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## The Role of Sexual Self-Disclosure in Partner Relational Satisfaction and Uncertainty

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THE ROLE OF SEXUAL SELF-DISCLOSURE IN PARTNER RELATIONAL  
SATISFACTION AND UNCERTAINTY

by

Riley Richards

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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# THE ROLE OF SEXUAL SELF-DISCLOSURE IN PARTNER RELATIONAL SATISFACTION AND UNCERTAINTY

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Western Michigan University, 2016

Sexual communication and sexual self-disclosure (SSD) are often viewed as taboo and uncomfortable when discussed between sexual partners. Prior research has demonstrated a strong connection between SSD and other relational factors in current dating and married partners. To that end, this study uses an Actor-Partner Independence Model (APIM) with current cross-sex sexual and romantic partners to understand how emergent adults experience SSD and the role it plays in their relational satisfaction and uncertainty. Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) undergirds this study as a theoretical foundation in fleshing out the ways emergent adults self-disclose about their sexual lives to their current partner and how it affects the relationship overall. The results of dyadic survey research designed to test the associations between communication about sex and relationship indicated a significant relationship between partner's levels of SSD and sexual satisfaction and the individuals SSD and their own sexual satisfaction. Future research is suggested to examine to what extent SSD has on the relationship and individuals in the relationship over the course of time.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
	Social Penetration Theory.....	6
	Self-Disclosure.....	10
	Intimacy.....	12
	Sexual Self-Disclosure.....	14
	Sexual Satisfaction.....	16
	Relational Satisfaction.....	19
	Relationship Uncertainty.....	21
III.	METHODOLOGY.....	24
	Participants.....	24
	Procedure.....	25
	Measures.....	25
IV.	DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.....	29
	Results.....	29
	Discussion.....	31
	Sexual Self-Disclosure.....	32
	Sexual and Relational Satisfaction.....	33
	Sexual Self-Disclosure and Sexual Satisfaction.....	34
	Sexual Self-Disclosure and Relational Uncertainty.....	35
	Limitations and Future Direction.....	37

Table of Contents – continued

Conclusion.....	38
REFERENCES.....	40
APPENDICES	
A. HSIRB Approval Letter.....	64

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual relationships serve a variety of functions and fulfill a variety of needs for individuals and cultures. From a biological standpoint, these needs include the need for reproduction (Buss, 1989). However, sexual relationships offer more than just a means to carry on genetic DNA to future generations. These relationships help fulfill our needs for intimacy, stability, and relationship health (Schutz, 1966). When these needs are not met, the relationship can suffer and, in some cases, terminate.

According to the National Fatherhood Initiative (2005) survey, 55% of divorced couples identified infidelity, described as an extramarital affair, as one of the reasons for their divorce. Infidelity was the third most common reason for divorce. Lack of commitment to the relationship was the most common reason cited for divorce and having too much conflict and arguing was the second most common reason. The national survey data is consistent with other research (see Amato & Previti, 2003; Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, & Markman, 2013). In romantic relationships, sex and reproduction are normally considered sensitive issues (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Wiederman, 2004). Although sexual infidelity is one of the major reasons that marriages end, sex is minimally discussed between sexual partners from youth (Rouner, Long, Bubar, Vernon, & Aungie, 2015; Wildman, Welsh, McNulty, & Little, 2006) to college students (Desiderato & Crawford, 1995). Communication is a key piece in fulfilling the variety of needs partners seek to obtain from their sexual relationships.

Sexual communication is defined as “the means by which individuals come to select potential partners for sexual relations, and through which the meanings, functions, and effects of sexual relations are negotiated” (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996, p. 49). Partners’ communication about

sex has implications for physical, emotional, and sexual health issues. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2013), Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) are on the rise, including a 22% increase of syphilis during 2011-2013 and a 4.3% increase in gonorrhea for men in 2012-2013. Sexual communication may aid in promoting sexual health. The World Health Organization (Sexual & Reproductive Health, 2015) defines sexual health as:

A state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled. Sexual health is simply the blending of emotional, social and intellectual conditions of our sexual beings, which positively “enhances personality, communication, and love” (World Health Organization, 1975, p. 6).

The sexual satisfaction partners feel is strongly correlated with their relationship satisfaction (Impett, Muise, & Peragine, 2014; Sprecher & Cate, 2004). The more partners communicate with one another about sex, the greater their use of condoms and the fewer number of sexual partners they have (Catania et al., 1989). Furthermore, the more teenagers and parents communicate about sex, the more likely teenagers are to discuss safe sex practices with their partners (Ryan, Franzetta, Manlove, & Holcombe, 2007). Time and time again, communication about sex has been found to lead to positive outcomes. However, communicating about sensitive and vulnerable issues can be difficult (Afifi, Caughlin, & Afifi, 2007; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Petronio, 1991, 2002). Partners who trust each other and feel as if they will be open to the

information are more likely to disclose private information (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2008). Furthermore, when partners discuss one risk-related topic, such as sex, it opens the discussion to other intimate and taboo topics (Anderson, Kunkel, & Dennis, 2010).

Communication and disclosure between partners is a foundational practice to maintain and grow relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Wheelless & Grotz, 1976), especially in sexual relationships. According to Greene and Faulkner (2005), future research should focus on four types of sexual communication: sexual limits, safer sex, pleasure, and health. Prior research on sexual communication has focused on such issues as attitudes toward condoms (e.g. Halpern-Felsher, Kropp, Boyer, Tschann, & Ellen, 2004), intention to use a condom (e.g. Kowalewski, Longshore, & Anglin, 1994; White, Terry, & Hogg, 1994), and intention to discuss safer sex (e.g. White, Terry, & Hogg, 1994). Thus, previous research focuses on the physical health aspect of sexual communication. However, there is still a gap within the study of sexual communication as it relates to romantic partners' relationship health and satisfaction.

Theiss (2011) found a positive relationship between indirect sexual communication and relational uncertainty and a negative relationship between indirect sexual communication and sexual satisfaction in heterosexual marital partners. This is one of very few dyadic sexual communication studies, as most studies focus on the perspective of one relational partner (e.g. Lehmiller, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2014; Wildman, Choukas-Bradley, Helms, Golin, & Prinstein, 2014). Furthermore, Theiss (2011) focused on marital partners and indirect sexual communication whereas much current research focuses on direct sexual communication and sexual communication between dating partners. Thus, this study will extend and build upon previous research concerning sexual self-disclosure in current dating romantic relationship dyads

by examining how partners' sexual communication relates to sexual and relational health. More specifically, this study investigates the role of sexual self-disclosure in current emerging adult couples as it relates to each person's own and their partner's relational satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relational uncertainty.

The current study is useful for several reasons. First, it advances our understanding of sexual self-disclosure within current emerging adult cross-sex romantic partners. Although there is a tremendous amount of knowledge that is known about the emergent adult age group, they are in a unique situation where their relationship is fluid in the sense the relationship changes while the individuals are still learning who they are. In addition, current heterosexual romantic partners are consistently negotiating their levels of intimacy due to the ever-changing state of the relationship (Surra & Hughes, 1997), thus this group is an ideal situation to study sexual self-disclosure. This knowledge can possibly carry over to other age groups or lead to future comparison studies of differences of age groups. Second, results have the potential to offer a theoretical contribution by applying Social Penetration Theory (SPT; Altman & Taylor, 1973) to communication about sexuality and, third, a practical contribution by providing communication practitioners and relationship partners with increased knowledge about relationship health. Fourth, it expands our knowledge of the nature of interdependence of sexual self-disclosure. Instead of viewing sexual self-disclosure as an isolated variable, the current paper views it as an integrated part of the relationship.

In order to address the role sexual self-disclosure plays within young-adult romantic relationships, Chapter 2 includes a literature review examining the relevant research pertaining to SPT (Altman & Taylor, 1973). SPT was used as a theoretical framework to discuss how and why partners disclose to one another as well as to predict the likely consequence for their

relationships. Next, based on previous research and the assumptions of SPT, six hypotheses were offered. By and large, predictions centered on an expectation that partners' levels of sexual disclosure and sexual satisfaction will be interdependent and positively related, and that such levels will also be associated with overall relationship satisfaction and relational uncertainty. In Chapter 3, "Methodology," the use of an Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) to analyze young adult romantic relationship dyads and a detailed methodology, including the procedures used, participant selection, description of instrumentation, and how the data was analyzed. Chapter 4, "Results" reviews and discusses the results of the study along with limitations and future directions for research. Lastly, in Chapter 5, conclusions are presented.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Social Penetration Theory**

Our interpersonal relationships often are fluid, change from day to day, and have various levels of closeness in comparison to one another. Social penetration theory (SPT) states, “the growth of an interpersonal relationship is hypothesized to be a joint result of interpersonal reward/cost factors, personality characteristics, and situational determinants” (Taylor, Altman & Sorrentino, 1969, p. 325). Furthermore, SPT’s general assumption is that relationships develop based on the breadth (frequency) and depth (intimacy) between the relationship partners by means of self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Self-disclosure is defined as “any message about the self that a person communicates to another” (Wheless & Grotza, 1976, p. 338). Breadth is based on the quantity, or range and frequency of topics of interactions, whereas depth is based on the personal or private quality of the information. Relationships can form from a mixture of more or less breadth and depth. For instance, partners may communicate about a wide variety of topics but not disclose much intimate information about their feelings on the topic. In interpersonal relationships, disclosure and openness are normally reciprocated by partners (Altman & Taylor, 1973). SPT argues that as one partner (partner A) increases the depth of disclosure, the other partner (partner B) will reciprocate, assuming that partner B desires to maintain and enhance the relationship further (Taylor & Altamn, 1975). Reciprocated disclosures generally lead to more self-disclosure, liking, and intimate feelings toward the partner providing the disclosure (Collins & Miller, 1994; Dindia, 2002). Simply, SPT is the idea that, over time, relationship partners disclose more information about themselves and that leads to the relationship being more intimate. SPT predicts relationships move through several stages.

The idea that relationships develop in stages has long been accepted by communication scholars (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Welch & Rubin, 2002). Although the number, order, and linearity of stage models of relationship development differ, many scholars accept the notion that relationships move through stages in a predictable fashion. The predictable fashion may be forward, backward, within stages or to a different stage, however it is always moving to a new state (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). Communication, and especially self-disclosure, is needed for partners to move into deeper stages of relationship development (Baack, 1991; Baxter & Wilmot, 1983; VanLear, 1987). First, both partners must want to maintain and/or increase the intensity of their relationship. SPT suggests that this decision is based on the assessment of costs, rewards, and alternatives of the relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). If the perceived rewards of self-disclosure outweigh the potential of harm of vulnerability (cost), partners will self-disclose. Increased reciprocal self-disclosure leads partners to be more emotionally involved, have greater levels of relational satisfaction, and be more stable (Hendrick, 1981; Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980; Sprecher, 1987).

SPT (Altman & Taylor, 1973) includes four stages of relationship development: orientation, exploratory effective, affective, and stable. A fifth stage, de-penetration, signals that a relationship is coming to an end. The *orientation stage* of the relationship occurs during the initial interaction and takes place within the surface and periphery level of personality. *Surface* level information are superficial facts, or facts you can gather by looking at a person or not confrontational information, e.g. what is the current prize of gas. The *periphery* level includes 'public' areas of information such as what inferences can be gained by how someone dresses and their behavior. Outside of inferences of appearance, information disclosed in this level are topics individuals feel comfortable with discussing in a social setting, e.g. who their favorite sports

team is. Common topics discussed in the periphery level are general likes/dislikes, family background, and geographic history (Allensworth, 1996). In this stage, individuals engage in communication on the surface level in effort to get to know each other (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Verbal communication can include everyday activities which reveal only a small part of the non-personal self (Roloff & Miller, 1987). Individuals in the orientation stage tend to use questions to probe for information, however the topics remain within “safe” ground of conversation between strangers (Ayres, 1979). During this stage, neither partner is invested in the other or a future relationship, resulting in comfortable and nonconflictual conversation (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

After the initial and minimal interaction of the orientation stage they become more comfortable, partners mutually disclose information regarding a wider range of topics, which remain on the periphery level and occasionally cross over into the intermediate level. The *intermediate* level includes disclosure of selective information and receivers, the information goes beyond general information such as political affiliation but extends to how the individual feels about a topic such as who and why they voted for a certain political candidate in an election. This stage is known as the *exploratory effective exchange*. Partners let their guards down somewhat in order to gain a richer understanding of each other. Disclosure and conversation within the stage is more evaluative and partners begin to “test” each other for their opinions on topics as a means to better “get to know” each other (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Ayres, 1979). If both partners perceive on the basis of their newfound understandings of each other a reward in the relationship, they are likely to continue to the third stage. Individuals within this stage are considered friendly or casual acquaintances (Taylor & Altman, 1987).

In the *affective exchange stage*, dyadic partners increase the depth of their conversations, thus leading to intermediate and central levels of disclosure. *Central* levels of disclosure include

private information reserved for family members, close friends, and relational partners (Taylor & Altman, 1987). Close friends and romantic partners enter this stage after they know each other enough to comfortably share intimate information. During this stage, partners move toward sharing intimate knowledge that leading to caring for each other, often in the context of a strong friendship. The open disclosure in the relationship between the partners allows them to be casual and move toward deeper intimacy exchanges, such as those about deep-rooted future aspirations. However, individuals within this stage are not completely sure of the stability of the relationship and few topics inconsistently will cross over into the central layer (Taylor & Altman, 1987). According to Taylor and Altman (1987), partners within the affective exchange stage are considered close friend or romantic partners.

The fourth and final stage of relational development is the *stable exchange*, where almost everything from the surface to the central levels of information is discussed. At this stage, fewer secrets are kept and the partners become intertwined with each other. Individuals in this stage can normally predict their partner's feeling and behavior (Roloff & Miller, 1987). At this stage, all four layers have been peeled back, allowing partners to fully embrace each other and leaving partners vulnerable. However, the expectation is that the cost of disclosure (fear of being vulnerable) will be low due to each individual's high amount invested in the relationship (Taylor & Altman, 1987).

Both relational partners do not always enter the next stage at the same time, sometimes one partner will be more willing than the other to disclose information at the deeper levels while the other is not (Allensworth, 1996). Individual partners must weigh the cost/reward of the relationship and interaction to determine whether to proceed into the next level (Taylor & Altman, 1987). If the costs outweigh the rewards for the relationship, partners fall into the *de-*

*penetration stage*, which ultimately leads to dissolving the relationship. Less self-disclosure results in less intimacy in romantic relationships while partners are in the de-penetration stage (Tolstedt & Stokes, 1984).

### **Self-Disclosure**

As noted above, SPT is the notion that relationships advance in intimacy as a result of increasingly broad and deep self-disclosure between partners. Self-disclosure is a process involving two roles: the discloser and the disclosure recipient (Collins & Miller, 1994; Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2009). Self-disclosure has been shown to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Wheelless & Grotz, 1976). When both partners in the relationship disclose information and show support for each other, trust is developed (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 2003). If the disclosures are made over time and appropriately, then attraction, liking, loving, trust, and mental health benefits can increase (Rosenfield, 1979).

Not only has self-disclosure helped within relationships, but also for individual physical health. Self-disclosure about a traumatic experience has been associated with a decrease of physical symptoms, less immune dysfunction, and fewer physician visits (Kelley, Lumley, & Leisen, 1997; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988). Self-disclosure can take oral or written forms. Gillis, Lumley, Mosley-Williams, Leisen, and Roehrs (2006) found that writing at home about emotional states and stressful experiences led to a reduction in poor sleep, utilizing healthcare services, and marginally physical disability. Discussion and disclosure of personal information strengthens the bond between two people, leads to more positive management of past stressors, and reduces shame associated with previous experiences (Murray-Swank, McConnell, & Paragament, 2007; Smyth, Hockemeyer, Heron,

Pennebaker, & Wonderlich, 2008). The individual's physical health benefits justify the common advice to "let go" instead of "bottling up." The relationship health outcomes of self-disclosure are just as important as the physical health.

The amount of the self-disclosure can be used to judge the strength of the relationship based on the amount of information that is shared (Adler & Procter, 2007). Self-disclosure within romantic relationships is generally rewarding and contributes to the relationship quality, for romantic partners (Brunell, Pilkington, & Webster, 2007; McAllister, 1980). Relationship benefits of self-disclosure include reinforced values and clarified thoughts or feelings (Derlega et al., 1993). The relational benefits of self-disclosure are so great that when it decreases, the relational quality decreases (Brunell, Pilkington, & Webster, 2007).

Although there are well-documented benefits of self-disclosure, sharing private thoughts, experiences and feelings with a partner is not easy (Petronio, 2002). Revealing private information is risky due to the potential vulnerability it places on the individual (Afifi, et al., 2007; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Petronio, 1991, 2002). The vulnerability comes from the potential for damaged image, loss of self-esteem, and hurt feelings (Gilbert, 2001; Leary, 2001; Rosenfeld, 1979). Although potential risks are involved, self-disclosure must take place between relational partners for the intimacy development to begin (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Relational intimacy and physical intimacy between friends are commonly confused. Monsour (1992) believed intimacy involves self-disclosures, trust, emotional expressiveness, unconditional support, and physical contact.

### **Dyadic Effects**

So far, the focus has been on the individual's SD with little focus on the interactive effects partners have on each other. To produce a more accurate understanding of SD in romantic

relationships, it is necessary to further elaborate on the interdependence of the relationship. Like SPT and Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS), interdependence theory (Kelly & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) was framed from the exchange perspective, which posits that individuals seek to enhance rewards and diminish costs in the relationship.

### **Intimacy**

Sternberg (1986, 1997) defined relational intimacy as the relational partners' perceptions of how bonded, connected, and close they feel to each other. These perceptions of relational intimacy can include showing affection, sharing information, and participating in activities with one's partner (Patrick, Sells, Giordano, & Tollerud, 2007). The acts of showing affection, sharing information and doing activities together in the context of face-to-face interaction predict high levels of relational intimacy (Emmers-Sommers, 2004). The amount of self-disclosure is also linked to relational intimacy (Knobloch, Solomon, & Theiss, 2006). Relational intimacy is built through different primary pathways for men and women. McNelles and Connolly (1999) found that for men, intimacy is created through shared activities and self-disclosure, whereas for women, it is fostered only through self-disclosure. Relational intimacy fulfills two major roles, promotes positive feelings about the relationship and one's partner beyond the potential negative feelings direct communication bring about when discussing relational problems (Laurenceau, Troy, & Carver, 2005; Sanderson & Karetzky, 2002; Theiss & Solomon, 2006). Overall, relational intimacy is a major component within the relationship that relates to how the romantic partners communicate with one another (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004).

Sexual behavior and relational intimacy have a positive relationship (Birnbbaum, 2007). Thus, relational intimacy is related to sexual intimacy based on the expression of intimacy

through affection and shared activities. Furthermore, trust, commitment, and expression of love are often related to sexual intimacy (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004). Beyond the positive effects sexual intimacy has on the relationship, men and women may differ in their desires for sexual intimacy. Not all men and women are the same. However, research has demonstrated some group-level differences between the two. On their first dates, many men hope to experience sexual intimacy and many women hope to experience conversational intimacy (Mongeau, Jacobsen, & Donnerstein, 2007). It is clear that men hope to achieve sexual intimacy earlier, on average, than women (Morr & Mongeau, 2004). Women view their sexual relationships as centered on intimate emotions more than do men (McGinty, Knox, & Zusman, 2007).

Emotional closeness and intimacy are the most frequently cited motives for having sexual activities in romantic partnerships (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004; Meston & Buss, 2007). Sexual activity between romantic partners maintains and strengthens the relationship (Burnbaum, Reis, Milkulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006). Yet, discussing intimacy, specifically sexual intimacy, is difficult for most partners regardless of context and the identity of the target receiver. Wildman et al. (2014) found that 54% of youth had never discussed sex with their current sexual partner. In addition, women between 19 and 25 years old do not feel comfortable talking to their sexual partners about contraception (Parker & Ivanov, 2012).

Cultural expectations surrounding gender roles have contributed to differences between men and women's attitudes toward sexual intimacy. Research conducted in the 1970's and 1980's provide support for the notion that, in cross-sex romantic relationships, men focused more on sexuality as recreational and pleasure-centered, whereas women saw sexuality as more relational and person-centered (DeLamater, 1987; Kaplan & Sager, 1971). Cross-sex romances are still stereotyped in this way. More recent research has shown that men are more accepting of

casual sex and participate in a larger variety of sexual behaviors, whereas women report preferring a more committed dating relationship in order for sex to occur (Hyde & Oliver, 2000; Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Therefore, women may be expected to be passive and compliant toward their male counterparts, who are expected to be assertive, initiate sexual activity, and be knowledgeable about it (Gagnon, 1990). Both men and women enjoy sex (Schwartz & Rutter, 1988) and prefer to have it with a committed romantic partner (Laumann, Michael, & Gagnon, 1994). Couples experience higher levels of intimacy, closeness, relational satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction when they self-disclose more (Byers & Wang, 2004; Reagan, 2011). Yet, communicating about sex, and the intimacy involved, is notoriously difficult for relationship partners.

### **Sexual Self-Disclosure**

Sanford (2003) found sexual conflict to be in the top five most difficult topics to discuss between romantic partners. Sexual self-disclosure (SSD) is defined in several different ways by several groups of researchers. A number of scholars describe SSD as people's willingness to communicate with another about various sexual topics (Papini, Farmers, Clark, & Snell, 1988; Snell, Belk, Papini, & Clark, 1989; Yang, Yang, & Chiou, 2010). Byers and Demmons (1999) defined SSD as "the extent of individuals' self-disclosure to a dating partner about their likes and dislikes with respect to specific sexual activities they engage in" (p. 180). SSD has been defined in a more general way as "the extent to which one talks about one's sexual preferences with one's partner" (Rehman, Rellini, & Fallis, 2011, p. 3109). For purposes of this study, SSD is defined broadly as the "degree to which a member of a romantic dyad discloses his or her sexual thoughts, feelings, and behavior to his or her partner" (Tang, Bensman, & Hatfield, 2013, p. 227). This disclosure is a direct form of sexual self-disclosure. Previous sexual communication

studies have considered indirect sexual communication (see Theiss, 2011), however for the purposes of this study direct sexual communication is considered.

The Interpersonal Process Model of Intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988) can be applied to the dyadic differences within the romantic partners to make sense of their biological differences. The model's two key components are self-disclosure and partner responses to the disclosure. In essence, positive responses to self-disclosure lead to more self-disclosure. Prior research highlights open communication (e.g. self-disclosure) as the keystone to satisfying sexual relationships (e.g. Byers & Demmons, 1999; Ferroni & Taffee, 1997). For instance, dating partners are more likely to disclose enjoyable sexual behaviors than sexual acts that are not enjoyable to them (Herold & Way, 1988). This is understandable, given individuals self-disclose more positive emotions than negative emotions as it is more appropriate to self-disclose positive emotions (Howell & Conway, 1990).

For cross-sex romantic partners, SSD is important because of its association with relationship satisfaction (Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Levenson, 1988; Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998), social support (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001, Sparrevohn & Rapee, 2009) and intimacy (Forgas, 2011). Furthermore, the intimacy derived or produced from SSD is linked with sexual satisfaction (Haning et al., 2007), whereas low intimacy is associated with low sexual activity (Donnelly, 1997) and sexual dysfunction (McCabe, 1997; Stuart, Hammong, & Pett, 1987). However, in some instances SSD may not always be received as welcome and could lead to or stem from relationship problems. Disclosure about sexual attitudes, feelings, and behaviors can be difficult. Hatfield (1984) found six major fears that refrain individuals from disclosing: fear of losing one's individuality, fear of one's own disruptive impulses, fear of exposure, fear of abandonment, fear of loss of control, and fear of

angry attacks. For instance, in women SSD and sex guilt have a negative relationship (Herold & Way, 1988). If the woman does not wish to expose her sex guilt she is less likely to commit SSD. Building intimacy on a sexual level within the relationships is an interactive and reciprocal process of self-disclosure (Berg & Derlega, 1987; Laurenceau, et al., 1998; Reis & Sahver, 1988), it can be difficult when a partner withholds from sharing (Butler, et al., 2003). Moreover, partners' reactions to the sharing of sexual information are also important. Laurenceau, Barrett, and Rovine's (2005) longitudinal diary study found that the responsiveness of a partner mediates the discloser's self-disclosure. The more positively partners respond to each other's self-disclosure, the more partners share. Therefore, a positive relationship between partners' levels of sexual self-disclosure is expected.

**H1:** There will be a positive linear relationship between romantic partners' levels of sexual self-disclosure.

### **Sexual Satisfaction**

Sexual communication is primary to the maintenance and development of satisfying sexual relationships (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). Lawrance and Byers (1995) defined sexual satisfaction as "an affective response arising from one's subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one's sexual relationship" (p. 514). However, Sprecher and Cate (2004) gave a more direct definition of sexual satisfaction as "the degree to which an individual is satisfied or happy with the sexual aspect of his or her relationship" (p. 236). Having sexual aspects like fantasies, fears, and desires are associated with greater sexual satisfaction (Masters, Johnson, & Kolodny, 1986), but their disclosure may place the partner in a state of vulnerability (Afifi, et al., 2007; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Petronio, 1991, 2002). Despite this risk, however, SSD offers rewards because increased sexual communication is associated

with greater sexual satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Sprecher, 2006). The association between communication and sexual satisfaction is so strong that sex therapists have long sought to improve sexual and non-sexual communication between partners (LoPiccolo & Miller, 1978; MacNeil & Byers, 1997). Therefore, a positive relationship between SSD and sexual satisfaction is predicted.

**H2:** Individuals' sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction will have a positive relationship.

The Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS) was developed to understand sexual satisfaction in relationships (Byers & Wang, 2004; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Sprecher, 1998). Like SPT, IEMSS is a social exchange model and is based on the idea that people will seek to enhance rewards and minimize costs. Sexual satisfaction is considered to be an important relationship reward (Fletcher, Simpson, Thompson, & Giles, 1999). Costs and rewards may be tangible objects (Byers & Wang, 2004), but for purposes of this study, costs and rewards will refer to intangibles like disclosure, satisfaction, intimacy, and the like. IEMSS proposes that individuals will be more sexually satisfied if: (a) they experience more sexual rewards than costs in the relationship; (b) the balance between sexual costs and rewards is favorable to their expectations; (c) they perceive that their partner's and their own levels of sexual costs and rewards are equal; and (d) they are satisfied with nonsexual aspects of the relationship. Rewards are defined as "the pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications the person enjoys" whereas costs are defined as "factors that operate to inhibit or deter the performance of a sequence of behavior" (Thibaut & Kelley, 1986, p. 12). When communicating their sexual desires, romantic partners can struggle to find balance between becoming vulnerable (costs) and the potential for improved sexual activity and satisfaction (rewards).

Understanding the individual's motives to achieve sexual satisfaction is important for understanding the individual's actions and what potential outcome they may have on the relationship. So far, the link between an individual's SSD and sexual satisfaction has been discussed, but the effect of SSD on the partner is also important to consider. Self-disclosure is a process within the partnership and should be viewed as such (Berg & Derlega, 1987; Laurenceau, et al., 1998; Reis & Sahver, 1988). In this section and the following section(s), I discuss the dyadic effects romantic partners can have on each other by means of the SPT.

Reciprocity is the interactive effect that occurs when one partner discloses more due to his/her partner sharing information with him/her (Molm, 2010). Partners simply reciprocate each other's disclosures in terms of frequency and, especially, in terms of intimacy (Hill & Stull, 1982). Within cross-sex marriages, reciprocity has been found to co-create a relational culture that provides relational norms for both partners to follow (Goldmish & Baxter, 1996; Huston, 2000). The principle of reciprocity is effective because of the potential negative social sanctions that can occur when a partner does not reciprocate (Cialdini, 2007). Reciprocity stretches beyond the disclosure of information. Reciprocity operates as a quid pro quo or "something for something". For instance, men often view women as more sexually available after he purchases her a drink or dinner (Emmers-Sommer, Warber, Passalacqua, & Luciano, 2010; George, Gournic, & McAfee, 1988).

Sexual satisfaction significantly predicts intimacy for husbands and wives (Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, & Gangamma, 2014). Furthermore, a positive association exists between partners sexual and emotional intimacy (Haning et al., 2007). However, methods by which cross-sex partners generate intimacy are different. Generally, women place more emphasis on emotional

closeness than men, and men place more emphasis on physical closeness (e.g. Hook, Gerstein, Deterich, & Gridley, 2003; Ridley, 1993; Sprecher, 2002; Talmadge & Dabbs, 1990).

Although cross-sex partners emphasize different aspects of sexual satisfaction and intimacy, the two partners affect each other. If a woman does not receive the emotional and relational closeness she desires from a sexual episode, she would be less likely to participate in one therefore lowering her sexual satisfaction. If the female partner lowers the frequency of sexual episodes, the male partner's sexual satisfaction should decrease. Due to the principle of reciprocity, each partner's sexual satisfaction should be similar to one another. Sexual satisfaction between married partners has been positively associated in prior research (Theiss, 2011). However the association of sexual satisfaction between dating partners has gone unnoticed. Due to the extensive background in sex differences and their relation to sexual satisfaction in addition to the principal of reciprocity a relationship exists. Thus, I predict a positive association between partners sexual satisfaction. Formally stated:

**H3:** Partner's levels of sexual satisfaction are positively associated.

### **Relational Satisfaction**

Relational satisfaction is defined as "an individual's attitude toward the partner and the relationship, typically in terms of the perceived quality of the relationship" (Dainton & Stafford, 1994, p. 89). Couples who self-disclose with one another have higher perceptions of caring and relational intimacy (Hook, Gerstein, Deterich, & Gridley, 2003). Along with intimacy, commitment, and passion, relational satisfaction influences the quality of romantic relationships (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 2000). Satisfaction and commitment are positively associated with one's own self-disclosure and amount romantic partner discloses (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Romantic partners tend to be more satisfied when they disclose positive

emotions (Broderick & O'Leary, 1986; Davidson, Balswick, & Halverson, 1983; Kelly, Fincham, & Beach, 2003) and less satisfied when they withdraw more from the relationship and conversation (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977; Guerrero & La Valley, 2006; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kelly et. al., 2003).

Relational dissatisfaction in romantic relationships may be a byproduct of jealousy (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Guerrero & Eloy, 1992). Jealousy can come in many shapes and forms. Merrill and Afifi (2012) found the dissatisfaction from jealousy is a predictor that partners will withhold disclosing to their partner. Partners who are dissatisfied with their relationships tend to interpret their partners' behavior by enhancing the agitating nature that causes their dissatisfied feelings. Those higher in relational satisfaction view their partners' behavior along the lines that enhance the relationship (Manusov & Koenig, 2001; Sillars & Canary, 2013). These attributions can lead to the withholding of disclosures, which poses a problem for sexual partners.

Numerous studies have shown the greater the disclosure in romantic relationships the greater the relational satisfaction (Derlega, et al., 1993; Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). These studies have also shown a positive relationship between relational satisfaction and sexual satisfaction (Banmen & Vogel, 1985; Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Meeks, et al., 1998; Sprecher, 2002). The connection between relational satisfaction and sexual satisfaction has been explained by Cupach and Mett's (1991) expressive pathway. The expressive pathway suggests that partner's sexual self-disclosure regarding their preferences contributes to relational satisfaction and intimacy. Then, greater relational satisfaction leads to an increase in sexual satisfaction. Therefore the following hypothesis is suggested:

**H4:** Individuals' sexual satisfaction will be positively related to their partners' relationship satisfaction.

As partners' disclose more to one another, they move deeper into SPT's stages, resulting in higher levels of understanding and intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Litzinger and Gordon (2005) found in their longitudinal study a positive relationship between sexual satisfaction and communication in romantic partners. However, the degree to which communication is associated with an improvement in sexual satisfaction is unknown, therefore the following hypothesis is suggested:

**H5:** Individuals' sexual self-disclosure will mediate the relationship between their own and their partners' sexual satisfaction.

Partners' satisfaction is often related to how certain they are about the relationship as a whole. More specifically, a negative relationship exists between relational satisfaction, self-disclosure, and how certain partners are about the relationship.

### **Relationship Uncertainty**

According to the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT, Berger & Calabrese, 1975) the less relational uncertainty a partner has, the greater intimacy he/she should have with a partner. The major assumption of URT is that humans want to decrease uncertainty within their relationships. From the assumption, the theory suggests that the major goal in a relationship is to explain and predict behavior based on the gained understanding of one another (Berger, 1987). At the beginning of romantic relationships, uncertainty may be experienced as fun and exciting. However, long-term uncertainty can harm the longevity of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). Due to the dynamic nature of relationships, uncertainty reduction is a never-ending process (Berger & Bradac, 1982). Knobloch and Solomon (1999) define relational

uncertainty as “the degree of confidence individuals have in their perceptions of involvement within interpersonal relationships” (p. 264). Simply, it is the inability to explain or predict one’s own and one’s partner’s behavior (Afifi & Reichert, 1996). URT can be applied to multiple interpersonal constructs, but for this study will focus on relational uncertainty, which refers how uncertain a romantic partner is about their partner (Dainton & Aylor, 2001).

Relational uncertainty comes from either the sources of the uncertainty or the themes or content of uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Sources of the uncertainty separate into three entities: self, partner, and relationship (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). *Self-uncertainty* refers to the doubts one has about the relationships and their own involvement and *partner-uncertainty* refers to the doubts on has about their partner and their involvement within the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b). The first and second sources of relational uncertainty are individual centered with one relationship partner. *Relationship-uncertainty* considers the doubts and concerns on a dyadic level (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). All three uncertainty sources taken together reflect the relational uncertainty of the dyadic relationship and the amount of confidence partners have in their relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Solomon, Weber, and Steuber (2010) found that relational uncertainty can occur during any point of the relationship, but it most often occurs during periods of transition. Thus, uncertainty between partners’ increases when “the expectations, identities, and scripts that people typically employ to make sense of their relationship are in flux” (Knobloch & Delaney, 2012, p. 751).

Uncertainty contributes to relational instability and produces relational instability by means of communicative, emotional, and mental disturbance (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010, 2011; Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magasmen-Conrad, 2009). High uncertainty tends to lead to

lower relationship satisfaction, communication, and higher topic avoidance (Knobloch, 2006, 2008; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Relational uncertainty is a strong predictor of feelings of jealousy and with high levels of jealousy people are less likely to express their uncertainty (Afifi & Reichert, 1996). Lessened disclosure of uncertainty may lead to the inability to predict partner behavior, thus resulting in even higher uncertainty (Afifi & Reichert, 1996). Thus, greater uncertainty is connected to less frequent maintenance behaviors (Dainton & Aylor, 2001) such as self-disclosure. Therefore, I predict a negative relationship between relationship uncertainty and SSD.

**H6:** Individuals' levels of relationship uncertainty will be negatively associated with their SSD.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

In order to test majority of the hypotheses, use of an Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) was used. APIM (Kashy & Kenny, 1999; Kenny, 1996) was designed to measure the interdependence within dyadic relationships. Interdependence exists within dyad relationships when one partner's behavior, emotion, or cognition affects the other partner (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Kelley, et al., 2003). Interdependence within the APIM is derived from analyzing the sample size based on the pairs of participants; the dyads. Therefore, the unit of analysis (*n*) is the relationship pair versus the individual partner.

#### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 19 cross-sex current romantic partner dyads. In each dyad, at least one member was enrolled at the large Midwestern University from which participants were recruited. Of the participants, a majority identified as White (63.2%, *n* = 24), followed by Black or African-American (31.6%, *n* = 12), American Indian or Alaska Native (2.6%, *n* = 1), and one (2.6%) who declined to answer. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 29, with a mean of 21.02 (*SD* = 2.56) and a median of 20.5 years. In terms of college classification, there were juniors (36.8%, *n* = 14), seniors (21.1%, *n* = 8), sophomores (18.4%, *n* = 7), first-years (18.4%, *n* = 7), a graduate student (2.6%, *n* = 1), and one who declined to answer (2.6%). The length of time in the relationship between the participants varied, ranging from 1 to 100 with a median of 11 months (*M* = 24.79, *SD* = 30.12). Participants were recruited via convenience sampling of the university's communication student participant pool along with snowball sampling from the participant pool. The study was posted on the School of Communication's SONA research website, an online tool for coordinating research participation. Upon completion, each student

participant was provided with credit toward a required class research assignment. An alternative assignment was provided to those students choosing to not participate in studies through SONA. Additionally, a snowball sampling technique was used to increase the number of participants for this study. Students in large section communication courses were requested to recruit/suggest a couple to participate in the research.

## **Procedures**

Current romantic partners were invited to a public computer lab within a large Midwestern university to complete the online study. Potential participants were presented with a statement of informed consent (Appendix A). After providing consent, each participant was seated on opposite sides of the room and out of view from their partner. Next, each participant was instructed to open their sealed envelope and input their specific dyad code into the survey accessed online. This code was used to link each individual participant's data to their partner's data. They were instructed to complete the following measures: sexual self-disclosure (Snell, Belk, Papini, & Clark, 1989), the global measure of relational satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers, 1998), the global measure of sexual satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers, 1998), relationship uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999), and demographic characteristics. After participants completed the questionnaire they were thanked for their time and dismissed.

## **Measures**

### *Sexual Self-Disclosure*

In order to measure sexual self-disclosure, an adapted version of Snell et al.'s (1989) revised sexual self-disclosure scale (SSDS-R) was used. The instrument includes 72 items, with 24 three-item subscales measured on a series of 5-point Likert type scales ranging from 1 (*I have not discussed this topic with my intimate partner*) to 5 (*I have fully discussed this topic with my*

*intimate partner*). The subscales include, (1) sexual behaviors (e.g., “my past sexual experiences”); (2) sexual sensations (e.g., the things that sexually arouse me”); (3) sexual fantasies (e.g., “my imaginary sexual encounters”); (4) sexual preferences (e.g., “the sexual behaviors which I think people ought to exhibit”); (5) meaning of sex (e.g., “what sex in an intimate relationship means to me”); (6) sexual accountability (e.g., “my private beliefs about sexual responsibility”); (7) distressing sex (e.g., “times when sex was distressing for me”); (8) sexual dishonesty (e.g., “the times I have pretended to enjoy sex”); (9) sexual delay preferences (e.g., “times when I prefer to refrain from sexual activity”); (10) abortion and pregnancy (e.g., “how I feel about abortions”); (11) homosexuality (e.g., “my personal views about homosexuals”); (12) rape (e.g., “my own ideas about why rapes occur”); (13) AIDS (e.g., “my personal views about people with AIDS”); (14) sexual morality (e.g., “what I consider “proper” sexual behavior”); (15) sexual satisfaction (e.g., “how satisfied I feel about the sexual aspects of my life”); (16) sexual guilt (e.g. “how guilty I feel about the sexual aspects of my life”); (17) sexual calmness (e.g., “how calm I feel about the sexual aspects of my life”); (18) sexual depression (e.g., “how depressed I feel about the sexual aspects of my life”); (19) sexual jealousy (e.g., “how jealous I feel about the sexual aspects of my life”); (20) sexual apathy (e.g., “how apathetic I feel about the sexual aspects of my life”); (21) sexual anxiety (e.g., “how anxious I feel about the sexual aspects of my life”); (22) sexual happiness (e.g., “how happy I feel about the sexual aspects of my life”); (23) sexual anger (e.g., “how angry I feel about the sexual aspects of my life”); and (24) sexual fear (e.g., “how afraid I feel about the sexual aspects of my life”). Previous reliability coefficients range from .93 (Nichols, 2012) to .96 (Coffelt & Hess, 2014). In this study, a reliability coefficient of .97 ( $M = 230.36$ ,  $SD = 55.86$ ) was originally obtained. However, seven missing data points were found during data analysis within the SSD

measurement. Data points can be missing for a variety of reasons and determining the reason for the missing data point determines what appropriate strategy to use to address the problem (Little & Rubin, 1989). While utilizing the software tool Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Little's MCAR (Missing Completely at Random) was used. Resulting in seven different items not answered once each ( $\chi^2 = .000, DF = 496, p > .05$ ) rejecting the null hypothesis of data points not being missed at random. After utilizing the maximum likelihood (ML) procedure within SPSS a reliability coefficient of .97 ( $M = 228.89, SD = 54.52$ ) was obtained, demonstrating acceptable reliability. The ML is a procedure that replaces missing data based on the likelihood of how previous answers in the subscale were answer.

### *Sexual Satisfaction*

Sexual satisfaction was measured by The Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (GMSEX) from the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire (Lawrance & Byers, 1998). The instrument includes 5 items assessed on a series of 7-point bipolar scales. Participants respond to the question "In general, how would you describe your sexual relationship with your partner?" in terms of (*bad/good, unpleasant/pleasant, negative/positive, unsatisfying/satisfying, and worthless/very valuable*). Items were scored such that higher values represent higher amounts of sexual satisfaction. Previous reliability coefficients range from .93 (MacNeil & Byers, 2005) to .96 (Byers, 2005). In this study, a reliability coefficient of .90 ( $M = 21.42, SD = 3.41$ ) was obtained, demonstrating acceptable reliability.

### *Relationship Satisfaction*

The Global Measure of Relationship Satisfaction (GMREL) from the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire (Lawrance & Byers, 1998) was used to

measure relationship satisfaction. The instrument includes 5 items measured on a 7-point bipolar scales. Participants responded to the question “In general, how would you describe your overall relationship with your partner?” in terms of (*bad/good, unpleasant/pleasant, negative/positive, unsatisfying/satisfying, and worthless/very valuable*). Items were scored such that higher values represent higher amounts of relationship satisfaction. Previous reliability coefficients range from .84 (MacNeil & Byers, 2005) to .96 (Byers, 2005). In this study, a reliability coefficient of .95 ( $M = 25.26, SD = 5.42$ ) was obtained, demonstrating acceptable reliability.

#### *Relationship Uncertainty*

Relationship uncertainty was measured by using Knobloch and Solomon’s (1999) 16-item subscale from their relational uncertainty scale, 4 subscale instrument rated on 6-point Likert-type scales ranging from (1) “completely or almost completely uncertain” (6) “completely or almost completely certain”. All 16-items are prefaced with “How certain are you about ...?” The first subscale measures *behavioral norms* (e.g., how certain you are about what you can or cannot say to each other in this relationship?), *mutuality* (e.g. how certain you are about how you and your partner view this relationship?), *definition* (e.g. how certain you are about the definition of the relationship?), and *future* (e.g. how certain are you about the future of the relationship?). Items were scored such that higher values represent higher amounts of relational certainty. Previous reliability coefficients range from .92 (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005) to .94 (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). In this study, a reliability coefficient of .97 ( $M = 36.71, SD = 17.91$ ) was obtained, demonstrating acceptable reliability.

## CHAPTER IV

### DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

#### Results

In order to test H1, predicting a positive linear relationship between romantic partners' levels of sexual self-disclosure, a Pearson Product-Moment correlation was conducted. Results indicated a significant moderate-to-strong positive relationship between male partners' sexual self-disclosure ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ) and their female partners' sexual self-disclosure ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ )  $r(17) = .66$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r^2 = .44$ . Thus, H1 was supported.

In order to test H2, predicting a positive relationship between individuals' sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction, a Pearson Product-Moment correlation test was conducted. Results indicated a significant positive approaching weak relationship between sexual self-disclosure ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) and sexual satisfaction ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ )  $r(36) = .30$ ,  $p = .034$ ,  $r^2 = .09$ . Thus H2 was supported.

In order to test if partners' levels of sexual satisfaction are positively associated (H3), a Pearson Product-Moment correlation test was conducted. Results indicated a significant positive moderate relationship between the male partner's sexual satisfaction ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ) and the female partners' sexual satisfaction ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ),  $r(17) = .41$ ,  $p = .041$ ,  $r^2 = .17$ . Thus H3 was supported.

In order to test if an individuals' sexual satisfaction is positively related to their partner's relationship satisfaction (H4), two Pearson Product-Moment correlation tests were conducted. Results indicated no significant relationship between male sexual satisfaction and female relationship satisfaction ( $r(17) = .05$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $r^2 = .00$ ) or between female sexual satisfaction and male relationship satisfaction ( $r(17) = -.27$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $r^2 = .07$ ). Thus, H4 was not supported.

In order to test if an individual's sexual self-disclosure mediates the relationship between their own and their partner's sexual satisfaction (H5), a Pearson Product-Moment correlation was first conducted.

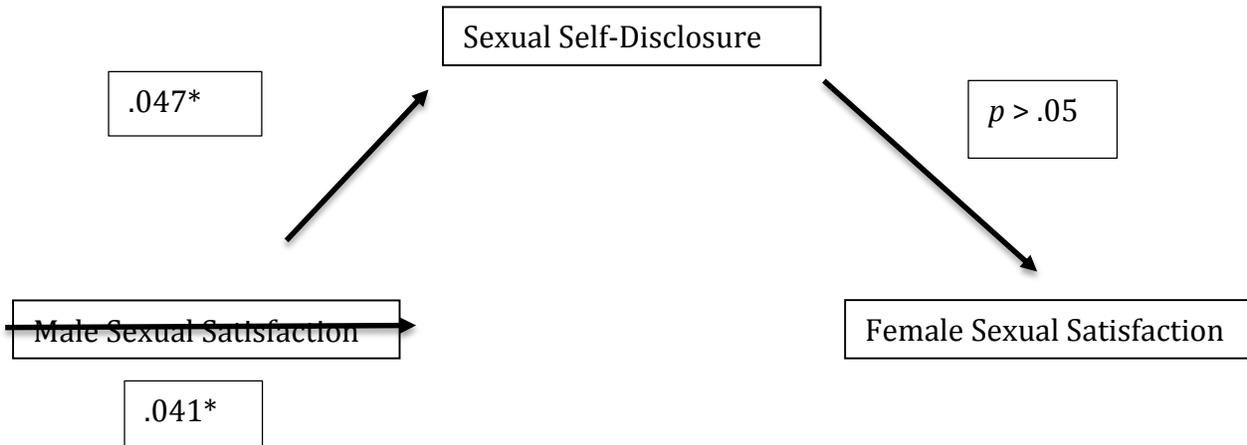


Figure 1: Model illustrating the mediating relation of sexual self-disclosure between male sexual satisfaction and female sexual satisfaction. \* =  $p < .05$

The predictor variable male sexual satisfaction was significantly related to sexual self-disclosure ( $r(17) = .46, p = .047, r^2 = .21$ ) and significantly related to their female partner's sexual satisfaction ( $r(17) = .41, p = .041, r^2 = .17$ ). However, the predictor mediator sexual self-disclosure was not significantly related to female sexual satisfaction ( $r(17) = .25, p > .05, r^2 = .06$ ) as shown in Figure 1. Therefore a regression test was not needed to test mediation because all three variables were not correlated. Thus H5 was not supported.

In order to test if an individual's level of relationship uncertainty is negatively associated with their sexual self-disclosure (H6), a Pearson Product-Moment correlation test was conducted. Results indicated no significant relationship between relational uncertainty ( $M = 4.71, SD = 1.12$ ) and sexual self-disclosure ( $M = 3.18, SD = 0.76$ )  $r(36) = .19, p > .05, r^2 = .04$ . Thus H6 was not supported.

## **Discussion**

The study examined how sexual satisfaction, relational satisfaction, and relational uncertainty among partners related to sexual self-disclosure. The purpose of the research was to determine the role sexual self-disclosure plays within current emergent adult romantic relationships. Several hypotheses were derived from previous literature and tested within the current study. Thus contributing to the relevant literature by adding more in-depth insight to the body of work addressing sexual communication, satisfaction, and uncertainty between current romantic partners.

The current study identified a positive relationship between partners' sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction, and also identified a positive relationship between individual's sexual self-disclosure and their sexual satisfaction. These significant results follow the trend of previous significant finding in the field of sexuality. However, the non-significant data representing a partner's sexual satisfaction not correlating to their partner's relational satisfaction, sexual self-disclosure not mediating the relationship between partner's sexual satisfaction, and relational uncertainty and sexual self-disclosure having a negative relationship are just as important as the significant findings.

The majority of previous studies on sexual communication gather data from one member of the dyad and ask the participant to predict their partner's variable data points thus giving nonfactual data between current partners. This study is one of the few looking at data from both partners and seeing SSD as the interactive effect between partners instead of a byproduct of internal factors. Furthermore, the strengths of the current project include a diverse group in current academic standing along with a substantial average length in the relationship with a mean of two years. Some recent studies utilize couples that have been together for six to eighteen

months (Keller, et al., 2014) while others use couples who have been together for at least six months (Parkinson, Simons, & Niven, 2016). Lastly, while utilizing an online based survey the tendency for participants to give socially desirable responses was minimized while understanding that many people are hesitant to discuss sexual content with researchers (Dillman, 2000; Orbuch & Harvey, 1991). Although the use of dyadic data is important to clearly demonstrate connection in interpersonal factors the connections made with this study have limitations. Further discussion of results related to each variable is continued below, followed by a discussion of current study limitations and proposed directions for future research.

### **Sexual Self-Disclosure**

Given that some of the SSD predictions were supported and some were not raises some interesting implications for the role SSD plays within current emergent adult romantic relationships. H1, a positive relationship between partner's levels of sexual self-disclosure, was provided based on one of the foundational assumptions of social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), reciprocity. According to reciprocity principal of self-disclosure, if an individual desires to maintain or strengthen the relationship between themselves and another, the individual will disclose more information. In the context of cross-sex romantic partners, if the male partner wishes to maintain or strengthen the relationship with his female partner he will disclosure more resulting in a feedback loop of more disclosure and vice versa between partners.

The results of the current study were consistent with this theory in that sexual self-disclosure was associated with more sexual self-disclosure between partners. Meaning that as one partner discloses more about their sexual life such as previous sexual behaviors or anger about sex leads to more reciprocated disclosure from the partner. It is important to note the measurement does not highlight if the SSD is perceived as positive or negative in nature, just that

SSD exists. The positive and negative nature is highlighted within the limitations and future directions portion below. It may be possible that individuals felt more comfortable sharing positive disclosure than negative disclosure resulting in a reciprocal effect (Byers & Demmons, 1999), however future analysis is needed to fully demonstrate the type of disclosure.

### **Sexual and Relational Satisfaction**

H3 suggested that partners' sexual satisfaction would be positively associated. Beyond SPT, the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS, Byers & MacNeil, 2006) also provides a theoretical foundation for the hypothesis. The IEMSS models suggests that an increase in self-disclosure leads to an increase in intimacy and sexual satisfaction. This increase occurs due to the perceived increase of rewards over the costs. Although intimacy data was not collected within the current study, it is safe to assume it will follow the trend established in a majority of previous studies (Burnbaum, et al., 2006; Davis, et al., 2004; Meston & Buss, 2007). The results of the current study supported this hypothesis. As one partner's sexual satisfaction increases, their partner's sexual satisfaction also increases.

Although a positive relationship was found between partners' sexual satisfaction, no significant relationship was found between one's sexual satisfaction and their partner's relationship satisfaction, H4. SPT and IEMSS were the theoretical foundation for this hypothesis. What are possible explanations for this? One possible explanation is the possibility to not have a single causal direction between sexual satisfaction and relational satisfaction (Byers, 2005). However, the same principle can be applied to the transition of sexual satisfaction from one partner to the other partner's relational satisfaction. Another possibility is that the quality of the communication between partners is not effective. For instance, Emmers-Sommer's (2004) study found that quality of communication accounted for 36% of variance in intimacy between

partners. Additionally, Yoo, et al. (2004) found that married partners who perceive their partner's communication as positive were more likely to feel an increase in intimacy and ultimately satisfaction. The current study did not account for the participant's communication style or their perceived partner communication, but it is possible that it was one of the factors working against the hypothesis. Additionally, the low sample size could have resulted in an underpowered result. If this is the case, not enough data is available to detect a true relationship between one's sexual satisfaction and their partner's relationship satisfaction.

### **Sexual Self-Disclosure and Sexual Satisfaction**

The H2 predicted sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction to have a positive relationship. Much like the previously reviewed assumption of IEMSS, as a partner perceived more rewards (their own sexual satisfaction) they tended to disclose more to increase rewards and decrease costs. Overall, it is the relationship quality that affects the sexual satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers, 1995). Adding upon work of La France (2010) who found couples who perceived their sexual rewards to be higher than their expectations reported lower costs than expected. Since partners who view the rewards of the sexual relationships are more likely to see little cost associated they are more likely to seek the benefit of self-disclosure. Results supported this prediction. As a partner felt more sexually satisfied, they tended to increase their sexual self-disclosure and vice versa. However, the same cannot be said about the other sexual satisfaction hypotheses.

It was predicted in H5 that an individual's sexual self-disclosure will mediate the relationship between their own and their partners' sexual satisfaction. Following the assumption of SPT and IEMSS, as internal interpersonal factors increase (in this context, it is sexual satisfaction), the external interpersonal factor (sexual self-disclosure), would increase as well.

Essentially, the SSD would act as the mechanism via the two partners' sexual satisfaction levels are connected. However, this prediction was not supported in the present study. There was no linear relationship between sexual self-disclosure and partner's sexual satisfaction. What are possible explanations for the lack of significance?

The first consideration follows the same path as previous considerations for the lack of significance, the sample size. Nineteen couples provide limited insight on a statistical level to determine the pathway of their sexual satisfaction. It also allows for a Type II error to occur, the failure to assess a true occurrence due to the power of the test. Additionally, it is worth investigating if SSD has significant value for the individual and does not transfer to their partner in the tradition route. Future data collection and analysis is required to test the idea.

### **Sexual Self-Disclosure and Relational Uncertainty**

H6, individual's levels of relationship uncertainty will be negatively associated with their sexual self-disclosure, was provided by the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The theory makes the assumption that individuals will seek to lower their uncertainty and better predict the behavior and resulting actions of others. Relationship uncertainty is the degree individuals have to the lack of confidence they have in their perception of the relationship. When paired with sexual self-disclosure, it is easy to see how if an individual had high levels of relationship uncertainty they could be less likely to disclose on such a sensitive topic. However, the results found no significant relationship between relationship uncertainty and sexual self-disclosure. What are possible explanations for the lack of significance?

The first consideration is that the measurement used to operationalize uncertainty is the overall lack of confidence an individual partner has about the perceptions of the relationship.

Further analysis could examine the other two dimensions of uncertainty (self-uncertainty, partner uncertainty) separately for relationships to SSD. A post hoc analysis was conducted to see if a correlation between SSD and one of the four subscales of relationship uncertainty existed. Results indicated no significant relationship between behavioral norms ( $r(37) = -.14, p > .05, r^2 = .02$ ), mutuality ( $r(37) = -.14, p > .05, r^2 = .02$ ), definition ( $r(37) = -.24, p > .05, r^2 = .06$ ), future ( $r(37) = -.19, p > .05, r^2 = .04$ ), and SSD. Another possibility is the relatively high sample mean of relational uncertainty (just over midpoint at 4.71) suggesting that the majority of individuals were more certain than uncertain. This is understandable as the mean time in the relationship was two years. A post hoc analysis was conducted to test the significance of the mean relationship uncertainty and the scale midpoint. A one-sample t-test was conducted and results indicated a significant difference between the mean relational uncertainty and scale midpoint ( $t(37) = 3.89, p < .001$ ). Additionally, all of romantic couples were sexually involved with their partners. Further data analysis is needed to test if sexually involved couples perceive to have greater levels of certainty than less physically intimate or non-physically intimate couples. Theorists suggest that relational uncertainty will decrease as the relationship grows and become more intimate (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) but will not ever ultimately go away (Knobloch, 2008; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). Additionally, there was a positive relationship between sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction within this data set. Previous research has found a negative relationship between sexual satisfaction and relational uncertainty (Theiss & Nagy, 2010; Theiss & Solomon, 2007). This is due to the relational uncertainty enhancing emotional and communicative reactivity (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). Following this logic, those who are relationally uncertain will have lower sexual satisfaction. Therefore, it is possible that the test of a negative relationship between relationship

uncertainty and sexual self-disclosure did not account for the low sexual satisfaction as a result of the relational uncertainty. Further analysis would be required to test this possibility. Lastly, the sample size does leave the question that a type II error could exist.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are a number of limitations to this research. An important consideration regarding the present study is the representativeness of the sample, which consisted of nineteen intact emergent adult romantic relationships. Nineteen couples does not allow enough data to yield generalizable information or detect small to medium effects at the 95% confidence level. Gathering data from both partners takes more time and resources. Unlike most studies of college-aged romantic relationships, the current study sampled both partners. The dyadic interdependence approach is a strength in terms of research validity (it overcomes the ecological fallacy). However, the logistical issues of the presence requirement and consent requirement of both partners pose challenges to response rate and adequate sample size. Several of the hypotheses were supported and several were not. More data is needed to confidently define the role SSD has within the relationship.

Furthermore, the breakdown of the subscales of SSD was not considered within the current study. Future research should consider how the subsections of SSD have different relationships with the same subscale and different subscale of their partners. Lastly, more information is required when SSD goes wrong or has negative implications such as less reciprocated disclosure or a decrease in sexual or relational satisfaction. Another way to consider this is, what is the desired outcome the partner providing the disclosure hopes to achieve and, how is the disclosure subjectively experienced by its recipient.

The second major limitation is the sampling bias. Sampling bias is a common external validity concern within sexual research. It may compromise the degree to which participants are representative of the larger population of interest. Participants of sexual research tend to have more permissive attitudes about sex and have a higher sexual self-esteem (Wiederman, 1999). Acknowledging the fact that certain types of people--those who are less accepting and permissive in terms of sexuality--are less likely to participate is important when attempting to generalize the findings. Caution should be used if applying the results to general public (e.g., those outside the emergent adult demographic or non-volunteers for this type of research). Additionally, considering that the current study focus on heterosexual couples, one should use caution when attempting to generalize the results to relationships between same-sex partners.

Many questions about the role sexual self-disclosure plays with intact cross-sex romantic relationship over time are unanswered. Due to having participants complete the questionnaire in one time period does not allow the data to represent how SSD and the relationship between SSD and the other interpersonal variables change over time. Ultimately, the current state of the study needs more data to clearly show significance or non-significance. Beyond the current study, longitudinal studies should be performed to gather more detail on the manner in which SSD affects romantic relationships partners over the course of time.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this study confirmed there are positive correlations between partner's sexual satisfaction and sexual self-disclosure, and between the individual's sexual satisfaction and sexual self-disclosure. Additionally, no relationship was found between sexual self-disclosure and relational uncertainty, individual sexual satisfaction and their partner's relational satisfaction. Lastly, sexual self-disclosure was not found to mediate the relationship between

partners sexual satisfaction. Even though the current study confirmed significance for sexual self-disclosure and sexual satisfaction, there is a need for more advanced and longitudinal studies. Promising areas for future research include the quality and intention of the disclosure and the partner's response to the disclosure. Future studies examining these factors will assist in better understanding how sexual self-disclosure, sexual satisfaction, relational satisfaction, and relational uncertainty are related and how to improve partners' sexual communication

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## Appendix A

### HSIRB Approval Letter

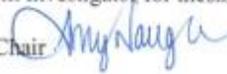
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: February 23, 2016

To: Autumn Edwards, Principal Investigator  
Riley Richards, Student Investigator for thesis

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair 

Re: HSIRB Project Number 16-02-27

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Sexual Self-Disclosure" has been **approved** under the **exempt** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., ***you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under "Number of subjects you want to complete the study."*** Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

**Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.**

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

**Approval Termination: February 22, 2017**

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