gap in communication.

3.3.4   Too Busy

In nine of the ten collections, at least one partner wrote that there was a delay in sending at least one letter because she or he had been too busy with work, visitors, caring for a sick family member, classes, or other matters. For example, Edward Dickinson wrote to Emily Norcross, February 1, 1827:

> I have intended to write two or three times before, but my business, which you know, must always be first attended to, has prevented. I have been unusually occupied for the last two or three weeks. (Pollak 1988, p. 88)

Similarly, Freeman wrote to Palmer, January 25, 1887:

> I have been too busy to get a word on paper! (Palmer and Palmer 1940, p. 102)

3.3.5   Postal Problems

In four couples, at least one gap in communication was attributed to problems with the postal service, including the postal schedule changing, the partner forgetting to stamp a letter, and the mails being slow.

3.3.6   Too Tired

In three letter collections, a lover explained a gap in communicating by saying she or he had been too tired to write. For example, Agnes Miller wrote to Olaf Stapledon, April 23, 1916:

> I meant to begin writing to you when we first came up 3 days ago, but we have been out picknicking each day & in the evening when we get in we always have to turn to & light our fire & get a meal & wash up & then Daddy reads aloud or we are too tried & are ready for bed. (Crossley 1987, p. 141)

3.3.7   Other Explanations of Correspondence Gaps

There were ten other explanations for a gap in communication offered in some love letter collection. All of them assure the partner that the gap did not indicate a decline in love for the partner. The ten explanations include feeling that it was a mistake to write because doing so would expose the couple relationship to others in a situation where

exposure would be embarrassing or create family or community difficulty, being in a situation where one could not write or mail a letter, being in a bad mood, concern about boring the other, and having nothing to say. The ten other explanations also included delaying writing until one had acquired a specific piece of information that was important to give the other, not writing because the partner hurt the writer's feelings, not being bored (the partner had told her not to write until she was bored), being distracted by the beauty of vacation surroundings, and having torn up a letter without sending it because the writer felt that it was a mistake to send that letter as drafted.

3.3.8 Thanks for Writing

Perhaps because letter exchange was so much the vehicle of the relationship and because gaps in communication could be worrisome, there were instances in all ten letter collections of thanks given to the partner for writing the letter most recently received. In some collections, thanks were offered in quite a few letters. Thanking the partner may reflect the anxiety inherent in gaps in communication (fear of communicative failure), and it is a way of acknowledging that since the relationship is a corresponding one, the letters are crucial to the relationship. Thanking the partner also may be a way to encourage the partner to continue writing, and, if thanks were offered about specific things written, thanks could be understood as encouraging the continuation of writing like that.

Some expressions of thanks were very simple, something like, "Thank you for your letter." However, thanks often involved expressions of love and intensely worded gratitude. This was particularly so when the partner had sent an especially loving expression of affection and commitment. For example, Wilson wrote to Galt, May 5, 1915:

> That wonderful note…[was] the most moving and altogether beautiful note I ever read, whose possession makes me rich; and I must thank you for that before I try to sleep--thank you from the bottom of a heart that your words touch as if they knew every key of it. I am proud beyond words that you should have thought of me in such terms and put the thoughts into such exquisite, comprehending words. (Tribble 1981, p. 11)

Then there was this from Miller to McDowell, September 24, 1855:

> How could you send me such a letter altogether unannounced? Why it's the sweetest & dearest I ever received. Do you know it is about the first full disclosure of passionate affection for me that you have ever made. I feel as if I had inherited a kingdom. Darling Sally, I love you ever since I broke the seal with an entirely new devotion. I will live for you. A woman that endows me with so much passion shall be my warmly cherished & highest pleasure in life...I think you have been concealing from me & keeping back a sort of devotion which God approves & which he intended should be planted in all married relations…. Oh, I love that letter so! I have read it over & over this morning. (Buckley 2000, p. 398)

3.3.9   Why This Letter Is So Brief

No letter receiver complained about a letter being unusually brief, but 13 of the 20 letter writers (in 9 of the 10 letter collections) assumed that sending an unusually brief letter would be a communicative error (departure from what is right or proper) or communicative failure. Perhaps the underlying logic was that there is an inconsistency between saying "I love you very much" and writing only a little bit. The explanations for letters that were unusually brief often paralleled explanations for a gap in correspondence, with being too busy the most frequent explanation. However, there were explanations that were not offered for communication delays but were offered for letters being unusually brief, including that the letter had to be brief because the mail was about to be picked up and that the writer was on a train or in a horse-drawn coach and the shaking of the vehicle made for many writing errors.

3.4   Discussion

Potential or actual communicative failures, mistakes, or errors were addressed in all ten love letter collections. Some love letter writers expressed concern that written communication was harder than communicating face to face. They wrote of the potential of communication via letters for communicative failures, mistakes, and errors, which fits what the communication literature reviewed for this chapter suggested would be a risk. Some love letters corrected misunderstandings, particularly early in a couple's correspondence, which addresses potential or actual communicative mistakes and fits the relationship literature cited at the beginning of the chapter about the value of communication about communication. In another area of communication about communication, in most of the ten love letter collections, there were instances of correspondence addressing the potential or actual communicative failures inherent in correspondence gaps. In all ten letter collections, there were instances of one letter writer thanking the other for writing, and among the ways that could be understood is that the thanking arises from anxiety about the possibility of failure to maintain correspondence. In all but one of the ten letter collections, there were instances of explaining why and apologizing for a letter being brief, which can be taken as addressing the possibility that the other would think it is a communicative error (a departure from what is right or proper) or a communicative failure (a falling short or deficiency) for a letter to be too brief.

