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Abstract:

Research has shown that individuals in romantic relationships often avoid discussing past sexual experiences. In order to ascertain whether past relationships and/or past sexual experiences were considered to be "taboo," 102 individuals involved in romantic relationships were asked to list the topics that they were reluctant to discuss with their partners. As past relationships and past sexual experiences were reported as topics often avoided, responses to an open-ended questionnaire were coded to determine: (1) the reasons individuals give for avoiding talk about past sexual experiences, and (2) whether there are sex differences in how often those reasons appeared in responses. In descending order of prevalence, respondents reported that they tend to avoid discussing past sexual experiences due to four main concerns: (1) belief that the past should be kept in the past, (2) identity issues, (3) perceived threats to their relationships, and (4) emotionally-upsetting feelings. Men and women displayed extreme similarity in the frequency with which they indicated particular reasons for avoidance. Data-inspired suggestions for individuals hoping to elicit discussion of past sexual experiences with partners are offered.

Text of paper:

"Let's (Not) Talk About That":

Bridging the Past Sexual Experiences Taboo

to Build Healthy Romantic Relationships

Mike Anderson Adrienne Kunkel

University of Kansas

Michael Robert Dennis

Emporia State University

Mike Anderson (M.A., University of Kansas, 2006) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication Studies, University of Kansas, 102 Bailey Hall, 1440 Jayhawk Blvd., Lawrence, KS 66045-7574 (Phone: 785-864-3633; FAX: 785-864-5203; e-mail: mtanders@ku.edu).

Adrienne Kunkel (Ph.D., Purdue University, 2000) is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies, University of Kansas, 102 Bailey Hall, 1440 Jayhawk Blvd., Lawrence, KS 66045-7574 (Phone: 785-864-9884; FAX: 785-864-5203; e-mail: adkunkel@ku.edu).

Michael Robert Dennis (Ph.D., Purdue University, 2001) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication and Theatre, Emporia State University, 1200 Commercial St., Emporia, KS 66801-5087 (Phone: 620-341-5728; e-mail: mdennis3@emporia.edu). All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Adrienne Kunkel. This study is based on the first author's master's thesis, which was directed by the second author.

Introduction

Just as the decision to conceal or reveal information is an essential component of any relationship, the navigation of the dialectical tension between openness and closedness is fundamental to close relationships (Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981; Baxter, 1990; Dindia, 1998; Pawlowski, 1998). Although self-disclosure is necessary for the development of relational intimacy, too much sharing can potentially hinder relational development (Dindia, 1994; Ijams & Miller, 2000; Rawlins, 1983).

Topics potentially considered "off limits" or "taboo" within relationships are likely to reside at the primary intersections of opposing desires regarding self-expression and privacy. Studies conducted on taboo topics often mention past relationships and/or past sexual experiences as topics that are frequently avoided (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Turk & Thielman, 2002). Dailey and Palomares (2004) define topic avoidance as, "a goal-oriented communicative behavior whereby individuals strategically try to keep a conversation away from certain foci" (p. 472). In the landmark study identifying a typology of taboo topics, Baxter and Wilmot (1985) included both prior relationships and extrarelational social activity. More specifically with regard to sexual pasts, Desiderato and Crawford (1995) noted that almost half of relational partners fail to disclose information regarding past sexual partners to their current partners, particularly if they had multiple past sexual partners. In addition, Lucchetti (1999) discovered that one-third of her sample avoided disclosing their sexual experiences prior to becoming sexually involved with a partner.

The current study was implemented to determine whether past sexual experience is an important prevalent subset of the prior relationship taboo, what reasons underlie the reluctance to discuss it, and whether these reasons vary between the sexes. Whereas Baxter and Wilmot (1985, p. 258) explored the reasons for the existence of six different taboos "to determine if the taboo topics were avoided for similar reasons," we sought to identify reasons for the past sex experience taboo in order to serve distinct pragmatic and scholarly rationales.

Our practical imperative consists of the belief that ascertaining reasons for the past sex experience taboo will lead to more effective ways of broaching the topic. The discussion of past sexual experiences, undesired as it may be by some if not most partners, may lead to the sharing of vital health- and STD-related information early in new relationships. Consistent with the dialectical perspective on disclosure and privacy in relationships, such discussion may also be desired in relationships by one partner for reasons of achieving further knowledge about, and increased intimacy with, their more reluctant other half. The source of such resistance may be addressed and alleviated in communicative attempts to elicit discussion. Indeed, Lucchetti (1999) notes that, even for those willing to do so, there are few good models for talking about past sexual experience with a potential lover and the identification of barriers may enhance facilitation of successful disclosure. Adelman (1991, 1992) stated that perception of the implicit face threats involved in acquiring information about a partner's previous sexual experiences would also be vital.

We also sought a more nuanced and complete understanding of the reasons underlying one taboo to demonstrate the complexity of cognition that contributes to the communicative phenomenon of topic avoidance. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) found five reasons for avoidance of the topic, state of the relationship talk, and no more than three for any of their other taboo topic categories. It may be argued that two of their six taboo topic categories, conflict-inducing topics and negative self-disclosure, were themselves actually *reasons* for avoidance. In fact, Baxter and Wilmot did not produce additional reasons for avoidance of conflict-inducing topics or negative self-disclosure. Moreover, harm to the relationship (i.e., relationship destruction, negative relational implications, relationship threat) was identified as a reason for the existence of every taboo topic category other than conflict-inducing topics and negative self-disclosure. Our investigation was designed to capture the distinct major and minor concerns associated with a single important taboo topic. Finally, we responded to Baxter and Wilmot's

exhortation "an examination of differences in reasons as a function of the sex of the respondent...merit(s) further work" (p. 266).

The current investigation's first task undertaken was the determination of whether past relationships and/or past sexual experiences were avoided in the talk of our participants with their romantic partners. Once this was confirmed, the subsequent goals of the study became identifying the reasons individuals give for avoiding talk about past sexual experiences and assessing whether there are sex differences in the prevalence of particular reasons given for avoiding such talk. Taken in its entirety, this research endeavor's important contributions are to illuminate the constraints responsible for avoidance and to begin to shape possible strategies for those relational partners interested in overcoming them.

Literature Review and Rationale

In most close interpersonal relationships, expectations and desires to reveal personal information are countered by needs to maintain privacy (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), particularly in the case of potentially "taboo" topics such as past sexual experiences. In line with these competing and opposing tendencies is the existence of both potential costs and potential benefits associated with disclosure about past sexual experiences.

Potential Costs Associated with Disclosure about Past Sexual Experiences

Communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002) assumes that the revelation of otherwise private information in a relationship may leave individuals feeling vulnerable and/or resentful. In the case of disclosing about past sexual experiences, these feelings may be triggered by the suffering of the stigma associated with either "too much" or "too little" experience. Some argue that uncertainty tends to be more tolerable when we fear that the unknown information about our partners is of an undesirable nature (Afifi & Burgoon, 2005). Relational loss or deterioration may also be prominent negative consequences of the past sex discussion, especially if the discussion follows a period

of initial avoidance of the topic (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Golish, 2000; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Roloff & Johnson, 2001). In fact, Lucchetti (1999) admits that, "being open and honest about one's sexual history may harm a developing relationship" (p. 300).

Potential Benefits Associated with Disclosure about Past Sexual Experiences

Sexual self-disclosure may be vital to the establishment and maintenance of healthy relationships. Research has discovered that reciprocal sexual self-disclosure contributes to greater relational and sexual satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; MacNeil & Byers, 2005; Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998; Sprecher & Cate, 2004) perhaps by way of better understanding a partners' past sexual experiences, sexual health, and sexual likes/dislikes (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Cupach & Metts, 1991; MacNeil & Byers, 2009). Also, if balancing dialectical tensions is critical to the attainment of satisfying relationships of any kind, movement away from the extreme of outright topic avoidance and towards the practice of even selective disclosure may be fortuitous. Finally, according to the tenets of the well-known and respected uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), communication is a viable tool for the diminishment of unease associated with not knowing enough about another with whom one interacts.

Acquisition of information about a partner's sexual background may foster physical health as well. In the United States alone, 19 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases are diagnosed each year (CDC, 2008). Various health communication scholars have noted that the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, including the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), is as much a communication problem as a medical problem (Catania, Kegeles, & Coates, 1990; Cline & McKenzie, 1994; Freimuth, Hammond, Edgar, & Monahan, 1990). In order to achieve safer sex, relational partners need to assess infection risk through discussion of each other's past sexual experiences (Cobb, 1997; Lucchetti, 1999; Nolte, Sohn, & Koons, 1993). Disclosure of this nature in a

relationship may thus promote sexually protective choices (e.g., using condoms, possibly avoiding partners who have been indiscriminately sexually active).

Topics Associated with Disclosure Avoidance

Baxter and Wilmot (1985) were among the first to identify topics considered "taboo" in romantic relationships. They grouped topics into seven mutually exclusive categories, including one labeled "other." The three most commonly cited taboo topics for individuals in romantic relationships were: (1) the state of the relationship – topics that involved an explicit discussion of the current or future state of the relationship (representing 34.4% of the taboo topics mentioned), (2) extra-relationship activities – topics that dealt with activities and network relationships outside of the relationship (15.7% of the taboo topics) and, (3) prior relationships – topics regarding prior relationships with members of the opposite sex (12.8% of the taboo topics). Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004) discovered similar results; the state of the relationship was the most cited taboo topic (36.0% of the taboo topics), followed by extra-relationship activity (20.7% of the taboo topics), and prior romantic relationships (14.5% of the taboo topics). However, Turk and Thielman (2002) discovered that prior relationships (39% of the taboo topics) and masturbation (20% of the taboo topics) were the biggest taboos.

It seems that prior relationships and sex may be prominent among subjects that members of romantic couples are hesitant to talk about. Accordingly, the initial concern for the current investigation is whether the topic of past sexual experiences is a prevalent enough taboo among our participants to warrant the full-fledged exploration of reasons for why it is taboo. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: Are prior romantic relationships and past sexual experiences among respondents' most prevalent taboo topics within their romantic relationships?

Reasons for Avoidance

Petronio's communication privacy management theory (1991, 2000, 2002) purports that the impact of topic avoidance on relational satisfaction is shaped by the particular reasons for avoidance. Extant scholarly speculation has provided a variety of reasons why individuals in romantic relationships refrain from discussing certain topics. One example is concern with "relational protection" against the harm that might befall the relationship (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Ijams & Miller, 2000; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Roloff & Ifert, 1998). Another regards partners' reluctance to subject themselves and/or their partners to negative emotional experiences (Afifi & Guerrero; Baxter & Wilmot; Ijams & Miller) such as embarrassment and humiliation, harsh judgment, vulnerability, and fear. A third theme is that the relationship lacks the level of closeness needed for intimate disclosure (Caughlin & Afifi; Roloff & Ifert).

Unsurprisingly, the reasons for avoiding taboo topics in general and the recognized costs of disclosing past sexual experiences described above echo the theorized reasons that couples avoid discussing them. They may fear that talking about their past sexual experiences will be a threat to their relationship (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Cline, Johnson, & Freeman, 1992). They may also shrink from assuming the stigmas associated with "too much" sexual experience. In fact, Sprecher, Regan, McKinney, Maxwell, and Wazienski (1997) reported that, "when rating either a casual dating or a marital partner, participants gave higher desirability ratings to chastity than to either moderate or extensive sexual experience; furthermore, moderate sexual experience was perceived as more desirable than extensive sexual experience" (p. 327). Indeed, those with more past partners or more permissive sexual histories are evaluated negatively and as less desirable (Garcia, 2006; O'Sullivan, 1995).

Despite the rather extensive speculation about the reasons couples avoid taboo topics at large, and the need to understand barriers to the discussion of past sexual experiences, specific reasons that individuals consider such experiences to be taboo remain relatively unexplored.

Therefore, the following research question was posed:

RQ2: What reasons do individuals in romantic relationships give for avoiding talk about their own and their partner's past sexual experiences?

Sex-Based Differences in Reasons for Avoidance

While a great deal of social science research fails to find any meaningful, large, or consistent differences between males and females across a variety of behavioral variables (e.g., Aries, 1996; Burleson & Kunkel, 2006; Canary & Hause, 1993; Duck & Wright, 1993), there have been documented differences indicating that women tend to be more nurturant or emotionfocused in relationships, whereas men tend to be more instrumentally oriented or problemfocused (see reviews by Cutrona, 1996; Reis, 1998; Winstead, 1986). This has implications for self-disclosure; in fact, research finds that self-disclosure about personal topics within relationships seems quite natural and accepted but, only for women (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Dindia & Allen, 1992; Winstead). It follows, then, that women and men may have different positions about avoiding topics such as past sexual experiences, as well as reasons for adopting those positions. As noted above, Baxter and Wilmot (1985) believed that researchers who followed their lead might profitably investigate the existence of sex-based differences in the reasons given for avoiding topics. Thus, we posed the following research question:

RQ3: Do the numbers of males and females in romantic relationships who indicate particular reasons for avoiding talk about their own and their partner's past sexual experiences differ significantly?

Method

Participants and Procedures

104 individuals (49 male and 55 female) who were currently involved in romantic relationships completed a two-part open-ended questionnaire. Two of the females indicated that they had not had sex (i.e., that they were "virgins"), and thus they were dropped from all analyses, leaving a total sample

of 102 individuals (49 male and 53 female). Participants were students at a large Midwestern University who received research credit for participating in the study. The age range of participants was 18 to 26 years old, and their mean age was 20.1. Participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that their answers would be confidential. The University Human Subjects Committee approved the procedures and methodology for this project.

Participants were told that the focus of the study would be taboo topics in romantic relationships, which was defined as topics that they would consider "off limits" or often avoided in a romantic relationship. They were also informed that they would be answering questions about discussion of past sexual experiences. Within the instructions, sexual experiences were defined as "any encounter(s) involving fondling, and/or genital, anal, or oral intercourse." Five participants (4.8%) indicated that they had not had sex with their current partner. Participants also reported an average of 3.73 past committed/romantic partners, and the average length of their current relationships in months was 12.39.

Measures

Content of taboo topics. Participants were asked to list all the topics they avoid in their romantic relationship. Participants received the following written instructions:

The researchers would like to know what topics, if any, are taboo in your current relationship.

Please use the space below to describe (as completely as possible) any topics that you, your partner, or both of you consider "off limits."

Reasons for avoidance. To learn their reasons for avoiding the topic of past sexual experiences, participants were asked to answer this open-ended question:

In your own words, if your or your current partner's past sexual experiences are something you would rather avoid discussing in your current relationship, what concerns cause you to avoid the topic?

It is also important to note that the participants were instructed not to go back to the first question and add to or delete from what they already wrote. This was done to ensure that participants were not retroactively adding past sexual experiences as a taboo topic.

Analysis

In order to address research question one, each avoided topic was coded into one of seven categories adapted from Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) previous work: (1) state of the relationship; (2) relationship norms; (3) extra-relationship activities; (4) prior romantic relationships; (5) conflict-inducing topics; (6) negative life experiences; and (7) other. Additionally, topics coded as prior romantic relationships were further coded as to whether they were related to sexual experience. Results were summed.

To answer research questions two and three, an inductive and thematic analysis of answers to the open-ended question (i.e., "If your or your current partner's past sexual experiences are something you would rather avoid discussing in your current relationship, what concerns cause you to avoid the topic?") was conducted using a system developed by Owen (1984). Accordingly, the second and third authors independently coded all participants' entire responses to identify and quantify themes. To begin, a sample representing 10% of the participants' responses was coded by one of the coders, and the second coder coded a sample representing another 10% of the responses independently. Issues that appeared repeatedly in the responses were identified collectively as theme categories. Then, the coders independently analyzed an additional 30% of the responses and identified the remaining theme categories. Next, the coders collaborated to collapse theme categories into four overriding themes of concern about discussing past sexual experiences. They then independently identified all instances of each theme category that occurred among all responses from all participants. Finally, the two entire sets of codes were compared for total instances of agreement and disagreement. Holsti's method for analyzing reliability by way of agreement was computed to be .835. Whenever coders meet afterwards

to resolve initial independent disagreements about subjective categorizations of data, as they did for this analysis, a Holsti's method score of .7 or higher is indication of enough agreement to infer satisfactory reliability and that "units are by and large correctly classified" (Hayes, 2005, p. 119).

For the analysis of research question three, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was implemented to identify participant sex differences on each of the themes of concern regarding discussion of past sexual experiences.

Results

RQ1: Prevalence of Prior Relationships and Past Sexual Experiences Among Taboo Topics

The first research question was posed to enable identification of topics avoided by romantically involved couples and assessment of whether past sexual experiences was a prevalent taboo topic. 102 participants indicated a total of 185 taboo topics. 170 of the 185 (91.9%) topics could be classified as exemplifying any one of Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) six categories besides "other." The taboo topic mentioned most frequently (n = 70, 37.8% of 185 total topics) was prior relationships. Included within this category were responses involving past sexual experiences (n = 27, 14.6%). The second most popular category was conflict-inducing topics (n = 29, 15.7%) that included religion, politics, and smoking. The third most popular category was relationship norms (n = 24, 13.0%), which included sexual exploration and public displays of affection. Fourth in frequency was the category of extra-relationship activities (n = 24, 13.0%) and fifth was state of the relationship (n = 20, 10.8%). Only three responses (1.6%) fit the negative life experiences category and the final 15 (8.1%) were classified as "other."

These results inspire an affirmative response to research question one. The category of prior romantic relationships was self-reported as a taboo topic more than twice as often as any other category. Within the category of prior romantic relationships, the aspect of past sexual experiences (n = 27) was reported more than any other entire category except for conflict inducing topics (n = 29).

Clearly, the topic of past sexual experiences qualifies as avoided often enough by our participants to warrant further investigation.

RQ2: Reasons for Avoiding Talk About Past Sexual Experiences

The second research question was posed in an effort to identify the themes of concern given as reasons for avoiding discussion of past sexual experiences within romantic partners' interactions. The four themes identified by the coders were labeled "Past Should Be Past" (comprised of four categories: "keep past in past," "details too vivid," "respect privacy," "don't want self or partner thinking about it"), "Identity/Measuring Up" [comprised of four categories: "experience level discrepancies," "comparisons with past lovers," "insecurity (attitude)," "inadequacy (skill)"], "Relational Threat" (comprised of seven categories: "will not be as special," "past lover known or still around," "trust/honesty issues," "will not be as close," "causes fights," "still in love with past lover," "past lover still a friend"), and "Emotional Upset" (comprised of three categories: "jealousy," "embarrassment," "someone may get hurt").

Table 1 presents the number of participants and percentage of participants whose responses contributed to each theme and theme category. The "Past Should Be Past" (n = 48, 47.1% of 102 participants) and "Identity/Measuring Up" (n = 44, 43.1%) themes were most often evident among participants' open-ended responses. The numbers of participants who contributed portions of responses that were coded as "Relational Threat" (n = 34, 33.3%) and "Emotional Upset" (n = 26, 25.5%) themes were lower but still substantial. The two theme categories that were present in the most participants' responses were preferences to "keep past in past" (n = 20, 19.6%) and concerns about sexual "experience level discrepancies" (n = 19, 18.6%). A second tier of frequently represented theme categories includes concerns about "jealousy" (n = 12, 11.8%), and "details too vivid" (n = 11, 10.8%). The following paragraphs employ direct quotations from participants' responses to illustrate the nature of contributions to the themes and their categories.

Past should be past. Many participants reported that they avoid discussion of past sexual experiences because the past is better off left alone. One category of this theme determined to be somewhat prevalent was labeled "keep past in past" (e.g., "I'd rather concentrate on us instead of things in the past," "What is done is in the past and it doesn't change the way we feel about each other"). Another, "details too vivid," involved the desire to remain uninformed about the intricacies of partners' past experiences (e.g., "I do not want to know details of what she did with anyone else," "Maybe not in a lot of detail"). When participants recognized and preserved boundaries, their responses (e.g., "I also enjoy a bit of secrecy and therefore don't like divulging all information," "It's not really my responsibility to have to share what my sexual history has been," "He always changes the subject or says it's none of my business") were coded in the "respect privacy" category of the "Past Should Be Past" theme. Finally, respondents indicated that they "don't want self or partner thinking about it" (e.g., "I don't want to be thinking about anything but her when we are making love," "When we talk about her past boyfriends, I feel she might be thinking of them"). Our participants preferred not to dwell on the past, to display or demand respect for the maintenance of private issues, and/or to avoid disturbing information, images, and thoughts.

Identity/measuring up. A substantial portion of our participants appeared to worry about image and identity issues that may surface with the discussion of past sexual experiences. One variety of this concern, labeled "experience level discrepancies" involved anxiety about negative judgments associated with having far more or far less sexual experience(s) than one's partner (e.g., "I feel uncomfortable telling my partner the number of people I have had sex with," "I have had a lot less partners than him," "The difference in experience is great and can be uncomfortable to talk about"). Participants fretted about how they would measure up in "comparisons with past lovers" (e.g., "Also he will tell me that I am not as good at sex as _____," "She thinks that she needs to compare herself to my past relationships," "Is she prettier than I am or was she better than me?"). Participants also indicated that they, or their

partners, may avoid disclosure about past sexual experience because of "insecurity (attitude)" (e.g., "It's a large insecurity with me and I don't like talking about it," "I am a little insecure and always think that I like her more than she likes me") or perceptions of "inadequacy (skill)" regarding sexual prowess (e.g., "I think he felt sexually inadequate," "If some situation were to make my partner or I feel inadequate, it should be avoided"). Clearly, participants worried about how they or their partners would perceive themselves, or be perceived, as a result of past sexual experience discussion with partners.

Relational threat. A veritable surfeit of categories coalesced within a theme of concern exhibited by participants about damage that may befall a relationship when past sexual experiences are discussed. Some thought they "will not be as special" when co-existing with memories of their partners' past partners (e.g., "I don't like to hear about it b/c it makes me feel unspecial in some way," "I would rather think she has only had sex with me"). Others were uncomfortable with the current status of partners' partners such as "past lover known or still around" (e.g., "I know the person that they have had a history with," "She actually knows the person in my past who I was romantically involved with") and, less ideally, "past lover still a friend" (e.g., "I am close to several of my girlfriends to this day and it is hard," "His sexual experiences are hard for me to listen to especially when it deals with someone who is still a very good friend of his") or, perhaps worst of all, "still in love with past lover" (e.g., "Sometimes I feel that my partner is still in love with their ex").

Relationships between partners, and the interactions they feature, were also seen as threatened by the past sexual experience discussion. Responses indicated worry about the outcome wherein partners "will not be as close" (e.g., "My sexual history makes her feel like I'm not committed to her," "The discussion might lead to her disliking me and us drifting apart"), perhaps because "trust/honesty issues" will arise (e.g., "I think that I probably have trust issues and that is the problem," "I lied to him in the beginning about a particular sexual encounter"). In any case, several found through their experience that the past sexual experience conversation "causes fights" (e.g., "We actually just had a fight about it,"

"He found out and it was a very big deal"). Intimacy in, the quality of, and the continued existence of, the relationships between romantic partners were all established as possible targets for the damage that disclosure about sexual experience might inflict.

Emotional upset. Feelings themselves were also the focus of anxiety regarding the consequences of discussing past sexual experience with one's partner. Some dreaded thoughts of "jealousy" that might be inspired (e.g., "I can tend to get a little jealous," "I might make him jealous") while others were troubled with the potential onset of "embarrassment" (e.g., "I'm a little bit ashamed of it, too," "I have had experiences that I am not necessarily proud of"). Participants also preferred to avoid the possibility that "someone may get hurt" by revisiting past sexual experiences (e.g., "It hurts me to imagine my partner with anyone other than me," "My boyfriend was cheated on in his last relationship and it hurts him a lot"). Two specific upsetting emotions and a general sense of emotional pain were specifically nominated by our participants as unwanted manifestations of, and reasons to avoid, sexual experience talk with their partners.

Spanning of themes. In order to illustrate that many participants did not indicate single reasons, or even remain within the realm of one theme of reasons, for avoiding discussion of past sexual experiences, we quote here one participant who managed to crowd what would become the indicated four distinct theme category codes into his entire succinct response, "Jealousy is a big thing in our relationship ['jealousy']. Both of us want the other to be pure ['will not be as special'] and both want to erase the other's past ['keep past in past']. We avoid it because it causes us to be insecure with one another ['insecurity (attitude)]."

Related findings. In response to our open-ended request for reasons participants are not comfortable discussing past sexual experiences, 21 of 102 (20.1%; 8 males and 13 females) offered on their own that they were actually comfortable with the topic. 13 of these (12.7%; seven males and six females) indicated that they and their partners were always *entirely* comfortable with such disclosure.

Moreover, 24 participants (23.5%; 16 females and eight males) provided unprompted acknowledgment and/or reasons that discussion of past sexual experiences within romantic relationships was beneficial. These included: "getting over jealousy," "all skeletons are out of the closet," "knowing the other before getting serious," "openness," "need to know," "added to our sex life," "if he has been to the doctor," "have a safe relationship," "become more intimate," "reflective of what kind of person they are," "stay open and honest," "better understand each other," "be better lovers," "know what kind of person they are," "enjoy learning about him," "STD something I'd want to know," "intrigued and interested," "deserve to know," and "key to a healthy relationship is honesty."

RQ3: Sex Differences on Reasons for Avoiding Talk About Past Sexual Experiences

The third research question sought discernment of whether the numbers of males and females in romantic relationships who indicate particular reasons for avoiding talk about their own and their partner's past sexual experiences differ significantly. For each of the four themes, the numbers of males and females whose responses were coded into respective categories were summed.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted for each of the four themes (i.e., "Past Should Be Past," "Identity/Measuring Up," "Relational Threat," and "Emotional Upset"). Sex of participant was the independent variable for each MANOVA, and the categories of the respective themes served as the dependent variables. Results failed to reveal a significant multivariate main effect for any of the four themes.

Within each of the four themes, separate univariate analyses were conducted. The Bonferroni confidence-interval adjustment was employed to control for Type I error (Green & Salkind, 2003). The only univariate effect of sex was on the "respect privacy" category of the "Past Should Be Past" theme, $F(1, 100) = 6.73, p < .05, partial \eta^2 = .06$, so that the nine females whose responses indicated respecting privacy was of a significantly greater amount than that of the one male who did the same.

In light of the overwhelming statistical evidence for similarity between the sexes, a qualitative and less formal approach was employed to revisit and inspect the coded data for any other differences that may have emerged between the sexes. Almost without fail, any newly identified trends regarding the themes and categories of reasons for avoiding past sexual experience discussion were evident in the responses offered by both male and female participants. For instance, with regard to the concern about "experience level discrepancies," both some males and some females worried that they were less experienced than their partners and also, both some males and some females worried that they were more experienced than their partners. Similarly, with regard to the category "keep past in past," both some males and some females simply wanted to leave the past behind, while both some males and some females noted that they preferred instead to focus on the current partner and relationship.

Though "experience level discrepancies" and "keep past in past" were the two most prevalently coded reason theme categories, the lack of difference between the sexes was echoed for nearly all of the others in our ancillary inspection. The only exception concerned the "trust/honesty issues" category of the "Relational Threat" theme. Several women indicated that they had lied to their current partners about past sexual experiences, whereas several men suspected that they had been lied to by partners about past sexual experiences. Despite this small difference, the overall similarity between the sexes was a striking and consistent outcome of the quantitative analysis of our coded data as well as of our subsequent less formal qualitative approach.

Discussion

Review and Interpretations

This study provides further evidence that individuals in romantic relationships often avoid discussing past romantic relationships and past sexual experiences. In fact, the results for the analysis of research question one indicated that the category of prior romantic relationships was the most cited taboo topic among respondents and that past sexual experiences were primary concerns about prior

relationships. This warranted our continued exploration of such avoidance and the reasons for its existence.

Our inductive coding process, completely based in the responses of our sample, produced some striking similarities to the taboos and the reasons for their existence reported by Baxter and Wilmot (1985). For instance, Baxter and Wilmot discovered "relationship destruction," "negative relational implications," and "relational threat" to be by far the most prevalent reasons for their "state of the relationship," "extra-relationship activity," "relationship norms," and "prior relationships" taboos. These reasons closely match our reason theme of "Relational Threat." Several other reasons for taboos uncovered by Baxter and Wilmot seem to equate with our inductively-produced themes or theme categories (i.e., their "individual vulnerability" reason and our "insecurity (attitude)" category of the "Identity/Measuring Up" theme; their "right to privacy" reason and our "respect privacy" category of the "Past Should Be Past" theme; their "irrelevance of the past" reason and our "keep past in past" category of the "Past Should Be Past" theme; their "embarrassment" reason and our "embarrassment" category of the "Emotional Upset" theme). We also, however, detected themes or categories that were specific only to our focus on avoidance of past sexual experience disclosure (e.g., "inadequacy (skill)," "experience level discrepancies," "jealousy").

The two most prevalent themes of concern regarding reasons given for avoiding talk about past sexual experiences that we discovered were "Past Should Be Past" and "Identity/Measuring Up." Participants routinely cited the lack of relevance to current relationships of things that happened before they existed. Along with respect for privacy, this appears to be a rather neutral objection when compared with others from the "Past Should Be Past" theme, such as not wanting to know, think about, or visualize the details of a partner's past lovemaking activities. The "Identity/Measuring Up" theme captured participants' wishes to not be subjected to evaluation, especially by way of comparison. Many worried that their experience level differed from that of their partner. In a severe break from previous

thought about the costs of disclosure that predicted disdain for the exposed experience of partners, there was far more concern among our participants about being revealed as too inexperienced themselves. We also eventually discovered that both sexes worried about both directions of sexual experience inequities. Subsequent comparisons to their partner's past partners appeared to have been quite bothersome aspects of listening to a partner's tales of past experiences.

In lesser numbers, participants recorded concern about past sex experience disclosures creating threats to relational soundness wherein individuals or the relationship might be judged to be less close or special. Participants also labeled the knowing, or continued presence, of a partner's ex-lover as especially vexing. These threats to relationships are consistent with extant theoretical speculation, such as Roloff and Ifert's (1998) topic avoidance reason of "discussion harming the relationship" and Ijams and Miller's (2000) notion of "relational-protection." Finally, the possibilities of jealousy regarding one's own or partners' ex-lovers and of embarrassment over one's own past were somewhat common, and echoed Ijams and Miller's "self-protection" and "other-protection" constructs.

It was also discovered that many participants gave multiple reasons, often spanning different themes, for avoiding the past sexual experience conversation. This ability of individuals to elucidate rationales for not talking about past sexual experience seems to further verify its status as a taboo topic for many. It also speaks to the complexity of cognitive evident in the communicative phenomenon of topic avoidance.

Consistent with much recent evidence compiled in the social sciences regarding the similarity, or at least lack of pronounced consistent difference, among the sexes, statistical analyses detected that none of the four themes of concern responsible for discussion avoidance were found to occur more frequently among the responses of one sex than among the responses of the other. Additional qualitative inspection of the responses that contributed to the themes and categories of discussion avoidance reasons revealed that there were precious few trends to indicate difference among the sexes.

The only sex difference found within the statistical analysis showed that women were far more concerned with the act of respecting one's privacy. In the ancillary qualitative analysis, women more readily admitted lying whereas men indicated concern about being lied to. While research has shown that many individuals will engage in deception regarding past sexual experiences (Cochran & Mays, 1990; Knox, Schacht, Holt & Turner, 1993; Lucchetti, 1999; Marelich, Lundquist, Painter, & Mechanic, 2008; Stebleton & Rothenberger, 1993), our finding is contrary to Seal's (1997) discovery that more men than women report that they would lie in order to appear less sexually experienced.

Our initial rationale for exploring the possibility of sex differences with regard to discussing past sexual experience, though augmented by Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) exhortation to do so, was largely anchored in the widely regarded literature supporting the notion that women are more inclined to engage in and appreciate self-disclosure within relationships (Derlega et al., 1993; Dindia & Allen, 1992; Winstead, 1986). However, our findings that there are very few sex differences with regard to reasons for avoiding disclosure, that women are more respectful of privacy than are men, and that women are more likely than are men to hide or even lie about past experiences, seem to indicate that the chasm in self-disclosure tendencies between the sexes may be closing or smaller than previously thought and reported. Interested researchers might be inspired to determine whether this is the case.

Pragmatic Yield

At this point, then, our contributions include insight regarding the prevalence of the past sexual experience topic as taboo, the nature of romantic partners' reluctance to talk about past sex, and the validity (or lack thereof) of sex-based stereotypes for these phenomena. We have also discovered that, in line with extant scholarly positions (e.g., Byers & Demmons, 1999; Cupach & Metts, 1991; Lucchetti, 1999) stating that discussion of past sexual experience has sexual (e.g., knowledge of likes and dislikes), relational (e.g., pursuit of dialectical balance regarding privacy and disclosure rather than outright avoidance), and physical health (e.g., protection by way of knowledge about partners' past sexual

experiences) benefits, some of our participants are not only comfortable with such discussion, but can also elaborate specific reasons that it may be profitable (e.g., enhanced sex life, openness and honesty, intimacy and understanding, STD and medical knowledge). Nonetheless, the more sizable portion of our sample did not indicate such comfort. Clearly, then, there is a need among the minority who prefer such discussion for direction, if not instruction, regarding its stimulation. Our data offers the basis for practical strategies aimed at inspiring conversation about past sex experience with those who are reluctant to do so.

The category that was most prevalent, among reasons to avoid past sexual experience discussion, within participants' responses, was "keep past in past." Though this practice may seem most polite, unobtrusive, and benign, there is also the notion that each of us is a product of our respective pasts and if we revere others we should also appreciate the path that created their current selves. Those wishing to engage partners in past sexual experience conversation might remind them of this.

The second most common concern we observed regarded "experience level discrepancies." We also discovered that stigma was feared for reasons of both "too much" and "too little" past experience. Therefore, if partners seeking to talk about past experiences voice the positives of any level of experience (e.g., experience bestows sexual acumen; lack of experience connotes a special uniqueness about current sexual relations; moderation is a virtue in itself), fear of discrepancies may be lessened. Promises that conjuring up past experiences will not foster comparisons of quantity or quality between current and past lovers should also help to dispel "insecurity (attitude)" and "inadequacy (skill)" concerns.

The emotion of "jealousy" ranked third among our categories in the number of participants who nominated it as a reason not to talk about past sex. Therefore, setting the stage for disclosure with discussion about the negative implications and folly of jealousy might be advantageous.

Finally, in line with other categories of reasons that were prominent in our participants' responses, we recommend keeping relational damage to a minimum by dealing effectively with the continued presence of an ex-partner and by delivering assurances that nothing from the past could make the current relationship less special.

Limitations and Implications for Researchers

This study's findings should be qualified for a variety of factors. One was the highly selected and small-sized sample. A second qualification worth noting pertains to the internal validity of self-report data, which is always threatened by the potential for participant fabrication. Participants might have provided dishonest information because they did not feel comfortable revealing the truth or deemed it socially desirable to exaggerate or under-represent their experiences or concerns.

In retrospect, our research team's failure to collect data that may have further illuminated this area of study is regrettable. It may have served us well to inquire as to the nature and extent of participants' own past sexual experiences to determine what effects they may enact on disclosure, avoidance of topics, and other dependent variables. In the future, researchers might pursue these variables as well as correlations of taboos and concerns with measures of outcome variables such as sexual and relational satisfaction. Also, participants might be asked to report whether and how their concerns about disclosure of past sexual experience information diverge or converge with those of their partners.

Although this research focused on the majority of individuals who tend to avoid discussion of past sexual experiences, our unsolicited identification of those who are willing to do so makes it vital to determine characteristics that distinguish these individuals from each other. Locating individual-based sources of comfort with disclosure may provide further insight into why and how past sexual experience in romantic relationships may be beneficially discussed.

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Table 1

Number of Participants Whose Responses Contributed to Themes and Categories of

Reasons for Avoiding Discussion of Past Sexual Experiences

THEME and Categories	N	% of 102	Males	(% of 49)	Females	(% of 53)
PAST SHOULD BE PAST	48	47.1	15	30.6	33	62.3
Keep past in past	20	19.6	8	16.3	12	22.6
Details too vivid	11	10.8	4	8.2	7	13.2
Respect privacy	10	9.8	1	2.0	9	17.0
Don't want self or partner thinking about it	7	6.9	2	4.1	5	9.4
IDENTITY/MEASURING UP	44	43.1	22	44.9	22	41.5
Experience level discrepancies	19	18.6	9	18.4	10	18.9
Comparisons with past lovers	9	8.8	4	8.2	5	9.4
Insecurity (attitude)	9	8.8	4	8.2	5	9.4
Inadequacy (skill)	7	6.9	5	10.2	2	3.8
RELATIONAL THREAT	34	33.3	17	34.7	17	32.1
Will not be as special	10	9.8	5	10.2	5	9.4
Past lover known or still around	9	8.8	5	10.2	4	7.5
Trust/honesty issues	6	5.9	2	4.1	4	7.5
Will not be as close	3	2.9	2	4.1	1	1.9
Causes fights	3	2.9	2	4.1	1	1.9
Still in love with past lover	2	2.0	0	0.0	2	3.8
Past lover still a friend	1	1.0	1	2.0	0	0.0
EMOTIONAL UPSET	26	25.5	12	24.5	14	26.4
Jealousy	12	11.8	7	14.3	5	9.4
Embarrassment	10	9.8	3	6.1	7	13.2
Someone may get hurt	4	3.9	2	4.1	2	3.8