

## **Sexual Disclosures: Connections to Relational Satisfaction and Closeness**

### **Abstract**

This study examines sexual communication by describing the content of sexual disclosures within marital relationships and assessing the association between sexual disclosures and relational outcomes, specifically relational satisfaction and closeness. A survey administered to 293 married individuals (58% female) who averaged 40 years of age (range = 20-73), 13.7 years of marriage (range = 1 month to 54 years), and reported high levels of relational satisfaction assessed the relationship between the content of sexual disclosures and satisfaction and closeness. While sexual disclosures are made rarely, positive affect and sexual preferences are disclosed more than negative topics and disclosing sexual information is positively related to relationship satisfaction,  $r_p(280) = .26, p < .001$  and closeness,  $r_s(280) = .475, p < .01$ . Therapists can use these findings to show clients the positive relationship between revealing sexual information and relationship satisfaction and closeness, as reported by individuals experiencing relationship satisfaction.

## **Sexual Disclosures: Connections to Relational Satisfaction and Closeness**

Communication is one of the factors essential for healthy sexual relations between intimate partners (Masters & Johnson, 1970). Indeed, communication, sexual satisfaction, and marital satisfaction are highly interdependent (e.g., Burleson & Denton, 1997; Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Communication holds particular value in studies on sexual, relational, or marital satisfaction. The specific characteristics of communication that relate to healthy sexual interactions in marriages are not fully understood. Continued research on sexual communication sheds greater understanding on the role of sexual discussions and their connections to relational outcomes during marriage. Purnine and Carey (1997) argued for examination of the sexual content of interpersonal communication in an effort to understand the adjustments needed to improve sexual dysfunction. In the current study, we examine sexual communication by describing the content of sexual disclosures within marital relationships and assessing the association between sexual disclosures and relational outcomes, specifically relational satisfaction and affiliation (closeness/distance). Communication Privacy Management theory (CPM; Petronio, 2002) posits that individuals control private information, such as sexual disclosures, and regulate the passage of information across privacy boundaries. We rely on CPM as we next elaborate on relational outcomes associated with sexual disclosures.

### **Sexual Disclosure and Relational Outcomes**

Satisfying marriages exhibit certain qualities. For example, love, communication, and sexual satisfaction were significantly and positively associated with marital quality in a sample of dual-career couples (Perrone & Worthington, 2001). Further, researchers reported a positive correlation between relationship satisfaction and love attitudes, self-disclosure, and relational competence (Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998). Sexual communication, specifically,

contributes to sexual satisfaction (Montesi, Fauber, Gordon, & Heimberg, 2010), relationship satisfaction (Montesi et al., 2010), marital satisfaction (Chesney, Blakeney, Cole, & Chan, 1981) and marital quality (Sprecher & McKinney, 1992). Additionally, Theiss (2011) showed that no and indirect sexual communication each negatively relates to sexual satisfaction. Such findings imply that revealing sexual information is positively associated with relational outcomes, and concealing sexual information is negatively associated with relational outcomes.

Sexual self-disclosures likely vary by relational partners, particularly as relationships evolve from dating to marriage (Dickson, 1984). For example, individuals in dating relationships share sexual likes more than dislikes (Byers & Demmons, 1999), and college women report that sexual disclosures are easier as time in a relationship increases (Herold & Way, 1988). Further, individuals in committed relationships report more positive disclosures after sexual activity than individuals in casual dating relationships (Denes, 2012). Examining the content of sexual disclosures within the marital context extends this research on dating couple disclosures. Snell (1998) developed a scale to measure the content of sexual disclosures by evaluating breadth (number) and frequency of sexual topics such as attitudes, affect, values, and behaviors in a college student sample. We examine the content of sexual disclosures in a married sample and anticipate that the breadth and frequency of disclosures associate with relational satisfaction.

Further, too much or too little sexual self-disclosure could lead to relationship dissatisfaction, showing support for a curvilinear relationship. Lack of openness, in general, has been cited as a common problem within romantic relationships (e.g., Baxter, 1986), and decisions to disclose private information are based on the risks and rewards of the disclosure (Petronio, 2002). If little to no sexual disclosure occurs in a marital relationship, dissatisfaction

could result when partners are unable to understand each other's interests, desires, or concerns. On the other end of the spectrum, lack of censoring certain information can also diminish satisfaction. For example, sharing information that is shameful, embarrassing, or potentially harmful to the relationship would likely be associated with low satisfaction. And, too much disclosure, in general, can lead to diminished autonomy (Burgoon, 1982) and self-efficacy (Petronio, 1994). Vanlear (1991) showed support for a cyclical pattern between openness and closedness, demonstrating the tension communicators experience when regulating their disclosures. Exploring a curvilinear relationship between sexual self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction contributes to this argument.

Connected with relational satisfaction are other qualities such as closeness and distance (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Hess, Fannin, and Pollom (2007) maintain that relational affiliation—the degree of closeness or distance that people perceive between themselves and their partners—is one of the most important aspects of interpersonal relationships. Yet closeness and distance at either extreme can inhibit a relationship's ability to flourish. High levels of distance for married couples often predict divorce, functioning as a symptom of a distressed marriage, or even having causal influence (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). And, too much closeness could result in codependency if dysfunctional behaviors are present (Wright & Wright, 1991) or make a person feel “suffocated,” such as needing more independence or more time alone (Mashek, Le, Israel, & Aron, 2011). As with distance, too much closeness could either be a cause or a symptom in feeling suffocated.

According to Petronio (2002), gender is one criterion used to evaluate the disclosure decision. Men and women have been found to differ on self-disclosures, in general (e.g., Dindia & Allen, 1992) and sexual disclosures, in particular (Byers & Demmons, 1999; MacNeil &

Byers, 2005). For example, male and female college students in dating relationships have different pathways for achieving sexual satisfaction where men tend to be more instrumental in their disclosures than women and women tend to be more expressive in their disclosures than men (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). Women have also been shown to be more indirect than men when communicating about sex (Theiss, 2011). Further, when women make self-disclosures about their sexual likes and dislikes, they experience more emotional intimacy, which leads to greater sexual satisfaction. Men's sexual satisfaction was not impacted when they expressed their sexual likes or dislikes. Less is known about how men and women differ in their disclosures on other sexual topics.

In sum, we pose five research questions to describe sexual disclosures and show their connections to relational outcomes, particularly relational satisfaction and affiliation.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are common themes in sexual disclosures made by individuals in marital relationships and how frequently are sexual disclosures made?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What is the relationship between sexual disclosure (breadth and frequency) and relational satisfaction?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Do sexual disclosure and relational satisfaction have a curvilinear relationship?

RQ<sub>4</sub>: What is the relationship between sexual disclosure (breadth and frequency) and relational affiliation?

RQ<sub>5</sub>: Do men and women differ in their sexual disclosures?

## **Method**

### **Respondents**

Participants were recruited by undergraduate students at a large, Midwest university. Students could earn extra credit for recruiting up to three married people, where none of the

recruits were married to each other to protect independence among responses. No other criteria for participation were required. Most of the participants were likely part of the students' family and social networks. This recruitment method proved to be convenient in our efforts to examine typical marital relationships yet it also yielded a nonprobability sample. Respondents (see Table 1) were an average of 40 years old (median = 42,  $SD = 11.7$ , range = 20-73) and had been married an average of 13.7 years (median = 12.7,  $SD = 11.2$ , range = 1 month to 54 years). Most participants were Caucasian (91%), with the remainder being African American (5%), Asian (3%), or Other (1%). Fifty-eight percent of the respondents were female.

### **Procedures**

Students were instructed to tell potential respondents the nature of the study to reduce surprise by the content of the questionnaire. The students gave respondents the questionnaire and a postage-paid return envelope to mail their questionnaires directly back to the researchers. Along with the survey were sheets with (a) consent information, which the respondents were instructed to read before participating and to keep for their reference, and (b) the name of the student to receive extra credit, a first name of the respondent, and a daytime phone number. Ten percent of the respondents were randomly contacted by telephone to verify participation and all confirmed they had filled out the survey themselves. The information sheets were separated from the surveys and destroyed once verification and assignment of extra credit were completed.

### **Instrument Construction**

As part of a larger study, participants completed a packet with seven questionnaires and a demographic section. The instruments included the Revised Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale (Snell, 1998), Relational Satisfaction (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), and the Relational Affiliation Index (Hess et al., 2007). There were other measures in the survey not relevant to this analysis.

**Disclosure of sexual topics.** Disclosure was measured with Snell's (1998) Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale. This scale was designed to measure sexual topics individuals may have discussed with a sexual partner and with what frequency the topics were discussed by responding with anchors of *1 = never*, *2 = rarely*, *3 = sometimes*, and *4 = often*. The original Revised Sexual Self-Disclosure scale contained 72 items and 24 subscales. In order to avoid participant fatigue, the scale was reduced to 36 items and 12 subscales. The 12 subscales included disclosures of sexual behaviors, sensations, fantasies, preferences, dishonesty, delay preferences, satisfaction, apathy, happiness, anger, meaning of sex, and distressing sex. The subscales sexual accountability, abortion and pregnancy, homosexuality, rape, AIDS, sexual morality, guilt, calmness, depression, jealousy, anxiety, and fear were removed because these topics seem to have less relevance in marital relationships than in dating relationships. Reliability for the 36 items used in this study was high ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

**Relational satisfaction.** Rusbult and colleagues' (1998) relational satisfaction measure was chosen from among the many satisfaction measures because its items fit with the nature of the study and its aim to connect sexual disclosures to global assessments of satisfaction. Further, the measure has undergone extensive validation studies in its development as part of the Investment Model (e.g., Le & Agnew, 2003). Participants responded to five items using a scale of *1 = strongly disagree* to *7 = strongly agree*. Sample questions included "our relationship does a good job of fulfilling my needs" and "our relationship makes me very happy." Reliability for this scale in the data was high ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

**Relational affiliation.** Closeness was measured with Hess and colleagues' (2007) 16-item Relational Affiliation Index. This measure uses specific behaviors rather than relying on a holistic judgment, and it accounts for both closeness-enhancing behaviors and distancing

behaviors in a person's enactment of relational affiliation. Sample items included "When with my spouse, I was more talkative than I might be with someone else" (closeness) and "When I was talking to my spouse, I would do things to make the interaction as short as possible, such as pretending to agree or not asking questions" (distance). Anchors ranged from *1 = I never do this* to *7 = I do this every time possible*. Reliability of this measure was high ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

**Descriptive measures.** Demographic information included years of marriage, age, gender, race, and sexually active. Sexually active was defined as having sexual relations at least once per month. This criterion was established by Donnelly (1993), although Donnelly and Burgess (2008) assert that measures of sexual activity vary across studies. Seven percent of the participants in this study reported being in sexually inactive marriages. The data from these sexually inactive respondents were retained for data analysis because a lack of sexual activity does not preclude communication about sex.

### **Statistical Analysis**

The first research question examined aspects of sexual disclosure. We used principal axis factoring with varimax rotation to discern the topics discussed with their underlying factors (see Table 2). Items retained had factor loadings of at least .40. To understand the frequency with which topics were discussed, the sum of scores for each topic was averaged and then rank ordered. Simple linear regression was needed to analyze the variability (both number of topics and frequency) of sexual disclosures found on the relational outcomes of satisfaction and affiliation (RQ<sub>2</sub> & RQ<sub>4</sub>). We controlled for years of marriage when analyzing the relationships between the number of sexual topics disclosed, frequency of disclosures, and relational satisfaction and affiliation by including partial correlation coefficients. A curvilinear analysis was conducted with regression via curve estimation (RQ<sub>3</sub>) with the total score on sexual topics



serving as the independent variable and relational satisfaction as the dependent variable. Men's and women's mean scores on the number of topics disclosed were compared using a *t*-test (RQ<sub>5</sub>) and gender was included as a moderating variable in the regression analysis.

Assumption testing with a histogram showed that relational satisfaction exhibited negative skew, which indicated the sample consisted of more people with high levels of relational satisfaction than low. A one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test confirmed a non-normal distribution ( $Z = 2.47, p < .00$ ), requiring Spearman's rho statistic for correlational analyses and standardized scores of relational satisfaction for correlation and regression.

## **Results**

### **RQ<sub>1</sub>: Describing Sexual Self-Disclosures**

We asked descriptive questions about the sexual topics married people disclose and the frequency with which they were discussed. Five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 explained 38%, 12%, 7%, 5% and 3% of the variance, respectively, and 65% of the total variance in relational satisfaction (see Table 2). Seven items were dropped from the analysis because their factor loadings fell below .40—*times when I felt pressured to have sex, aspects of sex that bother me, times I lied about sexual matters*, and all the *meaning of sex* subscale items. Table 3 lists the mean scores of each of the five factors followed by the individual items in descending order to show the frequency of disclosure for each topic as well as the rank order of topics disclosed. As seen in the table, no topics were discussed frequently and only items on the preferences factor had a mean greater than 3.0. Overall, most sexual topics were disclosed rarely, and when disclosures occurred, discussions about preferences were discussed with the greatest frequency, followed by positive affect, sexual history, challenges, and negative affect.

### **RQ<sub>2</sub>: Sexual Self-Disclosure and Relational Satisfaction**

Next, we asked about the relationship between sexual disclosure and relational satisfaction. Regression analysis indicated that sexual self-disclosure accounted for approximately 6.6% of the variance ( $R^2_{adj} = .066$ ) in relational satisfaction. As the number of sexual topics increased by 1, relational satisfaction was estimated to increase by .013 (95% CI: .007, .018;  $\beta = .26$ ). Positive affect [ $r_p(283) = .40$ ], preferences [ $r_p(285) = .36$ ], and sexual history [ $r_p(282) = .20$ ] correlated positively with relational satisfaction at the .05 level, negative affect [ $r_p(284) = -.14$ ] negatively correlated at the .01 level, and challenges were not significantly correlated with relational satisfaction (see Table 4). The zero-order correlation between number of topics disclosed and relationship satisfaction ~~was moderate and positive~~ showed a positive association ( $r = .26, p < .001$ ). When controlling for years of marriage, there was a ~~modest~~ moderate, positive partial correlation between relational satisfaction and number of topics ( $r = .22, p < .001$ ). This change in the correlation value of only .04 shows that years of marriage had little effect on the strength of the relationship between relational satisfaction and number of topics disclosed.

The analysis between frequency of disclosure and relational satisfaction showed that frequency was a significant predictor of relational satisfaction,  $t(283) = 4.15, p < .001$ , accounting for approximately 5.4% of the variance ( $R^2_{adj} = .054$ ). The analysis indicated that as frequency of sexual disclosure increased by 1, relational satisfaction was estimated to increase by .03 (95% CI: .014, .041;  $\beta = .24$ ). The zero-order correlation between frequency of topic disclosure and relationship satisfaction ~~was moderate and positive~~ showed a positive association ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ). When controlling for years of marriage, there was a ~~modest~~ moderate, positive partial correlation between relational satisfaction and frequency of disclosures ( $r = .19, p < .001$ ). This change in the correlation value of .06 shows that years of marriage had ~~marginal~~

little effect on the strength of the relationship between relational satisfaction and number of topics disclosed.

### **RQ<sub>3</sub>: Curvilinear Relationship**

The regression showed only a marginal increase from the linear model  $R^2 = .069$ ;  $F(1, 278) = 20.622$ ,  $p < .01$  to the quadratic model  $R^2 = .071$ ;  $F(2, 277) = 10.537$ ,  $p < .01$ . The scatterplot confirmed the lack of a curvilinear relationship in this data set. Thus, there is insufficient evidence from this study to support a curvilinear relationship.

### **RQ<sub>4</sub>: Sexual Self-Disclosure and Relational Affiliation**

The number of topics accounted for approximately 12% of the variance ( $R^2_{adj} = .118$ ) in relational affiliation. As the number of sexual topics increased by 1, relational affiliation (moving toward closeness) was estimated to increase by .217 (95% CI: .147, .286;  $\beta = .35$ ). The zero-order correlation between number of topics disclosed and affiliation showed a positive association ~~was moderate and positive~~ ( $r = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When controlling for years of marriage, there was a modest~~moderate~~, positive partial correlation between affiliation and number of topics ( $r = .19$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This .05 change in the correlation value ~~of .05~~ shows that years of marriage had little effect on the strength of the relationship between affiliation and number of topics disclosed.

Frequency of disclosure accounted for approximately 9.5% of the variance ( $R^2_{adj} = .095$ ) in relational affiliation. As frequency of sexual disclosures increased by 1, relational affiliation (movement toward closeness) was estimated to increase by .468 (95% CI: .302, .635;  $\beta = .31$ ). The zero-order correlation between frequency of disclosures and affiliation was revealed a moderate, ~~and positive~~ association ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When controlling for years of marriage, there was still a moderate,~~moderate~~, positive partial correlation between affiliation and frequency of

disclosures ( $r = .27, p < .001$ ). This change in the correlation value of just .04 shows that years of marriage had little effect on the strength of the relationship between affiliation and frequency of disclosures.

### **RQ5: Women and Men**

Women's scores ( $M = 86.8$ ) on sexual self-disclosures were slightly higher than men's ( $M = 82.6$ ), but the difference was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 251) = 2.40, p = .12$ .

Women's mean score on sexual disclosure frequency ( $M = 17.2$ ) was also higher than men's ( $M = 15.6$ ), but not significantly so,  $F(1, 251) = 1.88, p = .17$ . Thus, there were no significant sex differences on sexual self-disclosure. To test whether gender had a moderating effect on the relationship between sexual self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction, gender was added to the regression equation reported in RQ2 above. In addition, a partial correlation assessed the relationship between number of topics disclosed and relational satisfaction when gender was added. Each test failed to show a significant effect due to gender,  $t = -1.43, p > .05$ ; partial  $r = -.09, p > .05$ . ~~Further, both zero-order and partial correlations failed to show significance between sexual disclosure and relational satisfaction when gender was in the model (zero-order  $r = -.05, p > .05$ ; partial  $r = -.09, p > .05$ .~~ Thus, men and women do not differ significantly in their sexual self-disclosures. Further, gender does not significantly affect the relationship between sexual self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction.

### **Discussion**

The purposes of this study were to describe the content of sexual disclosures discussed by married people, discern the frequency with which topics were disclosed, understand connections between sexual communication and closeness and relational satisfaction, and test for differences between men's and women's sexual disclosures. Findings from this research contribute to

theoretical understanding of the connections between sexual communication and relational outcomes and to practical situations such as marital or therapist-client interactions.

### **Content and Frequency of Sexual Disclosures**

Results of the factor analysis on the self-disclosure measure revealed five factors: sexual preferences, positive emotions related to sex, negative emotions related to sex, challenges regarding sex, and sexual history, illustrating the sexual topics selected by individuals in marital relationships. From these, sexual preferences were discussed most often, which shows a similarity to samples of dating men and women who discussed sexual likes more than dislikes (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). Yet overall, the findings show that individuals in marriage disclose little sexual information to their partners. Sex is often considered difficult to discuss, even within marriage (Cupach & Metts, 1991). However, this study did not evaluate the level of ease or difficulty for disclosing or revealing sexual information. It is possible that sexual information is rarely shared because one conversation satisfies a specific concern. For example, sharing sexual desires may have been revealed early in a relationship and the marital partner responded to this expression, thereby alleviating the need for future conversations about desires—as long as those desires do not change significantly during the course of the relationship. The value of a specific sexual topic would contribute to this area of research by understanding the importance placed on particular subjects. Conversations about sex may not happen very often, but they may be memorable as individuals seek fulfillment of their own and their partners' needs. The low topic disclosure may also indicate difficulties individuals have in talking about sex, even in this sample of satisfied individuals. Disclosing information, even to intimate partners, heightens vulnerability (Altman & Taylor, 1973) and increases fears of losing control and exposure

(Hatfield, 1984). Additional studies on comfort with sexual disclosures would also add to the discussion of sexual communication in marital relationships.

### **Sexual Disclosure and Relational Outcomes**

In this data set, the informative and positive disclosures (preferences, positive emotions, and sexual history) were positively associated with relational satisfaction and affiliation. By contrast, the negative disclosures were either associated with lower satisfaction and affiliation (negative emotions) or were unrelated to relational satisfaction or affiliation (challenges). This distinction is important because communication is sometimes operationalized by researchers as a singular variable of information flow. However, when analyzing research studies, therapists and clients benefit from findings that look at qualities of communication, such as the specific content of the disclosures as shown in the results of this study. Further, importance, quality, and timing of disclosures may be important for therapists or married individuals to evaluate because they are also associated with marital satisfaction (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993).

The percent of variance accounted for by sexual disclosures was 7% for satisfaction and 12% for closeness. These figures are significant and support the inclusion of sexual disclosures as a variable associated with relational satisfaction and affiliation. Research on topic avoidance provides evidence that people favor positive disclosures over negative or stress-inducing disclosures (e.g., Guerrero & Afifi, 1995), so the idea that people who have more positive relationships are more likely to share positive information is consistent with findings from that body of scholarship. Researchers provided evidence that sharing preferences can lead to better sexual and relational satisfaction (e.g., MacNeil & Byers, 2005). Further, while sexual disclosure contributed to both satisfaction and affiliation, there was a stronger association with affiliation. Although therapists can make a reasonably good estimate of affiliation by observing

interaction between partners, using an instrument like the Hess et al. (2007) measure could be a useful tool for assessing closeness and identifying specific topics that might help therapists and their clients see unique ways to enhance intimacy. The affiliation instrument measures openness, attention, and involvement, factors that might accelerate conversations about the ways in which affiliation is strong or weak, and it may point to places clients can see connections between their sexual communication and larger relational qualities.

### **Lack of Significant Sex Differences**

The results failed to support differences between men and women on the number of topics disclosed or frequency of disclosures. This result contradicts previous work on disclosing sexual likes and dislikes, where women in dating relationships were found to disclose more than men (Byers & Demmons, 1999). The current study included more topics than the Byers and Demmons study, thus it could be that when considering a broad spectrum of sexual topics, men and women do not differ. Additionally, women may make their sexual disclosures during relationship development and subsequently do not need to disclose as much sexual information during marriage. ~~Longitudinal studies of couples evolving from dating to marriage would reveal considerable information about the changes in sexual disclosures over time. Topic avoidance needs to be studied by specific topic (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Thus, this finding contributes to the literature on topic avoidance to show that both married men and women generally avoid the topic of sex.~~

### **Implications for Clinical Practice: Revealing Sexual Information**

Although the current sample consists of individuals with high relational closeness and satisfaction (~~45~~70% of the sample had an average satisfaction score of 5 or above on a 7-point scale; 59% of the sample rated closeness at an average score of 5 or above), their experiences

offer valuable insights for therapists working with distressed marital couples. These data show that even for people who feel positively about their marriages, there is still an association between sexual disclosure and relational satisfaction and affiliation. Specifically, individuals who disclose higher numbers of positive topics also report high levels of satisfaction. Similarly, those who report high levels of satisfaction report disclosing a higher number of positive topics.

The respondents reported fairly high levels of relational satisfaction, with only a smaller portion reporting low satisfaction scores. It is possible that our lack of support for the curvilinear relationship is an artifact of the sample, so the absence of support for that pattern should not be taken as evidence that such an effect does not exist. Seeking a sample that balances distressed and non-distressed couples may be necessary for more definitive testing of this pattern. A sample that contained distressed individuals should include those who make no disclosures and those who make many disclosures. ~~at all and make so many disclosures that the other partner is overwhelmed.~~ These extremes would reveal the curvilinear pattern shown in other relationships with extremely high and low levels of disclosure (e.g., Knobloch & Carpetner-Theune, 2004). The findings from this sample benefit the clinical environment by contrasting these results with the experience of couples in therapy. For example, if a client in therapy harbors sexual desires, therapists can explain that other couples who reveal this information report moderate to high levels of relational satisfaction and closeness, cautioning that revealing the sexual desire does not, by itself, mean that relational satisfaction or closeness will change, but that it may facilitate interactions that improve those qualities.

However, the valence of the disclosure bears some weight on the decision to reveal the information. For example, sexual challenges and negative affect were revealed the least by these participants. If a partner has not experienced a relational challenge or negative affect, then there



is nothing to reveal in these topic areas. However, when relational challenges are experienced to the extent that individuals or couples seek therapy, it is plausible that these topics are contained within a privacy boundary because they bring about vulnerability with intimate partners. Privacy boundaries are sacrosanct for many individuals and so individuals securely guard information.

Disclosure in a trusting, safe environment benefits those experiencing sexual challenges. Two issues that scholars have identified as critical for a relationship to be successful include trust (e.g., Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001) and positive attributions (e.g., Fincham, Harold, & Ganophillips, 2000). Without trust and with a tendency toward negative attributions of a partner's behaviors, an individual may perceive sexual disclosures as a source of potential harm. In such an environment, advising a client to communicate more has little possibility of resolving relational issues and improving satisfaction. Thus, in a relationship where sexual communication contains negative emotions, it is first necessary to assess and address underlying relational issues before helping the client to disclose sexual information.

Controlling for years of marriage had little only a small effect and moderating for gender had no significant effect on the connections between sexual disclosures and relational satisfaction or affiliation. Moderators such as motivation to reveal/conceal or relational characteristics have been shown to impact the connection between topic avoidance and dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004), hinting to other aspects of marital relationships that influence sexual disclosures. Thus, when couples discuss sexual disclosures with therapists, length of marriage should be given some consideration. However, sex differences seem to have no impact when the area of concern is sexual disclosures.

### **Limitations**

The data in this study were correlational and therefore, do not provide evidence of causality. While it seems plausible that better communication about sex will have a positive outcome on closeness and satisfaction, further research is needed to provide that evidence. Additionally, sexual satisfaction was not measured in this study, but it has been shown to strongly associate with marital satisfaction (Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). It seems likely that sexual satisfaction may mediate effects of messages and marital satisfaction. Future studies would benefit from inclusion of this measure. Finally, the sample consisted of mostly Caucasians. Privacy rules vary by culture (Petronio, 2002), thus individuals from other ethnic groups may report different experiences from the current sample as they make sexual disclosures.

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