3.5   Conclusion

In response to the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter that were driven by theoretical work on communication in general and communication in couples and families in particular, communication about communication was present and

seemed important in the ten love letter collections. Communication about communication seemed to have an important role in overcoming, minimizing, or avoiding communicative failures, mistakes, and errors arising from letters being the vehicle of communication. The findings reported here link to the theory and research literature cited at the beginning of this chapter by indicating that in the ten love letter collections, there were challenges from communicating in writing that the literature on communication would lead one to expect, and these challenges were addressed, as might be expected from the literature on communication in couple and family systems, by communication about communication. That all ten of the couples eventually married is an indication that they successfully addressed or avoided communicative failures, mistakes, and errors. This chapter thus helps to fill a gap in the literature on love letters and links that literature with the literature on failures, mistakes, and errors, with the literature on communication, and with the literature on premarital relationships.

3.6   Directions for Future Research

The research reported here offers ideas for research on love communications that are conveyed via text message and e-mail. Although letter writing is still important in some modern relationships, for example, between deployed members of the US military and their spouses (Carter and Renshaw 2016), modern life offers an array of ways to communicate electronically (Hertlein 2012; Janning 2018). Some approaches approximate face-to-face communication with visual and audio information in real time and thus are less likely to face the failures, mistakes, and errors love letter writers face. However, some romantic relationships make use of written electronic communications such as e-mail and text messaging, which risk the failures, mistakes, and errors the love letter writers encountered (Hertlein and Ancheta 2014) as well as the attributional challenges of gaps in the correspondence, which, as this chapter suggests, are problems present in love letters. Arguably there can be as much need for communication about communication with some modes of electronic written communication as there is for messages written on paper. Perhaps there is even need for more. Modern messages are often relatively brief (Bergs 2014), and that brevity may increase the likelihood of failures, mistakes, and errors in communicating because there is less redundancy in a communication and less context to clarify message meanings. That potential for failures, mistakes, and errors arguably makes it more necessary for frequent communication about communication. Are such communications frequent and useful? That is a potential topic for research.

A social information processing theory perspective (Walther 2015; Walther et al. 2015) suggests that if there is substantial redundancy in a couple's love letter exchanges, the redundancy might promote greater clarity and strength of messages. Even if there is less informational redundancy in a typical written communication than there is in a face-to-face exchange (because there is no nonverbal or nonlexical

information and because people may often say less to each other when they write than when they speak), there might be considerable redundancy across communicative exchanges, with rather the same things said in many letters. Related to that, there may be more requests from a partner for repetition in written communication than in spoken communication. The frequent expression of thanks discussed in this chapter may, for example, be understood as the encouragement of redundancy. So one direction for future research built on the research reported here is to investigate redundancy in love letters—how much is there, how much is there in love letters versus face-to-face romantic interactions, and do love letters with frequent thanks for previous letters have a higher level of redundancy?

The sense that failures, mistakes, and errors are challenges in love letter exchanges offers an alternative perspective on explanations given for delaying writing or writing too little. Many of the explanations letter writers offered can be interpreted to mean that writers chose not to write when they were more likely to make errors or to be less clear in communicating. Consider, for example, explanations such as not writing when tired (when one's error rate would be greater), when too busy (hence, possibly more errors because of being rushed and distracted), or when riding in a jouncing vehicle (which would increase one's error rate through slips of the pen).

If communication about communication facilitates the development of a couple relationship in which love letters play a major part, one might expect that future research would show that couples who were exchanging love letters and who broke up might have had a lower level of communication about communication, and that lack, leading to unresolved communicative failures, mistakes, and errors, may explain their breaking up.

3.7   Practical Implications

Lovers, whether communicating electronically or writing paper letters, might benefit from instructions online or in print about the value of communication about communication (metacommunication) and about how to do it. The research reported here suggests that communication about communication can be a valuable way for addressing or avoiding communicative failures, mistakes, and errors.

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Paul C. Rosenblatt (PhD) has a PhD in Psychology and is Professor Emeritus of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. He has published 14 books and roughly 200 journal articles and chapters in edited books. Much of his work has focused on the social psychology, anthropology, and sociology of people's closest relationships and what the personal and relationship impacts are of the ending of a close relationship. His work on couples includes studies of how the death of a child affects the parent couple's marital relationship, knowing and not knowing in couple relationships, and the challenges of such mundane factors in everyday couple life as couple bed sharing. Relevant to mistakes, errors, and failures, Rosenblatt's work includes explorations of shared obliviousness in family systems, the mistakes would-be helpers might make in supporting grieving people, how fatal accidents play out in families, and the ways that oppressive societal systems may create failings in family relationships. His chapter for this volume is based on analysis of personal documents (love letters). His previous research includes a number of studies using personal documents such as autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries.